

How we should show our love for God when life is hard

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church on March 31st 2019

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” (Romans 12.12)

Introduction

These last few weeks on Sunday mornings we have been studying Romans chapter 12, in which the apostle Paul works out the practical implications of the good news of our salvation. At the moment we are in the section that runs from verses 9 to 21 which speaks about the love that we are to have for other people, and the love that we are to have for God. Last week we were learning from verse 11 about the love that we should have for God. The apostle says in that verse, “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.” We saw that Paul urged his readers not be lazy about how they went about their tasks. He said that they were to be hot spiritually. They were to serve God as slaves. Now, in the verse we are thinking about today, he speaks about how we are to continue loving God even in times of difficulty.

The verse that we are thinking about today continues with the theme of love for God, but with a particular edge to it: it is about loving God when things are difficult in our lives.

Let’s face it: life in this world can be very difficult and sad. We experience pain and illness in our bodies. We experience people treating us badly. We may well experience poverty. We have worries for family members. We experience bereavement. We are hated by unbelievers, and sometimes directly persecuted. We must all face the prospect of our own death. Christians are not exempt from this suffering. In fact, in some respects, Christians may well experience more suffering than unbelievers.

This verse tells us how we are to love God, even when life is difficult. There are three things that the apostle tells us that we are to do:

1. We should rejoice.
2. We should be patient.
3. We should pray.

Let's think about these things.

1. We should rejoice

The apostle says in the first part of the verse, "Be joyful in hope"

There are two key words in this part of the verse. "Be joyful" and "hope".

The first word means "be glad" or "rejoice". There are many places where the Scriptures tell us to rejoice. The apostle Paul speaks in chapter 5 of this letter about how we who believe "rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (verse 2), and we "rejoice in God" (verse 11). In Philippians chapter 3 verse 1, he says, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you." He says that one of the fruits of the Spirit is joy. Peter speaks about how we who are believers are "filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 Peter 1.8).

The second word that we have in this verse is the word "hope". What is really important to understand is that when the Bible uses the word "hope" it uses it in a very different sense from the way that our world uses the word "hope". When the word says, "I hope so", what it means is, "I would love this nice thing to happen, but I have got a very good idea that it will not." But when the Bible speaks about hope for the believer, it is speaking about something wonderfully good in the future which is absolutely certain.

Let me mention some of the things that are coming to us who are believers:

1. The resurrection of the body. Jesus will come again, and when he does, we shall have glorious new bodies which are completely free from all pain, illness and suffering, and which will never die again.
2. The new heavens and the new earth. This world as we know it, with all its suffering and destruction, which results from man's sin, will be done away with, and will be replaced with a beautiful new world,

which will be unspeakably beautiful and free from any waste and decay.

3. Being totally free from the effects of sin in our lives. We shall see the Lord, and when we see him, we shall be like him. We will never again experience the grief of sinning, or taste the bitter results of sin in our lives, or the results of other people's sins.
4. Being perfectly at one with all brothers and sisters in Christ. Only true believers will be in the new world that God will make, and we shall get on perfectly. There will be no quarrels or disagreements. We shall be perfectly united with each other.
5. Being in the presence of God. The greatest thing of all is that we shall relate directly with God. We shall see him face to face. We shall be completely satisfied with him.

Moreover, this new world will never lose its sparkle. It will never "perish, spoil or fade" (1 Peter 1.4). We will never get tired of the resurrection life. We will find it more and more satisfying and delightful as we find out more and more about our brothers and sisters in Christ, and more and more about the beautiful new world that God will make, and most of all, as we find out more and more about God.

As I said a moment ago, the great thing about the Christian hope is that it is completely certain for the true believer. Let's think about some reasons why our hope is certain.

- Because of the death of Christ. When Jesus died he died specifically for his sheep, for those whom the Father gave him before the creation of the world. He said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10.11). He cannot fail to bring to glory all those for whom he died.
- Because of the resurrection of Christ. Jesus was raised from the dead as the "firstfruits" of those who would be raised. His resurrection guarantees our resurrection.
- Because we are justified. Those who trust in Christ are justified, which means that they are declared righteous in God's sight. God himself has declared us to be righteous before him. If God himself has declared us righteous, no-one can condemn us.
- Because Jesus is interceding for us. Jesus is now in heaven, and in heaven he is constantly interceding for us. He is our high priest who bears his blood into the most holy place in heaven, and is constantly pointing to his perfect sacrifice. He is, as it were, saying

constantly to the Father, "Do not look at their sin. Look instead at the sacrifice that I paid for their sin."

- Because of our union with Christ. Once we were in Adam, and we shared in all the curses that Adam experienced: condemnation, slavery to sin and death. Now we are in Christ. We are united to him. All that Christ has is ours. In him we are not condemned. We are set free from slavery to sin. We have life.
- Because we have been born again, and given spiritual life that cannot die. We who believe in Christ have been given eternal life. Eternal life is just that: eternal. It can never be killed off. Suffering cannot kill it. Even our own sin cannot kill it, because it is the life of the Holy Spirit in us.
- Because we have been chosen by God. Those of us who are saved were chosen by God before the creation of the world. That is a decision that God made, totally independently of how we live, and independent of our obedience to him. Nothing will ever change God's mind. Therefore, if you have reason to believe that you have been saved, you can be sure that God chose you, and that he will complete the work that he has started in you.
- Because we have been predestined by God. Those who are true believers have been predestined by God to be conformed to the image of his son. We shall one day be perfect. This cannot fail to happen, because God has decreed it.
- Because of God's oath. God has sworn to us that he will bring us to glory. As the hymn says, "His glory and honour are at stake, to save us from the burning lake." If you have truly trusted in Christ, and then were to land up in Hell, God would have been shown to have not kept his solemn promise. This cannot happen.
- Because of the sheer strength of God. No-one can withstand his power. He has committed the whole of his power to the salvation and keeping of his chosen people. Jesus said, as recorded in John's Gospel, chapter 10 verses 27 to 30,

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

So we who believe have a tremendous future coming to us, which is absolutely certain.

Given that we have such a great and certain hope, why do we find it so easy to feel low in spirits? The answer is because our trials and sufferings are obvious and visible. We feel them with our senses. But the future, though no less real, is invisible. Therefore, we have to make a conscious effort to exercise faith, and to focus on things that are not seen rather than on things that are seen. The apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 18, "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." He goes on to say in chapter 5 and verse 7 of the same letter, "We live by faith, not by sight." As we deliberately focus our thoughts on the future, rather than on our present woes, we will be able to fulfil this command to rejoice in our hope.

So here is the first thing that the apostle says, "Rejoice in hope".

2. Be patient in affliction

The apostle says in the next part of the verse "be patient in affliction".

Again, there are two key words here. This time, the key words are the words translated "be patient" and "affliction".

The word that is translated "be patient" means literally "remain under". We should continue in the situation of difficulty in which we find ourselves, and not take illegitimate means to try to escape.

The word that is translated "affliction" means literally "being crushed" or "being under great pressure", or "experiencing acute suffering". The older translations translate it as "tribulation."

So the apostle is saying, when life gets really difficult, we should stay put and continue to do the right thing, and should not try to find illegitimate ways to cope with our troubles.

There are various wrong ways in which people try to handle pressure. Some turn to drink. Some take illegal drugs. Others get involved in immoral relationships. Others try to dull their sense of unhappiness by watching movies and spending hours on social media. Others switch off from life and spend many hours in bed. Others move away from where they are living, when there is no good reason to do so, hoping that this will relieve them of their troubles.

This verse tells us that instead of taking wrong ways of dealing with pressure, we are to persevere with doing right, even while the pressure remains. We are to bear the troubles that God brings into our lives with patience, and we are to continue to do the right thing.

James says, in chapter 5 of his letter, verses 10 and 11,

Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

How can we be patient in times of acute difficulty and pressure? Let me give you some pointers:

1. Don't be surprised at it. We should not worry that something odd is happening to us when we suffer. It is normal. Peter says in his first letter, chapter 4 verse 12, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you."
2. Remember that this life is very temporary. We should remember that we do not belong here. This world is passing away. We belong to the world to come. We should remember that our lives are very brief and will soon be departing from this world, and then we will rest from our labour. Peter said in his first letter, chapter 1 verse 1, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world." He also says in verse 17 of the same chapter, "Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear." He says again in chapter 2 verse 11, "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul."
3. Believe in the sovereignty of God. Remember that God is ruling over all things, even difficult and sad things, for your good. Jesus said, as recorded in Matthew chapter 10 verse 29: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father." The apostle Paul says in Ephesians chapter 1 verse 11 that God "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will."
4. Believe in the love of God. When things go wrong in our lives we are tempted to think "God does not love me". The reality, however,

is that if you are a believer, you are loved with an everlasting love. Jeremiah 31 verse 3 says, "The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness." " Paul writes in Romans chapter 8 verses 35 to 39,

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

5. Remember that God is using your trials to enhance your experience of glory. Suffering that a believer goes through in this life will add to his experience of happiness at the resurrection. The more a believer suffers here, the greater will be the reward that he will receive at the resurrection. The apostle Paul writes in Romans 8 verse 28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." In 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 16 – 17, the apostle writes, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

So the second thing is that we should be patient in our afflictions. We should not try to find a quick fix, but we should continue doing the right thing, knowing that the Lord will bless us as we do.

3. Be faithful in prayer

We are to rejoice in our hope. We are to be patient in affliction. The third thing is that we are to be constant in prayer.

When we suffer, we are not simply to grimly bear our suffering. We are also to pray about it. We should pray for deliverance from the suffering if it is God's will, and also we should pray for God's help to continue to serve him, even if he does not deliver us.

The word that is translated “be faithful” literally means, “be strong towards”, or “be constant in”. It occurs in a number of places in the Bible. Let me give you some examples:

Acts 1.14: “They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.”

Acts 2.42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

Acts 2.46: “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,”

Col 4:2 “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.”

So the word carries with the idea of giving constant attention to something. We are to be constantly going to God.

There are other places also that speak about constancy in prayer. Jesus says, as recorded in Luke chapter 18 verse 1 that we should “always pray and not give up.” Paul says in Ephesians chapter 6 verse 18, “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.” With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.”

Does this mean that we should spend all day every day exclusively in prayer, and never do anything else but pray? Of course not. Many of us have work to go to. We have homes to keep. We have family members and friends to care for. We need to serve God in the church. But the point is that we should be constantly going to God in prayer, whatever we are doing. We should have times of the day when we get alone with God and pray to him, as Jesus told us to, and as he did himself. We should also have times when we gather with friends to seek God, and also when we gather with the whole church. But this does not mean that when we have finished our personal devotions, and come away from prayer meetings, we forget about God. Rather, whatever we are doing, we should relate with God as we do it, and shoot up quick prayers to him, like “Lord, please help me with this task”, “Lord, help me to love this person that I am talking to,” “Lord please help me with this pain that I am in.” Whatever our circumstances, whatever our difficulties, whether big or small, bring them to the Lord.

The apostle Paul writes in Philippians chapter 4 verses 4 to 7, in verses which tie up very much with the verse that we have been thinking about today,

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Whatever our concerns, we should bring them to God, and leave them with him. Peter says something similar in his first letter, chapter 5 verse 7, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." James says, in chapter 5 of his letter, verse 13, "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray."

What should we pray for? Of course, it is only natural that we should ask that, if it is God's will, he will remove from us the difficulty that we are in. Are you sick? Ask God to heal you. Are you very hard up? Ask him to provide for your needs.

But also, we should pray that if it is not God's will to deliver us from the difficulties, God will help us in those difficulties, to persevere and to honour him as we go through such difficulties, if it is not his will to deliver us.

Conclusion

We have seen from this verse three things that we are encouraged to do in order to show love for God when we are in difficulty: we should rejoice in our hope, we should be patient in our afflictions, and we should be constant in prayer.

I hope that, if you are a Christian, God will have spoken to you today and encouraged you. I need to say as we finish that all that we have spoken about today is only possible if you are a true Christian. If you are not a Christian, you have no hope. It will be impossible for you to be patient in affliction. You will be unable to pray truly. I would urge you, if you are not a believer, or if you are not sure, to come to Christ, so that you may be enabled to know his peace and joy in abundance.

This booklet contains the edited notes of a sermon which was preached by Henry Dixon. A recording of the actual sermon that was preached may be found at

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