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*“Suffering and Christian Hope”*

ROMANS 5:3-5

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PASTOR BRIAN SMITH

WILDWOOD CHURCH

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EAST MOLINE, ILLINOIS

## BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

One thing we know about you, you've had hard times. You've suffered. You've experienced pain and heartbreak. You are not alone, and you are not without hope! Romans 5:3-5 is unequivocal: suffering produces hope in the life of a Christian. Whether we choose to allow it to happen or not is another story. What is your take on suffering and Christian hope? Check out the teaching on this passage and let the Lord use your suffering to produce hope in you!

## INTRODUCTION

These verses and the one just before it are about suffering and Christian hope. Christian hope is one of delayed gratification. It is set on the life to come, not on this life. The hope of the Christian is that one day we will see things as they really are. It's like today we're looking on the back side of the tapestry and it's all a mess, hard to discern the beauty of it. One day, though, we will see the front side, the real side, the real art that the Lord is masterfully designing in and through us here.

Many Christians have unwittingly embraced a theology of glory, convinced God must reward obedience in this life. He blesses faithfulness and obedience, but this goes beyond that. It presumes God owes us an easy life. Kellye has shared this was our theology as young 20-somethings. She describes it as “A + B = C.” Our good behavior + our good choices must result in a good life.

This theology of glory is put to the test when the Lord acts in a manner we deem inconsistent with our behavior. Take for example, a young couple trying to do their best in the world. He serves in the military, she is a supportive military spouse. They attend chapel and a local ministry. They tithe. They are respectful of their parents. They try to be good influences on people around them. Sure, they have their failings, but for the most part, they've been upstanding people.

Then the Lord drops on them a diagnosis of infant acute lymphoblastic leukemia in their six-week-old daughter while dad is somewhere in the desert of Kuwait and mom is stuck in Germany with nurses and doctors who barely speak English. Fast forward two years and they're standing over their daughter's casket.

The theology of glory does not compute. It does not hold up under that kind of experience. Instead, the theology of the cross surfaces and replaces theology of glory and the couple finally understands what Jesus means when He said, *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”* Matthew 16:24

Theology of glory says if you obey, you will be blessed. If you are faithful, God will only give you what you determined is good. Theology of the cross, however, tells us that the most obedient One was crushed by God, rejected by man, and hung on the cross for the forgiveness of other people's sins.

Theology of the cross tells us to look for glory in the life to come. It tells us to count the cost and be willing to lay it all down for His name's sake. It lifts our gaze from the suffering in this life and sets it firmly upon the glory that awaits us.

In today's passage, we read that suffering produces hope. That's a bit of a non-sequitur, it doesn't follow logically. After all most people's hope is associated with the absence of suffering.

However, because we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (Romans 5:2), because we have determined that God's glory is of supreme value in our lives, whatever suffering we endure to His glory is quite good, even if it feels awful.

Let's read the passage now and then jump in verse by verse.

## ROMANS 5:3-5

**<sup>3</sup>Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.**

### PRAY

**Not only that** continues the thought from verse 2. The third consequence of having been justified by faith is that we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. In other words, our salvation leads to rejoicing in the hope of the glory of God. This is Christian hope.

## WE REJOICE IN OUR SUFFERINGS

Now we read that in addition to these consequences of our justification, **we rejoice in our sufferings**. Fully convinced that God works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes, and fully convicted that God is ultimately using all things for His own glory, we embrace suffering as both good for us and glorifying for God.

Thus, we rejoice. We do not rejoice *that* we are suffering. Rather we rejoice *in* our suffering. R.C. Sproul brings clarity when he says, "He was not saying that tribulation is a joyful, pleasant, pleasurable experience. Rather he is saying that because we have been justified, even the tribulations and afflictions we experience can be an occasion for joy."

It is not that we are happy or glad that we are suffering. We do not seek suffering or pain. Instead, we rejoice in the midst of our sufferings. When everything around us tells us to despair, we respond with rejoicing.

We rejoice because our gaze is fixed on Jesus, our hope is in His glory, the glory awaiting us in the life to come, the glory beyond comparison with this "light and momentary affliction."

## SUFFERING PRODUCES ENDURANCE

We must train our minds to believe that the Lord uses our suffering for our good and for His glory and in fact we face suffering **knowing that suffering produces endurance**. The Greek word translated **suffering** literally means to remain under pressure. Our natural instinct is to move away from pressure because it is painful. But the Lord forces us to remain under pressure because ultimately it produces **endurance** in us.

Consider athletes who train their bodies, disciplining their minds to inflict increasing pressure on their muscles, lungs, and hearts. The most successful athletes are the ones most fixed on their goal and willing to endure the most pain.

Christians should regard suffering as a similar means of growing in their faith and endure the pain of suffering with their minds fixed on the goal of Heaven.

As we read in 1 Corinthians 9, "*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.*" 1 Corinthians 9:24-25

## ENDURANCE PRODUCES CHARACTER

**Verse 4** continues **and endurance produces character**. The more we endure suffering, the more the Lord refines us and purifies our faith. The word here for character *dokimen* is related to a word we read in James 1:3 *dokimion* translated “testing.” And likewise in 1 Peter “*so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*” 1 Peter 1:7

Suffering forces us to draw near to our Heavenly Father and to come to know Him more and more. The more we come to know Him, the more we come to know ourselves and the less content we become with our character defects.

Like James and Peter, Paul has in mind the purifying process of spiritual dross being burned away, leaving in the words of Kent Hughes, “character without impurities.”

## CHARACTER PRODUCES HOPE

Because **character** is the fruit of endurance, it **produces hope**. When you’ve walked through the valley of the shadow of death with the Lord as your Shepherd, you taste and see that His hand of grace is sufficient to sustain you. You experience His abundant blessings. You experience what Job experienced, “*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you...*” Job 42:5

In the course of suffering many times and in many ways, your character is developed and your hope shifts from things of this world to Him. And hope in Him is the only real hope there is. That is because as we have come to hope more in Him and trust more in Him we are more confident that in the end we will also share in the glory that God promises to those who endure.

Those with the most authentic joy are they who have been through the refiner’s fire, have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, and have come out on the other side more confident that He is in fact the Good Shepherd and they are in fact His beloved sheep.

## NEVER PUT TO SHAME

It is for this reason that Paul continues, **and hope does not put us to shame**. This is a concept taken from the Old Testament. They who trust in the Lord find that He is enough.

*“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.” Psalm 20:7*

*“But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” Isaiah 40:31*

Likewise, those who hope in Christ will never be put to shame. They cannot be. They will never find that their hope has failed them or that it was wasted or that it was not fully sufficient.

If you trust in Christ for your salvation, you will have it. You will be spared the shame of judgment and the humiliation of eternal separation from God.

Still, people put their trust in so many other things than Christ today! Things like their jobs. Family. Looks. Possessions. Intellect. Technology. Politics. The military. Even church. All of these are flimsy. They will all disappoint and **put you to shame**.

They will fail to produce...fail to come through...fail to sustain.

This was exactly what I experienced when my daughter, Kennedy, passed away with leukemia. As we drove down the highway at 1:45 in the morning on February 7<sup>th</sup>, I was put to shame because I realized I had placed my hope in all the wrong things. It was as if I was standing in a circle of friends, each “friend” being something I had previously hoped in.

In my grief, I remember desperately seeking relief in my vehicles, then my house and pool, then my career and education, and my dogs, and on and on. Each of which assured me, “I’ll make you happy!” One by one it felt as if they all turned their backs on me when I needed them most. That’s

not an exaggeration, that's really how I felt driving home that night. I was put to shame. I was disappointed by them. And I'm ashamed now that I ever hoped in them to begin with.

Then, in a moment, it was like scales fell from my eyes and the Lord gave me hope. I knew I could no longer live for what I had been living for and I felt the invitation, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

## AGAPE POURED OUT

What happened that night is I was born again by the Spirit of God. I had been a church-goer for 16 years. But that night I was born again. Or to use the language of Paul, I experienced what he said in the second part of verse 5, **because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.**

God poured His love into my heart through His Holy Spirit. I had been indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee, the seal, the proof that I belong to God as His child.

Why is it Christians have hope in their suffering? Because we have been given the Holy Spirit who continually dispenses **God's love...**

Bishop Nygren tells us, "When we realize that [Paul] never uses agape to express man's love for God, we shall not think that it is of man's love that Paul speaks in this verse. Agape, the love which God showed us in Christ, is for Paul so tremendous a fact that he regularly refrains from using the same word to express our love to God."

Agape love means God loves us simply because He does. It is not anything that God sees in us that causes Him to love us. He just loves us. This is why we can be so confident that we will not be put to shame when we hope in Christ.

The verb **has been poured** takes the perfect tense, indicating a permanent status that rests on the completed work of Christ.

What Paul is describing here is what Kruse calls the "dynamic experience" of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the agent of God's love being dispensed continually in our lives. He is the One who continually reminds us that we are no longer slaves to sin, but we have been adopted into God's family as children of the King.

This fact, that God loves us unconditionally and has poured His love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, reminds us that even if everyone hates us, we can endure the sufferings of this life, come what may, and know that one day an eternal weight of glory beyond all compare will be ours in Him.

That is the goal on which every born-again believer fixes his eyes. That is Christian hope in the face of suffering.

No turning aside, no turning back, just echoing the Apostle Paul in *Philippians 3:14*, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

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