

“DEVELOPING A THEOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN SUFFERING”

I. Introduction

- A. If you were planning on running a marathon, you would not wait until the day of the race before you started to do any serious distance running.
1. On the contrary, you would spend the months and weeks leading up to the race building up your endurance.
 2. If you failed to do this, you would be totally unprepared for the grueling prospect of a 26.2 mile race.
 3. Marathon runners need to prepare for the challenge that lays before them.
 4. In like manner, Christians need to prepare for the challenge of suffering.
 5. We have a tendency to view suffering as an anomaly.
 6. When suffering comes, our prayers typically focus upon asking God to bring the suffering to an end.
 7. While it is perfectly fine for us to pray for relief from our suffering, we will be better prepared for suffering when our perspective is shaped by what God has revealed about suffering in his Word.
- B. Romans 5:1-5 teaches us some important lessons about the role of suffering in the Christian life.
1. As we study these verses today, we will see three things that relate to this subject.
 2. First, Christians have present peace with God.
 3. Second, Christians have the future hope of glory.

4. And third, suffering plays an important role in the life of Christian discipleship.

II. Present Peace

- A. The passage begins with the word “Therefore”, which tells us that Paul is drawing an inference from what he has been saying about the doctrine of justification by faith alone.
 1. Before he states this inference, he says something else that bears consideration.
 2. He says, “we have been justified.”
 3. The verb in that phrase is in the past tense.
 4. This tells us that justification is a past act for the person who has faith in Jesus Christ.
 5. Justification is a once and for all act by which God declares the sinner righteous.
 6. Justification results in a new and permanent status for the believer before God.
 7. The verdict of the final judgment has been drawn into the present for those who have faith in Christ.
 8. This is why Paul says in chapter 8 that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
 9. It is important for us to emphasize this because it is something that is always under attack.
 10. Even today, there are Christian teachers who are trying to persuade people that there is a future aspect of justification that will be based on our works.

11. Such teaching is flatly contradicted by Paul's assertion, "we have been justified by faith."
- B. The inference that Paul draws from the doctrine of justification by faith alone is that we now have peace with God.
1. This is referring to peace in an objective sense and not merely the subjective feeling of peace.
 2. In Christ, we have been reconciled to God.
 3. All of God's wrathful displeasure towards us has been removed by Christ's atoning work on our behalf.
 4. The enmity that previously characterized our relationship with God has been taken away.
 5. Instead of being objects of God's wrath, we are now the objects of his favor.
- C. We should not take this blessing for granted.
1. There are many people in the world who do not have peace with God.
 2. They may not have any worries about their standing with God, but if they do not have faith in Jesus Christ they are God's enemies.
 3. As Paul says, peace with God comes "through our Lord Jesus Christ."
 4. There is no other way to be reconciled to God apart from Jesus.
 5. And the only Jesus who can truly reconcile sinners to God is the real Jesus, the Jesus who is set forth in the Scriptures.
 6. A day is coming when all of those who have not been reconciled to God through Jesus will face God's final judgment.

7. On that day, there will be no mercy, no grace, no love for those who are still at enmity with God.
 8. There will only be unquenchable wrath, wrath that is fully deserved, wrath that is meted out in perfect justice.
 9. But if you have peace with God through Jesus Christ, then you have been delivered from that terrible doom.
 10. And this has important implications for your life in this present world.
 11. If you have been completely saved from that future judgment, then you can be confident that nothing that happens to you in this life is a matter of judgment.
 12. The fact that God is for you means that nothing can be against you in an ultimate sense.
- D. Christ has not won you an uneasy truce with God, a truce that might be broken at any given moment.
1. He has secured everlasting peace between you and God.
 2. This is why Paul says that through Christ we have obtained access into this grace in which we stand.
 3. The phrase "this grace" is referring to the grace of justification by faith alone.
 4. We stand in this grace.
 5. Justification is not a precarious state.
 6. It is a state that is fixed and permanent.
 7. We are immovably established upon Jesus Christ, the solid rock of our salvation.

III. Future Hope

- A. We turn now to consider our second point: Christians have the future hope of glory.
 - 1. Paul says that the peace that we have with God through Jesus Christ causes us to “rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”
 - 2. In the Bible, hope is not a matter of wishful thinking.
 - 3. Hope is something of which we can be certain.
 - 4. It is certain because it is rooted in the finished work of Christ.
 - 5. Christian hope looks to the future consummation of all that Jesus has already secured for his people by his life, death and resurrection.
- B. The object of the Christian’s hope is “the glory of God.”
 - 1. We are looking forward to a glorious future.
 - 2. Our hope is nothing less than the blessing of eternal joy in God’s consummated kingdom.
 - 3. You may remember that that Paul said in chapter 3 that our sin results in our falling short of the glory of God.
 - 4. Here Paul tells us that if we are in Christ, we can look forward to the hope of glory with confidence.
 - 5. By God’s grace, we have come to share in the glory of our exalted Redeemer.
 - 6. As Jesus said in his high priestly prayer in John 17, “The glory that you have given me I have given to them”.
- C. Hope plays a vital role in the Christian life.

1. Not only do we live by faith, we also live in hope.
 2. Living in hope means our ultimate focus is not upon the things of this life but upon the things of the world to come.
 3. In the words of J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity is not engrossed by this transitory world, but measures all things by the thought of eternity." [*Christianity and Liberalism*, 147]
 4. The Christian has hope that all of the ills that plague this sad world will one day be healed.
 5. And remember, this hope is not just wishful thinking.
 6. It is a certain hope.
 7. We need a hope that transcends this world, because the fundamental problems of this world seem pretty hopeless from a human point of view.
 8. But Christ's victory over sin and death assures us that there will be final victory over all that is wrong with this world.
 9. A day really is coming that will bring an end to all of our sinning, sorrow, suffering, shame, strife, toil, and worry.
- D. Paul says in verse 5 that this hope will not put us to shame.
1. It would put us to shame if it proves to have been a false hope.
 2. If we were to endure all of life's trials with the expectation that we will one day enter into Christ's glorious kingdom only to discover that in the end that we were wrong, then we would be put to shame.
 3. We would be shown to have based our hopes on something that was not true.

4. But this passage declares that our hope will not prove to be illusory.
 5. It will not disappoint us.
- E. Paul supports this claim by saying that “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”
1. The thing that makes our hope certain is our conviction that we really are the objects of God’s love.
 2. Note that Paul says God pours his love into our hearts.
 3. God does not give his love in small drops but in great abundance.
 4. And the Spirit is the agent through whom God confers his love to us.
 5. The Holy Spirit inwardly persuades us that God is favorably disposed toward us.
 6. When we are convinced of this, we know that nothing will be able to thwart God’s good purposes for us.
 7. The reason why Christian hope cannot be quenched by the trials and troubles of this life is because it is rooted in the conviction that the God who rules over this world truly loves us.
 8. As Paul says in Romans 8, “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” (vv. 16-17)

IV. Suffering and Christian Discipleship

- A. This brings us to the third and final point that we are considering in this sermon: the role of suffering in the life of Christian discipleship.

1. Paul says that we rejoice not only in hope of glory, but also in our sufferings.
 2. This does not mean that we rejoice in suffering itself.
 3. We rejoice in our sufferings because we know something about God's purpose in our sufferings.
 4. If suffering cannot be a matter of judgment for us, then it is always used for our good, for our sanctification.
 5. As Charles Hodge explains, "Since our relation to God is changed, the relation of all things to us is changed. Afflictions, which before were the expressions of God's displeasure, are now the benevolent and beneficent manifestations of his love."
 6. The suffering that we have to endure in this life attests that God is treating us as children.
 7. He does not let us have lives that are exclusively filled with ease and pleasure.
 8. He knows that that would not be good for us.
 9. God works through afflictions to discipline and train us.
- B. When Paul speaks of suffering in this passage, he is not only speaking of the opposition that sometimes results from our profession of faith in Christ.
1. That is certainly one type of Christian suffering, but it is not the only type.
 2. The suffering that we have to endure in this life can take many forms.
 3. It can be physical, financial, circumstantial, spiritual, emotional, psychological, relational, political.

4. Whatever forms suffering takes in your life, you can always rejoice in it because you know that God is working through it for your ultimate good.
- C. Our text explains this by setting forth a chain of the things that result from the sufferings that we face as Christians.
1. The first link in the chain is the link between suffering and endurance.
 2. Christian suffering produces endurance.
 3. As we bear up under our sufferings by depending upon the Lord to be our help, the Holy Spirit makes us spiritually stronger.
 4. God uses suffering to help us persevere in faith.
- D. The second link in the chain is between endurance and character.
1. Endurance produces godly character in God's people.
 2. It does this in an ironic way.
 3. Before it produces godly character, it exposes ungodly character.
 4. As Martin Luther explains, "Tribulation does not make people impatient, but proves that they are impatient. So everyone may learn from tribulation how his heart is constituted."
 5. In our flesh, we respond to suffering with murmuring, complaining, and bitterness.
 6. But as God graciously enables us to endure suffering in faith, he humbles us and gradually shapes our character so that we become increasingly conformed to the likeness of Christ.
- E. The final link in the chain is the link between character and hope.

1. Character produces hope in the sense that hope is one of the key character traits of the people of God.
2. Christian hope is not something that naturally grows within us.
3. Hope is not a matter of being an optimistic person, the kind of person who always looks at the sunny side of life.
4. There are plenty of non-Christians who have that kind of outlook on life.
5. Christian hope looks beyond this world to the blessings of the world to come.
6. And this hope is cultivated and strengthened through the trials that we have to endure in this life.
7. If we never had to suffer in this world, we would not look forward in hope to the next world.
8. Hope is like a muscle that needs to be exercised or else it will atrophy.
9. Suffering in this world is the context in which we exercise and strengthen our hope for the world to come.

V. Conclusion

- A. The peace that we have with God through Jesus Christ is a peace that can never be shaken.
- B. This is why we rejoice in hope of glory even amid the sufferings of this life.
- C. Our Savior has completed all that is needed to deliver us from the bondage of the flesh and the evils of this world and the curse of the law.
- D. Nothing can thwart Jesus as he works through his Spirit to apply the benefits of his redemption to the lives of those whom the Father has given

to him.

- E. You really can rejoice in your sufferings because you know that your God rules over them and has a favorable design in them towards you.
- F. You really can rejoice in your sufferings because you know that Christ is working through them to prepare you for glory.