

A Three Step Plan to Rejoice While Suffering

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November 16, 2008

Introduction:

We live in times of suffering. Hurricanes rack our coasts each year. We hear about someone new diagnosed with cancer or heart disease every week. Families struggle. Companies are faltering. The news scares us each day with talk of economic instability and financial failure throughout our country. Some fear religious persecution may come back in full swing in the coming years. Yet, despite all of this, verses like **Philippians 4:4** say, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (ESV). We then remember Paul wrote this letter from his own suffering in prison. I don't know about you but I can't help but wonder how. How are we supposed to actually rejoice in the midst of suffering? How can we gain the joy and strength to rejoice when we are enduring such pain physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually? I believe Paul actually gives us a three step plan to rejoice while we are suffering in **Romans 5:1-11**. If you are suffering right now or think you will in the future, examine this text with me to see the three steps necessary to rejoice even while suffering.

Before we get into the meat of this lesson, I do want to point out that the Scripture does not teach that the only emotion we are allowed is joy and rejoicing. Clearly as **Ecclesiastes 3:4** says, there is a time to weep and mourn. Even **Romans 12:15** says we must learn to weep with those who weep. Yet, even in times of weeping, there is a way for us to also have joy and rejoicing in the Lord.

Discussion:

- I. Look up in faith to God's plan.
 - A. The foundation for Paul's rejoicing was faith. By faith we are justified and have peace with God. By faith we have obtained access to God's grace in which we stand.
 - B. That first means we have to believe in God. As **Hebrews 11:6** says, we must believe God exists. There is no reason to rejoice in suffering if God is removed from the picture. And this is interesting because many people assume God must not be in the picture if they are suffering. The reality is, however, without God, suffering is pointless and nothing but a cause of despair. This goes beyond believing God exists; it means believing in the nature of God presented in the Bible. For instance, **Hebrews 11:6** says we must also believe God will reward those who diligently seek Him. This ties in with **Matthew 6:33**. If I am going to be able to rejoice while suffering I have to believe in the God who will provide for me and reward me if I keep seeking Him, His kingdom and righteousness. We must also have faith God will not allow us to go through more than we can handle by His grace and will always provide the way of escape (**I Corinthians 10:13**). I must believe in a God who disciplines me for my own good (**Hebrews 12:7-13**). This does not mean every bit of suffering is a punishment for something. However, every bit of suffering will discipline us, train us and help us if we let it, but that leads into our second point. Finally, we must believe in the God who is with us, no matter what we suffer (**Hebrews 13:5**), but more than that He is actually working in us to accomplish His will (**Philippians 2:12-13**) and therefore through Him we can do all things (**Philippians 4:13**). Do you believe in that God? If you don't, you will hardly be able to rejoice when things are good let alone when bad. If you struggle believing in this God, read the stories of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Job, Daniel. As **Hebrews 12:1-2** says, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who suffered but they had faith in this God and they survived. More than surviving they were rewarded.
 - C. This, however, means more than just believing in God. It means believing God. It means so believing God that we surrender our lives to Him and His way. Yes, we believe in the God who loves us, saves us, works in us and delivers us. Faith is not just headwork; it is also footwork. As **Romans 4:12** says, faith means walking in the footsteps of faith. God doesn't want us merely to profess faith in words. He wants us to live faith in our actions (**James 2:18**). This means we simply do what He says. We do that not because we are trying to figure out His rules but because we believe His way works. He teaches us to pray, we'll pray because we believe praying works. He teaches us not to forsake the assembly, therefore we make it to the assemblies because we believe that will work. He tells us to talk to those who have sinned against us. He tells us to reconcile with those against whom we have done something. He tells us to seek first His kingdom and righteousness instead of seeking first financial peace. Do you believe God's way works? Think about David and the opportunities he had to kill King Saul. That would

have seemingly ended his suffering as he constantly fled the King's armies an outcast. Yet, he chose to do things God's way and God's way worked.

- D. If we want to rejoice while suffering, we must have faith. We must believe in God; we must believe God. We must do this so much we surrender our lives to Him as **Galatians 2:20** presents.

II. Look forward in suffering to God's goal.

- A. **Romans 5:3-5** explains the reason we can rejoice while suffering is because we know suffering is not just done in a vacuum. Rather, suffering has a very specific place in God's plan. In fact, I will suggest that without any suffering we cannot go to heaven. Take a look at **Acts 14:22**. I used to think this meant that along the way to the kingdom we would endure tribulation. However, I now think Paul was saying the tribulation itself actually gets us to the kingdom.
- B. As we have learned in other lessons, God allows suffering so we can learn to be merciful. In **Romans 5:3-5**, we learn God also allows suffering because suffering produces endurance, patience, steadfastness or perseverance. This is an interesting statement because we expect endurance to help us make it through suffering. But this says it is the suffering that produces endurance. In other words, without suffering we cannot endure. Perhaps the perfect illustration is weight training. How do we learn to lift the heavy weights? We do so by building up to them. However, we have to challenge ourselves. If we only ever lift weights that are easy, we will never grow to lift the heavier weights. So we push ourselves. We strain and struggle with heavier and heavier weights, increasing the burden, pushing our muscles to their limits. When we do that, we actually cause the fibers in our muscles to rip and tear. The healing process is what builds the muscles and allows them to handle more and more weight. So, what helps us endure the heavier burdens? Other burdens. As we are pushed to our limits by our sufferings, we are strengthened and learn endurance. This allows us not only to be righteous, but to be righteous despite the attempts of Satan to stop us.
- C. However, the goal is not merely endurance. Endurance produces proven character (NASB). A form of the same word translated "character" in **Romans 5:4** is also found in **I Peter 1:6-7** where Peter speaks of the "genuineness" of our faith. Here he talks about how we rejoice even though we suffer because we know the trials test and prove our faith. We can easily misunderstand this picture. Today, we view testing as an issue of pass or fail. We think testing is just trying to see if we have enough faith. God does not let us suffer simply to see if we have enough faith. Rather, the picture of suffering and trial here is that of gold being tested. It is placed in the fire. Yes, this testing sees how pure the gold is. However, it does it by causing the slag and dross to rise to the top so it can be skimmed off. Thus, the purpose of the testing is not to see if we pass or fail. The purpose of the testing is to bring our dross to the top so we can identify it and get rid of it. Without suffering and tribulation, we might deceive ourselves to thinking we have strength when we don't. We gain strength by going through suffering to see where our weaknesses are so we can work on them and remove them. Do you see how without any suffering we cannot actually enter the kingdom? We have discussed this before and learned that most people take the hardship of suffering and act like its extenuating circumstances provide an exception to godly living. "Oh, God will understand, I was going through a really hard time." Actually, the suffering is given so we can see those weaknesses and remove them. Therefore, as suffering strengthens us, providing endurance, the increased endurance helps us remove our weaknesses as the suffering brings them to the surface.
- D. But again, that is not the end. Paul says the proven character gives us hope. Biblical hope is not wishful thinking as we might say we hope it doesn't rain tomorrow. Biblical hope is an earnest expectation and in this context, our hope is the hope of the glory of God (**Romans 5:2**). I believe this is reference to the same glory mentioned in **Romans 8:18-19**. This is our hope for the glory of God that is going to be revealed to us and in us in eternity. In fact, in **Romans 8:24**, Paul says it is in this hope we are saved. Because we have endured suffering and therefore gained greater endurance and that testing has helped us remove the dross from our lives we have hope of glory through God in eternity. This is the end and goal of our suffering—our salvation.
- E. If you want to rejoice in the midst of your suffering, you must begin with faith. Having established that foundation, then use your faith to remember that the God who saved you, has plans for you and is using your suffering to get you there. It is through this suffering that you will enter

the kingdom of heaven. If you have trouble recognizing this, remember Paul in **II Corinthians 12:7-10**. The suffering caused by his thorn in the flesh brought to the top that Paul needed to rely on God and His grace more. That discipline kept Paul from becoming conceited and helped him on his path to heaven. God has the same plans for us through our suffering.

III. Look back in memory to God's love.

- A. Many people have hope in things that disappoint or put them to shame. Their hope is in some earthly thing and it doesn't come through for them. Paul says our hope will come through for us and we are assured of that because of the love of God that has been poured out in our hearts by the Spirit. I do not believe this is a reference to some kind of miraculous operation of the Spirit in our hearts. Rather, this love of God is poured out in our hearts as the Spirit has revealed to us the love of God by telling us about Jesus' sacrifice.
- B. Paul says in **Romans 5:11** that we rejoice in God through Jesus who is our reconciliation. When we are suffering in the present moment and tempted to believe that God has abandoned us, we need to look back to the love God has poured out in our hearts by letting us know about His Son's death for us. What amazing love it is. After all, "one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die" (**Romans 5:7**, ESV). It is hard to recognize a difference between the righteous man and the good man. However, I once heard Bill Hall explain if there is a difference, the righteous person works hard to give what is due in each situation, whereas the good man will often go above and beyond the call of duty to do good to others. For instance, at a restaurant, a righteous man gets out his tip calculator to figure out what the exact right amount is for a tip. The good man thinks about how the waiter/waitress probably isn't making much and just gives an abundance to help out. Scarcely would anyone die for the man who gives to everyone what is his due. Perhaps a few might die for the one who goes above and beyond the call of duty in goodness. But we are neither of these. We have neither been righteous or good. We have been sinners, unrighteous, unholy and God loved us so much He sent Jesus to die anyway. Wow!
- C. The point to recognize here is that for all the trouble we might be facing right now in whatever we are suffering, the number one problem of our lives has already been resolved. God loved us so much that He took our sins away through Jesus. With that faith in our heart we recognize anything we are suffering now, whether it is persecution for being a Christian, our own sickness or the sickness of a loved one, financial ruin, national crisis or whatever, we can walk through it knowing that wherever it leads, in the end we are saved and going to heaven. This too shall pass, but God's love never will.
- D. Additionally, note **Romans 5:9-10**. Paul's point there is if God loved us enough to reconcile us to Him by sacrificing His Son, then He loves us enough to get us through whatever we are facing now with our salvation intact if we will merely hang on in faith. This brings us full circle to the faith we described at the beginning that knows God provides the way of escape and will not allow us to endure more than we are able (cf. **I Corinthians 10:13**). What a great, loving God we have; what greater cause could we look for to rejoice than His love for us and the reconciliation and salvation He has worked in our lives?

Conclusion:

According to Paul, this is the plan for rejoicing even while we suffer. What are you going through? Do you have financial struggles? ...family struggles? ...religious persecution and oppression? ...illness? ...loss of a loved one? Look up in faith to God and His plans, look ahead to God's goals for your suffering and look back in memory of God's love. We serve an awesome God who loves us. His love is not cheap and easy like some kind of Santa Claus who removes every challenge and makes life a garden path. Oh no, our God loves us enough to let us face our challenges that we might grow and enter His kingdom. Praise God for that.