



## A PERSPECTIVE ON PAIN

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1199  
Romans 5:3-11  
Eleventh Message  
Gary Vanderet  
August 22nd, 1999

One of the most glorious passages in the New Testament is found in the opening verses of Romans 5, where the apostle Paul in a series of positive claims speaks of the unquenchable joy of people who have been justified by faith.

I want to begin by reading the words of a fellow pastor describing a difficult year in his life:

This past year has been the most difficult year of my life. My wife has been through five major surgeries, radiation treatment and chemotherapy. I'm thankful now knowing she's going to make it. During the same year I suffered the loss of several key staff teammates, whose moves were very guided for them but a source of pressure and uncertainty in my work. Problems which I could have tackled with gusto under normal circumstances seem to loom in all directions. Discouragement lurked around every corner, trying to capture my feelings. Prayer was no longer a contemplative luxury, but the only way to survive. My own intercessions were multiplied by the prayers of others. Friendships were deepened as I was forced to allow people to assure me with words I had preached for years. No day went by without a conversation, letter or phone call giving me love and hope. The greatest discovery that I made in the midst of all the difficulties is that I can have joy when I don't feel like it, artesian joy.<sup>1</sup>

That is the kind of joy that Paul describes here in Romans 5, the unquenchable joy of the believer.

Up to this point the apostle has clearly shown our *need for justification*. Every one of us was hopelessly lost in sin and living under the wrath of God. And Paul has explained the *way of justification*: Jesus Christ became the sin bearer and carried our sins in his own body on the cross. By believing in Jesus we are delivered from our sins, declared "Not guilty!" and given the gift of righteousness.

In our text today, Paul will go on to describe, again in a series of positive claims, the *results of our justification*. In our last study, we looked at the first three of these results. First, we have "peace with God." The war between God and us is over. Second, we are "standing in grace." We live in a relationship of unconditional acceptance with God. And third, we "rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." As we look to the future we rejoice in the fact that our destiny is secure.

The word "exult" is used throughout this passage in the NASB. We do not use this word much today. The NIV translation, "rejoice," is much better. The word really means boasting, which is simply the outward expression of where our inner confidence lies. Paul is stating where our confidence lies, or ought to lie, as believers, as those who are justified by faith. That is why this passage can be used as a gauge of how well we have understood and ap-

plied the first four chapters of Romans. Viewed in that light, this text is a measure of Christian maturity.

It seems quite natural to rejoice, to be confident in what is positive, but the rejoicing that comes next is supernatural. We not only rejoice in our present relationship of peace and grace with God, and in our future prospects, we also rejoice in our personal problems. Romans 5:3-4:

**And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; (NASB)**

Some of you are probably thinking, "That's easy for Paul to say, but he doesn't understand my pain. He doesn't know how much suffering I have experienced." But, if you think about it, Paul would understand. Everywhere he went he suffered. He was beaten. He was thrown into prison. He was shipwrecked. It is possible that his wife and family left him because of his conversion. Just like many of you, life was tough for Paul. Many of you have had struggles in the past or are presently battling with things like substance abuse, broken marriages, and other painful circumstances. You have suffered seemingly unbearable losses.

Paul was not a masochist. He did not find pleasure in pain. He is not telling us that when tragedy strikes, we are supposed to enjoy the pain even though our hearts are breaking. Some people enjoy torturing themselves. They aren't happy unless they're miserable. But Paul is not talking about that. When his enemies were hurling rocks at him, I am sure he didn't stand there, asking for more. He tried to avoid pain, as we do. He would flee when he knew people were out to kill him. But he also knew something that we too often forget: "*knowing that tribulation brings about...*" Suffering accomplishes something. Suffering is valuable, it is productive, and that is what causes us to rejoice.

What does suffering produce? Paul goes on to say:

**knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope;**

Suffering is the process that perfects us. Far from being an obstacle to our spiritual growth, pain is actually the condition that supports it. Suffering produces perseverance. This word *perseverance* is very colorful. It is a compound word derived from two Greek words which mean, "remain," and "under." Suffering literally means, "to remain under." It is the capacity to remain under the pressure without collapsing. It signifies stability and staying power. What a wonderful quality that is! We all want to be stable and strong, able to stand when the hurricane winds blow. Have you ever asked God to make you a strong and

stable person? Facing adversity is the only way to become that way. Perseverance comes through suffering.

It's not that suffering makes you tough inside. The process is not like that at all. James says that suffering "tests our faith," that wonderful quality of centering ourselves on God and trusting him completely. Suffering makes us cling to Christ. It strips away the facade of self-sufficiency, the illusion that we can live on our own strength, using our own resources. When God puts us in circumstances that take us to the end of ourselves so that we are unable to cope, then we can turn to him and discover that he supplies everything we need to face the circumstance. Peter puts it this way in his epistle: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Pet 1:6-7).

The only way for God to build our faith is to take us through times of testing, as gold is purified by fire. The goldsmith melts the gold to bring the impurities to the top to be ladled off, and he continues that process until he can see his face reflected in the gold. Suffering is like that. It is the heat that melts and purifies our faith. Suffering pulls out all our supports and leaves us vulnerable and needy. And as the impurity of our fleshly self confidence comes to the surface it is ladled off, and the character of Jesus Christ can be seen.

That is why Paul goes on to say that perseverance produces proven character. The word simply means "proven"—tested and found approved. In the Ancient Near East, the word appeared on pottery that had gone through the furnace intact, without cracking—an ancient version of the Good Housekeeping seal of approval. This was necessary because unscrupulous potters would fill cracks with wax, paint over their handiwork, and sell the vessels as sound. Consumer advocates would check for cracks by holding pots up to the sun. If there were none, they would stamp them *sina* (without) *sera* (wax). That is where the word sincere comes from. In the Greek world they wrote *dokimos*. That is the word Paul uses here. It means "tested and approved."

A feeling of stability and reliability is ours when we refuse to view troubles as an intrusion but, rather, as an opportunity to trust God and do his will in the midst of our circumstances. Someone has said that God wants to squeeze us like grapes to make sweet wine, and the pressures we experience is due to his fingers effecting that purpose.

As we go through that process of suffering, clinging to God, our character blossoms and we become more mellow and easier to live with. We sense God's working in our life we have a sense of expectancy about the future. Paul says that proven character produces hope. Again, the hope he is talking about is something that is sure and certain. It is no fantasy or illusion. The kind of hope he is referring to is an irrepressible optimism. God's work in our lives gives us a sense of optimism about the future. We become steady and reliable, less nervous about the future. We know that God is at work making us into the kind of people he wants us to be. This is the confidence that Paul writes about in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10:

**I think you ought to know, dear brothers, about the hard time that we went through in Asia. We were really crushed and overwhelmed, and feared we would never live through it. We felt we were doomed to die and saw how powerless we were to help ourselves; but that was good, for then we put everything into the hands of God, who alone could save us, for he can even raise the dead. And he did help us, and he saved us from a terrible death; yes, and we expect him to do it again and again (2 Cor 1:8-10, Living Bible).**

And then Paul goes on to say that this certainty will never disappoint. In fact, the very experiences of suffering and pain that we want to be freed from are exactly what we need in order to become assured of God's love. This is striking, because our natural reaction to suffering is to doubt God's love.

In these next few verses Paul elaborates on the theme of God's love. These words have been used so often in evangelistic messages we tend to forget what they meant in their original context. Paul is not talking to non-Christians, but to Christians. He wants to assure believers in the midst of their pain that they are loved. Verses 5-8:

**and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.**

Our hope rests on God's love. John Stott comments: "The reason we know our hope won't let us down is that God won't let us down; his love will never give us up."<sup>2</sup> This is the first time in Romans that the love of God is mentioned. There is no more important time in a believer's life to be assured of God's love than in the midst of pain. When we find ourselves in difficult circumstances, our first reaction is to think that God is mad at us, that he is not good or he doesn't have our best interests in mind. If that is how we respond, we sink into a deep depression or lash out and start complaining. And in our bitterness and anger we blame God for ruining our life. But rather than regarding pain as an evidence of God's wrath, Paul says our difficult circumstances are the arena where God wants to communicate his love.

There are two major means which God has provided so that we can be assured of his love. The first is the Holy Spirit. This is also the first mention in the book of the Holy Spirit and his work in our lives. Every believer receives the gift of the Holy Spirit at the moment of his conversion, when he or she was justified by faith. Now one of the most important ministries of the Spirit is to make us aware of God's love. Paul says that God has poured out that love within our hearts through the Holy Spirit. The image is of a cloud bursting open, letting loose a downpour in a parched desert. In the midst of our wilderness the Holy Spirit's desire is to refresh us deep inside with a downpour of God's love.

And the second objective way we know that God loves us is that he died for us. God proved his love for us through Christ's death on the cross. John Stott writes: "The

essence of love is giving...The degree of someone's love is measured partly by the costliness of the gift, and partly by the worthiness of the receiver. The more the gift costs the giver, and the less the recipient deserves it, the greater the love is seen to be. Measured by these standards, God's love is absolutely unique. For in sending his Son to die for sinners, he was giving everything, his very self, for those who deserved nothing from him except judgment."<sup>3</sup>

So let us not evaluate God on the basis of our circumstances. If we desire insight into the character of God, all we have to do is look at the cross. Jesus' sacrificial death is the foremost display of love in history.

Paul continues, verses 9-10:

**Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.**

If Christ died for us while we were sinners, if he demonstrated his love while we were his enemies, how does he feel about us now that we are his friends? The apostle's point is clear: If God demonstrated his love then, certainly he loves us now. The fact that we are suffering and that life is hard should never persuade us that God doesn't love us. He gave his life for us on the cross, and has poured out that love to us through the Holy Spirit. He is surrounding us in that love.

This leads Paul to his final statement. He has one more point. Verse 11:

**And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.**

The ultimate mark of maturity is that we rejoice in the person of God. Mature Christians don't rejoice so much in the gifts that God gives, they have come to the place where they love God and worship him.

And this is the place where suffering leads us: it enables us to know God as we've never known him before. Job said, out of his own misery: "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5).

As my friend Dave Roper writes: "Sorrow is the means to that end to all things—God himself. Suffering brings us heart to heart with him...When repeated strokes rob us of health, friends, money, and favorable circumstances, God becomes the only thing in life for us. He alone becomes the object of our devotion. We cry out with the psalmist, 'Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.'"<sup>4</sup>

That is the place to which God wants to bring us. So we can see a progression in this entire passage, over the course of our last study and again today. We begin our Christian life rejoicing in the fact that we are forgiven. The burden has been removed and we are freed from all of our past guilt. We are at peace with God and no longer face his wrath. And we rejoice in this new relationship of unconditional acceptance that we now enjoy. We rejoice as we

think about the future, and the assurance that we will one day experience the glory for which we were created. But then we begin to face the tribulations that Jesus said we would endure. Life becomes hard and we suffer loss. It is then we learn that the suffering we are going through is not a negative but actually a positive thing. It is refining our faith and producing character. In the depths of such painful times we grow to experience our Heavenly Father's love in a way we never had done before and we richly enjoy his presence and his love. We begin to see God not so much as someone who merely dispenses good things, but as a Father whom we love and worship.

Where do you find yourself in this process? These positive declarations of all that is ours now that we have been justified are a helpful gauge to measure own spiritual growth. I pray that you are not only growing older, you are maturing, too. If not, perhaps a good response to this message would be to tell the Lord that you want to grow up. That is certainly his desire for you, to bring you to the place of enjoyment of which Habakkuk spoke: "Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

Let us close this morning by singing *It Is Well With My Soul*. This hymn was written by Horatio Spafford, an attorney who lived in Chicago in the last century. He was a dynamic Christian man who was influential in the founding of the Moody Bible Institute. Following the great Chicago fire in 1871, wanting to get his family away from the city while it was being rebuilt, he put his wife and children on a ship and sent them to Europe. As they were crossing the Atlantic Ocean the ship was struck by another vessel in the middle of the night, and both ships sank. This mother saw her four children drown. She was struck by a falling mast, but was miraculously saved by holding on to some floating debris. She was rescued and taken to Wales. While she was in a hospital there she telegraphed back to her husband the two words: "Saved alone." Dr. Spafford took the first ship to Wales. As the vessel neared the place in the Atlantic where his children had perished, he walked along the deck, contemplating all that had happened. It was then that he was moved to write *It Is Well With My Soul*:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

This is the message that Jesus wants to communicate to us this morning: the unquenchable joy of the man or woman, boy or girl who has been justified by faith.

© 1999 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino

1. Lloyd John Olgilvie, *Drumbeat of Love* (Waco, TX: Word, 1978) 176-77.
2. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 1994) 142.
3. Stott, 144.
4. David H. Roper, *A Man to Match the Mountain* (Discovery House, 1996) 21.