

## HOW GOD USES SUFFERING IN OUR LIVES

### Romans 5:1-6

Good morning! After a two-week break, we'll continue our series on the Book of Romans which we're studying verse-by-verse. Before we took a break from this series, we looked at Romans 5:1-11 and we saw that Paul lists the benefits of being a Christian. He mentions six different benefits of believing. Do you remember what these are?

As a review, these are the benefits of believing:

1. You are at peace with God.
2. You have a 24-hour access to God.
3. You have a dependable hope that won't let you down.
4. There is a purpose in your problems.
5. The Holy Spirit fills you with His love.
6. You are eternally secure.

I want us to look at one particular benefit – #4 “There is a purpose in your problems” but I want to actually rephrase it as “How God uses suffering in our lives”. That’s the title of this message.

Please open your Bibles to Romans 5:1-6. Follow along as I read this passage.

v. 1 *“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.”*

In this passage, I want us to focus on verse 3. It says, “we also glory in our sufferings”. As I mentioned in my last message, glory in Greek can also mean rejoice or boast or be happy. And that’s how some versions of the Bible translate it. So, Paul is saying that Christians can rejoice in their suffering. How is that?

Ok. Let’s look at Phil. 1:29 where Paul sets forth the same thought, *"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him."* Now, when we lead someone to Christ, we normally don’t show them this verse. What happens is this: somebody becomes a Christian and at first everything goes really smooth in the Christian life. I think God kind of protects baby Christians. When you're a baby Christian it seems everything you pray for, you get. Everything goes smoothly at first. But inevitably as you begin to grow a little bit you're going to face it -- the problem. It will be different for every one of us. We'll have to face a trial. The typical reaction for the Christian when they hit their first big whammy is "What happened? God, don't You love me anymore? I must not be a Christian. God must not like me." We think that God promised a rose garden and they've never seen this verse. Peter says, “Don't be surprised when these things happen”. In 1 Peter 4:12, we read, *"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you."* Folks, when you get in a problem, don't panic. Just realize it's normal, nothing strange or unusual when you have problems.

What do you do instead? v. 13 *"But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."*

There is a misconception that being a Christian exempts you from problems. It doesn't. There are people who think that everything you pray for you'll get, and every time you're sick you ought to be healed. God is a miracle working God but not everybody gets healed. Why?

v. 19 " *So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.*" Is suffering sometimes God's will? The Bible says it is. People think that when you get into a problem you must be out of God's will but it says "...those who suffer according to God's will..."

There is a place for suffering in the Christian life. When Paul wrote this to the Romans the Christians were being persecuted by Nero. They were being fed to lions and all kinds of stuff. Suffering is normal and natural in the Christian life.

In Greek, suffering literally means distress. Suffering in the Bible literally means anything that causes distress. When we talk about how God uses suffering in your life, we could say how God uses stress in your life, pressure in your life, problems and difficulties in your life. Anything that causes distress can be labeled suffering. There's a wide variety of intensity from a minor irritation to a major catastrophe. The intensity makes no difference. God can use even irritations and even major tragedies to bring good in your life if you understand how he does it.

Paul says we are to glory or rejoice in our suffering. He doesn't mean to enjoy the suffering. The most important word in this verse is "in". We rejoice in our suffering. It does not say we rejoice because of our suffering. It does not say we rejoice for our suffering. It does not say we rejoice that we are suffering. We rejoice in our suffering.

What does that mean? You rejoice knowing there is a purpose behind it. Why can a Christian rejoice in suffering? "*Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know...*" Why can a Christian rejoice in suffering? Because we know something other people don't know. We have a perspective other people don't have. We have an understanding that non-believers don't understand. We have a different perspective from the world. We rejoice because we know something.

What is it that we know? *"...we know that suffering produces..."* Suffering accomplishes something. There is meaning behind the suffering. For the Christian, suffering produces something.

All three of our kids were born by natural childbirth. I was in the delivery room with Bel for all three babies. I have seen the pained expression of my wife in labor. It was tough to watch her in pain. I have also seen, once the baby was delivered, when her whole expression changes. Because the pain produced something worthwhile!

That's what Paul is talking about here. He's saying, "We know there is pain in life. Suffering, trials, problems, distress. But for the Christian it produces something. So we can rejoice in it. We know that it's not just meaningless. There is a purpose behind the pain. It will be all worthwhile."

What does suffering produce? How does God use suffering in my life? Paul says *suffering produces three things*:

1. *Suffering produces perseverance.* The Greek word for perseverance literally means the ability to handle pressure. It means the ability to stay under pressure. Usually, we want to get out of pressure, run from it. We want to get on top of it, not under it. Perseverance is the ability to stay under pressure. Its synonyms are patience, endurance, stability. God uses suffering to teach you how to handle pressure, how to hang in there, never give up, keep on keeping on, be consistent.

The opposite of perseverance is panic. You want to bail out, cop out, fall apart. You can either panic or persevere when you're under pressure. Paul says that God's very first purpose of suffering is to teach us how to handle pressure. Remember when Jesus and the disciples are out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee and Jesus goes to sleep in the boat. A big storm comes up and knocks the boat back and forth. Maybe you feel that way, knocked around in life.

The disciples panicked. They come to Jesus, shake Him, wake Him up, "Lord, don't You know what's happening? Don't you care?" Those are the two things we always ask God in the storm: Don't You know what's going on -- Don't You see my problem? Don't You care? Those are two common responses to trials. Jesus gets up and says to the raging sea, "Peace, be still!" and it's silent automatically. In Greek that phrase literally means "Sit down and shut up!" He could have said that to his disciples as well. "Sit down and shut up!" You learn endurance through suffering. You become more stable.

In 2 Corinthians 1:8-10, Paul gives his testimony, *"We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."* Even Paul got depressed. He was ready to give up on life. If Paul, the greatest Christian who ever lived next to Jesus Christ, can get depressed I can relate to that. He said, I was pushed so bad I didn't think I could make it! The man who experienced that wrote what we just read -- suffering produces perseverance. Paul learned two things in suffering: he learned about himself and about God. He learned that, in his own ability, he could not handle the stress of life. But he learned in God's ability he could handle the stress of life. Those are two things every Christian has to learn. Until you learn them you're not going to rejoice in suffering.

Suffering produces perseverance. Then,

**2. Perseverance produces character.** Character is a relatively rare term in the New Testament. Paul is the only person who uses this word. It's used seven times in the Bible. It's used to mean two things. Character is used to refer to something that is tested and proven reliable. Let me show you what character looks like:

## VIDEO (American Tourister)

You could say that luggage has character. It was tested, thrown around, put under pressure and didn't break down.

The other way to use this word is to refer to metal that has been purified by heat and fire. When you heat up a metal the impurities rise to the top. When they're purifying gold or silver they will heat it up real hot and the dross -- the impurities -- rise to the top and they skim it off. Someone asked a silversmith, "How do you know when the silver is pure?" He said, "When I can see my reflection in it." That's the neat thing about the Christian life. You know when a Christian is pure when you can see Christ's reflection in their life. Perseverance produces character.

Look at Hebrews 2:10. This is talking about Jesus, *"In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered."* Jesus Christ was made perfect through suffering. The word "perfect" does not mean sinless. Jesus was already sinless. He never sinned. It means mature, lacking nothing, and that's character. Jesus was made perfect through suffering. It's the same "perfect" we talk about in character, meaning proven reliable. Jesus was proven reliable through suffering. He lived through the temptations and came out OK. He went through the cross. He went through the suffering and was proven reliable through those circumstances.

If that is the way Jesus was made perfect, how do you think you're going to be made perfect? What makes you think you're any different? If Jesus was made perfect through suffering, do you think God's going to do differently for you? In James is the same word -- perfect, meaning maturity. James 1:2-4 says, *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let*

*perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."* This is not a one-time lesson in the New Testament, it's all the way through. The Christian's response to problems is rejoice! Romans, 1 Peter, James - three different authors say, consider it joy when you're going through problems. Why? Because you know! You know something about that problem. You know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance -- the same word we just looked at in Romans -- the ability to handle pressure. *"Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."* The word mature is the same word used for Jesus in Hebrews -- perfect. You'll be mature, complete. Suffering produces perseverance and perseverance produces character. It makes you a veteran. One thing about veterans is they're stable in crises if they've been through the war and handled it. They have been through a situation. Once you've been through it you can handle another one.

What does suffering produce? Suffering produces perseverance. Perseverance produces character. And

### **3. Character produces hope.**

Trials, rather than destroying our hope, are meant to increase our hope. Hope is the diploma you get for passing the test. What is hope? In the New Testament, hope does not mean wishful thinking. It means confidence. God says, "I'm going to use problems in your life to give you the ability to handle pressure and that will make you reliable and a person of character, someone with Christlike character. And when you have this Christlike character you will be confident. Trials will give you more confidence. The first time you have the problem you don't know what to do. The second time you had the problem you handle it a little bit better. The third time... You get confidence because you've been through the situation.

When you become a veteran in the crises of life it produces confidence, stability and you become bold from the experiences because you can say from experience, not just from head knowledge, and **Phil. 4:13 "I can do all this through him who gives me strength."** becomes real to you. The "him" is Jesus. The Bible says that as a fact, but it's been proven in your life. You're living proof that you can handle all things through Christ who strengthens.

There is only one problem. Suffering does not automatically produce these things in your life. How many of you know people, even Christians, who have been through the suffering but it didn't produce any character in their lives? No confidence in their lives? No ability to handle pressure in their lives? In fact, instead of that, they became bitter and angry at God and may have even given up on their faith when they went through trials.

This process only works for Christians, and it only works for Christians who are cooperating with God. What makes the difference whether that problem in my life is beneficial or it's just wasted and I become a bitter resentful person? The difference is attitude.

Let me now share with you **five attitudes toward problems and pressures that will cause defeat in your life.** These are attitudes that will counteract God's purpose. If you have these attitudes in your life then all the problems that you go through would not teach you anything.

**1. Rebellion.** Rebellion against the problem. "God's not fair! He's treating me wrong! I don't deserve this!" It's a spirit of resentment. Rebelling against the problem defeats the purpose. **1 Samuel 15:23 (AMPC) "Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft."** It is just as evil to rebel against God's purpose in your life as it is to get involved in the occult. We don't have a right to be rebellious.

**2. Murmuring.** The common term is complaining. This was one of the major sins of the Israelites in the Old Testament.



It's mentioned ten times in the book of Exodus. It was this sin -- complaining -- that kept them out of the promised land. They had seven different tests. When they blew it, they would go one more lap around the desert! They spent 40 years and they finally died out there.

Many Christians never get into the abundant life because they are chronic complainers that keeps them out of the joy of the Lord. Canaan, in the Old Testament, does not represent heaven, contrary to popular opinion and hymns like "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand". It's not heaven; it represents the abundant, spirit-filled Christian life. In Canaan there were giants. Even after they got into the Promised Land there were problems. There are no problems in heaven but there are problems in the abundant Christian life.

1 Corinthians 10:10 says, *"And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel."* And in Philippians 2:14-15 *"Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.' Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky."* He says in a dark society, people who don't complain are so unusual they stand out like stars at night. When you find somebody who does not grumble and complain and argue, they are so unusual that they are like a bright star shining out at night. You see a difference.

3. **Worry.** It doesn't do any good. Worry is mental and physical suicide. Doctors have said it wrecks your health. It's like sitting in a rocking chair -- you keep moving but you don't go anywhere. The more you worry, the bigger it gets in your mind. A tiny problem gets bigger every time you worry about it until it gets enormous and finally out of control. When you worry, think of these verses. **1** Peter 5:7 *"Cast all your cares on him for he cares for you."*

Philippians 4:6 *"Don't worry about anything but in everything with prayer and thanksgiving make your requests known to God... And the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."*

4. **Fear.** This is related to worry. This is simply not trusting God. The reason we fear is we really don't think God has our best interest at heart. That's typical. When a problem comes, we think "God, do you really love me? Are you sure you know what you're doing?" We begin to doubt His love and power. We begin to be afraid. But 2 Timothy 1:7 tells us, *"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but one of power, love, and sound judgment."* If you're going through a problem you have the ability to work yourself through it with the help of God.

And there's this encouraging passage in Isaiah 43:1-2 *"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze."*

Only one thing I don't like about this verse: *"When you pass through..."* Why can't it be around? over? beside? No, God is going to take you through the problem and He says I'll be with you, I'll protect you, you can rely on Me. Don't be afraid.

5. **Self-pity.** This is the one that is almost incurable. It's probably the most dangerous because the person who is having the pity party is enjoying it. We want to have a pity party. We want people to feel sorry for us. We're enjoying feeling sorry for ourselves. David says in Psalm 69:20 *"I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found none."* David had a pity party but nobody came.

What is the secret of rejoicing in suffering? *Romans 5:5 "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."*

We've said that what makes the difference whether suffering has a positive or negative effect on your life is your attitude. Paul says that the truth that gives you a positive attitude is this: *You realize that suffering is the evidence of God's love, not His wrath.* There are two important words in verse 5: "love" -- this is the first time the word love is used in the book of Romans. And "Holy Spirit" -- this is the first time this is used in the book of Romans. The first mention of love and the Holy Spirit. Too often we see our problems as evidence of God's wrath and we feel rejected and alone and we think "God doesn't love me. God has rejected me. God must be mad at me. God is punishing me." Therefore, you become resentful. v. 5 says that God allows the problems and troubles so He can show us His love.

There are two responses to suffering: "Why?" or "Help!" Why is it that we get mad at the one who can help us the most? Instead of becoming resentful against God we become submissive and say, "God, take this problem." Even in your suffering God loves you and has your best interest at heart. Paul says that the Holy Spirit has been given to us. How did he give it to us? Our last verse makes it clear. *"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly."* (v. 6) If Jesus did not die for us, we wouldn't have the Holy Spirit. He says that if God loved you so much to die for you on the cross when you were totally rejecting Him, how much more does God love you now that you're a part of His family? If God loved you when you were totally rejecting Him, certainly He loves His children when they're going through problems and trials and through the fire.

Folks, don't let suffering make you bitter. Let it make you better because there is a purpose behind it. God loves you and he wants to make you like his Son Jesus.