

Reading: James 1:1-18

Theme: Rejoice in our sufferings.

Top sports people try to maintain and improve their fitness and skills, even improve them by small percentages. By slacking off or missing training, or suffering an injury their performance is affected and it is hard work to get back to fitness - especially after injuries as their body can be so easily out of condition. In a similar way, our hope in the glory of God can easily become weakened and out of condition, but God in His love and wisdom has set a process in place to maintain and develop the “fitness” or “muscles” of hope in us. The trouble is, we do not appreciate the gain we get from the pain of it! The process is described for us in v3-5a. These verses are sandwiched between hope - they start and end with hope. I want us to note 2 things from v3 and another 2 things in v4 & 5a next time.

1. Crazy Words?

I use this heading as so many people would read v3a and feel that Paul was mad, crazy or deluded to write such things. For it appears that Paul moves on from v2, does so excitedly as he says in effect “*There is more, there is something further*” when he wrote “*Not only so...*” What he had written was wonderful, but now it seems he’s writing of something as good, as wonderful, as amazing grounds for certainty, security and assurance in our salvation.

We see that he went on to write “*but we glory in tribulations*” (AV), “*but we rejoice in our sufferings*” (NIV). Hang on, doesn’t that seem crazy and mad! People view religion, especially Christianity - as it is so often presented - as “*Believe and all will be ok.*” Some churches teach that when you become a Christian you will have and enjoy “*health, wealth and prosperity*” and that any suffering is wrong, for it is a result of your lack of faith or your sin. They teach that suffering is to be avoided and they would question, even doubt that we are to rejoice in our sufferings as we are not to have any!

Society around us can look at these words, as you might be doing, and think “*That’s crazy*”. They wonder how anyone in their right mind could rejoice in sufferings and Paul’s words are considered crazy words! Yet they are not crazy words - that is why I placed a question mark at the end of the heading. Paul was a realist and he knew that pain hurts; he knew suffering caused grief, caused questions. Paul uses a word here that covers “*afflictions, oppressions, pressures, stresses, difficulties, illnesses and even persecutions*” the word he uses means *a pressing, a pressing together, pressure* and as a metaphor for the above meanings. Our sufferings, our tribulations include all those matters.

Trouble, tribulations, sufferings come to all people to a greater or lesser degree. How then are we as Christians - who are justified, at peace with God, having a secure standing by faith in this grace and have the hope of the glory of God – how are we to react to, to face such sufferings? Here Paul says we are to “rejoice” or “glory” (AV), “exult” (NASB). This is the same word that is used in v2, translated “rejoice”, which has the force of boast, brag, exult, rejoice! It is not put up with, keep a stiff upper lip, not resign meekly to such, or do your best in such, nor even sticking at things. It is something radically different and amazing - glory, rejoice, exult, brag, boast in our sufferings!

Someone might say they see what Paul means - that even in spite of our sufferings, or even in the midst of our sufferings we are to rejoice. Yes, that is right and is certainly included in what Paul wrote here, but it is more than just rejoicing in spite of such things. Charles Hodge writing on the words used goes on to say these words “*do not mean that we glory in the midst of afflictions, but on account of them. They are themselves the matter of the ground of glorying... Afflictions are to the Christian a ground of glorying; he feels them to be an honour and a blessing.*”

Perhaps by now you are convinced I have been keeping crazy company and quoting their crazy words! Yet the Bible nowhere says that we will have trouble-free life. Job 5:7 says *“Man is born to trouble as surely as the sparks fly upward.”* The Lord Jesus warned His immediate disciples and all all who follow Him *“in the world you will have tribulation”* (John 16:33). Paul encouraged new converts to remain true to the faith in Acts 14:22 by saying *“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”*

In becoming a Christian, we have more tribulations just because we are a Christian, as we go against the flow, are prepared to be, or are different and it is noticed, as we say *“No”* to sin and *“Yes”* to God and godliness; as the devil is openly and actively our enemy and are in a spiritual battle and war against the world, the flesh and the devil and put to death, mortify, our sinful desires. All these sound like a sour recipe for suffering if ever I heard one!

The NT warns us of these things - for it is 100% honest. Cults and many who preach easy believism or want decisions - a mental or emotional decision, do not mention these things. Every so often we hear of great numbers going to, being affected by this and that in Christian circles and yet the nett effect on the churches and the land is minimal. There seems to be no lasting spiritual fruit for they seem to spring up and then disappear - like the seeds sown on shallow soil. I remember one guy when I was in Bangor University saying of Christianity *“I tried it, but it didn’t work!”* It seems he still had problems and difficulties and it was not what he had been offered and wanted, so his profession was dumped. Christianity is not just mind over matter, nor the power of positive thinking, nor ignore the hurt or problems and they will go away. Christianity says that with all God has done for you, will do for you that you can exult even in your sufferings.

Charles Hodge draws attention to 3 areas or reasons for Christians rejoicing in their sufferings and all I'll do is briefly touch on the 3 headings he gave:

A. Because they consider it an honour to suffer for Christ:

Jesus says in Matthew 5:10-12 that we are blessed if we are persecuted for righteousness sake. In Acts 5:41 we read that the disciples, after being flogged, left the Sanhedrin **rejoicing** because they'd been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Yes, their flogging would have hurt them, but it was seen as a means of glorifying the Saviour and as believers, any opportunity to do that should cause us to rejoice. The trouble is that this way of suffering really costs us and identifies us in and with Christ's sufferings. Sadly, we are too much glory grabbers and like cushy, easy ways.

B. Because they rejoice in suffering being the occasion of manifesting His power in their support and deliverance.

Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10 wrote about the thorn in his flesh and was willing to boast gladly of his weakness so Christ's power would rest on him. The sight of our weaknesses is to give us a sight of God's power to help us and keep us. As we sang - *He giveth more grace as the burdens grow greater.*

C. Because suffering is made the means of their own sanctification and preparation for usefulness here, and for heaven hereafter:

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:17 of our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all. James in 1:2 & 12 encourages us to persevere in trials. While Peter in 1 Peter 1:6-7 again stresses we are to rejoice in suffering so that our faith may be proved genuine and result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus is revealed. He then wrote 1 Peter 4:12-14 showing we not to be surprised by things we suffer and we are to rejoice as we participate in the suffering of Christ.

The theory sounds fine and grand, but how do we work it out in real life, nitty-gritty situations and sufferings we go through? How is it to affect us? It does not mean we are to be silly, glib or even masochistic. That is, we suffer something, but alleluia springs to our lips in a simplistic unthinking way. That is silly, glib, thoughtless, mindless. Why would we say such? Such suffering is not pleasant but it can really hurt us, distress us, confuse us, even cause us to ask “Why?” We are told in Hebrews 12:11 *“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.”* Regrettably, some Christians feel being miserable and sorrowful is the right condition and we must not smile or enjoy life! Yet other Christians say we are to be happy and joyful at all times! We do not have a warrant for either position exclusively in Scripture. There are many things for us to rightly and truly to enjoy and delight in, but even the best of joys, are tinged with sorrow. Even in trials we can have reasons to rejoice.

We are to think and react biblically. We rejoice in sufferings because of the way we view them - they do not alter our standing with God one little bit and instead of working against our hope, they actually support and promote it. We may not see or experience such as we go first into a trial, a time of suffering, but as a child of God, as we begin to apply our faith, work out our faith in the dark situation, we note and remember that we are reconciled, at peace with the God who loves us and cares for us; that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus and in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.

Yes, we need to recognise and remember the 3-points Charles Hodge made and apply them. We are to realise we have a great hope and we stand in this grace even in situations of suffering. It shows us that this world is not our rest, our paradise - as brilliantly amazing as it is, for our hope is far greater. Often our sufferings remind us of all that very clearly. Yes, sufferings hurt, are grievous, confuse us and cause questions. Yet when we remember our God, they are not to cause our faith to crumble, but to cause our faith and therefore our

hope be exercised and develop. Part of the ongoing developmental process in us is patience or perseverance. Moving on we see:

2. Necessary Opportunity.

We may be aware of the poster, the sign that says “*Grant me patience Lord, but make it quick!*” Sufferings, tribulations will show us our own frailty, but will also reveal to us God’s enabling and keeping grace and His strength in such situations. Billy Graham said “*The will of God will not take us where the grace of God cannot sustain us.*” I know it as “*The providence of God...*”

Paul does not just say “*rejoice in sufferings*”, but continues “*because we know that suffering produces perseverance*” (NIV), “*worketh patience*” (AV) and “*endurance*” (ESV). Suffering, trials are to produce and bring about a progress in us which is to encourage us, help us to rejoice as we recognise and dwell on this truth. The word “*produces*” means to perform, accomplish, achieves, works out, brings about. So, sufferings, when viewed by faith will achieve something in us. As we commit our ways to the God who loves us and works all things together for good for His people, so we see we are not being punished, nor are we victims of random chance and we are able to not only rejoice in such sufferings but we discover the process of perseverance going on in us.

Some people start something with great enthusiasm and in a short time fade away e.g. New Year’s resolutions. Some in a marathon race start so well, but soon fade and even drop out. In our Christian life there is to be a perseverance, a keeping on, a patient enduring. We are not to be flash in the pan Christians, who fadeaway like a puff of smoke, but those who persistently run the race before them, even if they are divinely helped plodders. The ESV translates “*perseverance*” as “*endurance*” and shows the sense of keeping on going.

A Christian is one who can rejoice in sufferings as hard as the sufferings are, because they know they are in God's loving hands and they can keep on keeping on; they have a patient continuation in the Christian faith. They realise it is not just them, for God is at work, but they have to be involved as they work out their salvation with fear and trembling. As they continue in the race set before them, they do so looking unto Jesus for they have an awareness of their need for Him and they are conscious of the need of prayer, of God's word and fellowship.

We may not like what we see of ourselves in tribulation times. Often our Lord reveals to us how weak we are, how much we cling to our secret sins, our precious possessions, but then He shows us of Himself, His grace and enabling and so we patiently continue to rest on Him our Shield and Defender. As our situations change, so we recognise our need of constantly being given fresh supplies of grace for the situations and trials of each day. As that happens, we learn to rest on Him, to rely on Him and not our abilities alone. That is not easy, as we can be so independent, have such confidence in ourselves and our abilities. Yet we need to lean more on Him. Good old Peter so often did what he wanted to do as a young man, but the Lord Jesus told him it would not always be so - John 21:18 *"I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."* By then Peter was ready to contentedly have it so - as he had learned perseverance and patience. It is interesting to note that he wrote a lot about patience in both his letters - which is not bad for an impulsive man!

Tribulations, suffering are necessary opportunities in which we are to develop and grow. The Lord doesn't want us remaining as childish novices. I used to help with rugby training for children and some of them didn't want to get mucky, didn't want the ball passed too hard, were afraid of contact in tackles. As coaches we could have said

“Fine, don’t worry we will keep everyone away from you!” In doing so they would not have progressed or developed. Our Lord loves us too much to leave us as babies who are wrapped up in cotton-wool away from all bumps and bruises of life.

We may feel we have failed in our tribulations, it has been too much and we may be feeling that we are a miserable Christian, a failure. Listen, we are still believers and yes, we may be limping, but we are to keep on going on and all heaven wants us to do so, our Saviour and heavenly Father wants us to do so and encourages us on through His word and by the work of the Holy Spirit.

When we feel like giving up, even as we go through suffering, we are to remember the great crowd of witnesses urging us on through their testimony throughout the ages. We are to look to our heavenly Father; to our Saviour who has run the race before us, who knows what tribulations and sufferings are like and is helping, keeping and urging us on. We are to be steadfastly, enduringly, patiently persevering even in our sufferings and we are to keep on keeping on and to be constantly rejoicing even in such sufferings.

We all know it is not easy, but we are to view things from our position in Christ, our standing in His grace and we are not to be self-centred and wallowing in self-pity, but we are to eye the finishing line and the glory that waits for us. This works perseverance, which leads us on into what Paul writes in v4 & 5a - but that is our next subject for next week!