

We Choose How We'll Respond 2022
 2 Corinthians 1:3-10 Romans 5:1-10

2 Corinthians 1:3-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation. We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again.

Romans 5:1-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

Chippie, the parakeet, was a very nice and happy little bird,
 pleased to pass the hours sitting on his perch,
 swinging and singing to his heart's content.

One day Chippie's owner was cleaning out his cage,
 getting all the nasty stuff off the bottom with a vacuum hose.

The phone rang, and when she reached for it,
 well, somehow Chippie got sucked in.
 Immediately she dropped the phone, shut off the machine,
 and frantically tore open the vacuum cleaner bag.

Inside, Chippie was alive, but very still and stunned by the trauma.

The little bird was all covered with filth, dirt and grime,
 so, the owner rushed into the bathroom
 and held Chippie under the running – splashing water.

Then realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering,
 she grabbed the hair drier, turning it on full,
 blasted the little guy with a sudden rush of hot air –
and poor little Chippie never knew what hit him.

A few days later a friend called to ask how Chippie was getting along,
 and the owner replied, "Well, he seems OK, he looks OK,
 but Chippie doesn't seem to swing and sing much anymore ...
 ...he just sits on his perch, staring out into space."

With all that's gone on and all we've dealt with these past few years,
 with all the craziness, stress, trauma and disruptions of Covid,
 surely that's enough to turn anyone's singing into a blank stare.
**Yes, I believe we can all relate to Chippie, the parakeet,
 and so how are people of faith supposed deal with it all?**

Drawing on his own trials and experiences of life and ministry
 Paul explains to the struggling Christians of Corinth: vs. 3, 5, 10

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all
 consolation, For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through
 Christ. He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; **on him we have set our hope** that he
 will rescue us again.

The word 'sufferings' in is often translated as 'tribulation',
 which comes from a word in Latin, 'tribulum'.

A 'tribulum' was a large plank of wood with spikes on the bottom.
 At harvest time, stalks and sheaves of wheat
 were spread out over the smooth hardened threshing floor...
 ... then a someone would stand on the 'tribulum'
 which a mule dragged over the wheat stalks like a sled
 which broke open the heads releasing the wheat.

That is a common biblical image of tribulation or sufferings,
 the experience of feeling like **you've been run over by a tribulum**,
 and may be a fair description of following current events these days.

In our texts today, Paul is very carefully making the case,
 that beyond mere endurance and trying to survive life's storms,
 struggles & trials **can be** a blessing and gift toward our growth,
 like the tribulum crushing the stalks for the valued wheat ...

**... because God's love, grace and mercy really are that powerful,
 the power of God to make good, even from our worst disaster
 by using our struggles to produce something of great worth...**
 ... which is the point Paul is making in Romans 5.

Paul begins Romans 5 by focusing on specific blessings, vs. 1-2.

Therefore, since we are **justified by faith**, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and **we boast** in our hope of sharing the
 glory of God.

The phrase "we triumph" is a better translation than "we boast",
 so, it's, **we triumph** in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

Paul's point is, that amid all the challenges and realities of life,
 don't let our defeats, failures and disappointments in this life

distract us from God's gracious purpose and abiding truth,
the full hope, joy and peace that our God intends for us.

Boast, isn't saying that we brag about our hope, but that we triumph,
in knowing with certainty that our hope is sure and secure,
that we will participate in the glory of God's purpose fulfilled,
and that grace will over time redefine who we are and how we live.

When Paul wrote this letter to the Christians living in Rome,
it was a very challenging and uncertain time of persecution.

Recognizing the difficulties and troubles that they were enduring,
he offers **pragmatic hope** amid their struggles & suffering. vs. 3-5
... but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Boast?, again, it's not that we brag about our suffering,
but confident in God's grace and promises, we triumph
for we know our struggles and God's love **are interrelated...**
**... because by God's grace something beneficial and a blessing
can emerge from the difficulties, losses and trials we endure.**

Now this is very important,
and I want to be very clear about what Paul is **NOT saying**.
It's not that good and faithful Christians shouldn't ever feel bad,
or just laugh and smile anyway, or try to ignore their pain away.

Maintaining a stiff upper lip when we really need to grieve
is not a faithful Christian response to our losses and pain,
**and Paul is absolutely not saying that Christians should deny
or hide their suffering, fear, failures, struggles or wounds.**

But when Paul wrote, "we also boast in our sufferings"
he means that even amid our struggles and defeats, we can
trust & know that God will accomplish victory in our lives.

It means that our suffering is never meaningless or pointless,
because of God's promised salvation, healing purpose and power
to transform even the terrible & painful stuff of our lives,
and somehow **use even suffering** for our benefit & growth.

As Paul explains it, "knowing that suffering produces endurance" ...
... much like a committed athlete such as a marathon runner
who keeps running hard despite breathlessness and pain,
for you can't produce endurance, without enduring.

Paul continues, "and endurance produces character"
In the Greek, the word that's translated as "character"
means to be validated and proven true through testing.
Character comes from having endured, and prevailed,
and to prevail, comes through effort and with a cost...
... much like a good guitar player will have callused fingertips.

The stronger and more spiritually mature Christians I have known,
have all had **the dirt and worn-spots of struggle and endurance,**
they were marked by scars and wounds, by hard lessons in life.

We can develop confidence, a trusting faith and hope in God,
through our suffering, our losses, struggles and tribulation,
because God uses all of that – even our pain and disasters,
ultimately, for our good and growth and compassion,
to produce character, confidence, faith and hope.

Our Christian character is tested & confirmed by enduring adversity,
for it is in passing through storm, trial and tribulation
that we learn and grow through our own personal experience...
**... as we emerge from struggle with a tested and stronger faith,
more certain and deeper, with more developed hope and trust.**

And so, Paul concludes, "and character produces hope"
Biblical hope is not, "I hope I will be lucky or fortunate",
but is a confident and proven **hope for tomorrow
based on God's faithfulness yesterday and today.**

It is not a hope of self-confidence that I can if I try harder,
or that we can withstand by our own will, tenacity or strength,
**but it's a confidence in God, in the faithfulness of God,
which over time, becomes our true courage and strength...**

... for as we pass through life's storms and fires of adversity,
we learn through experience **how truly gracious God really is.**

The call is for **a living-faith committed** to truth and hope in God
that dares to ask in humble and trusting submission:
**"OK Lord, what are you trying to show or teach me through this,
and how can what I endure serve to honor and glorify you?"**

Though we don't know exactly what lies ahead, **we do know God's love.**
**Our hope is in believing God and in trusting God's love for us,
because the promise is, God will finish what he started in us.**

As Paul wrote to the Christians living in Philippi, vs. 1:6
I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion.

Grace means that the Holy Spirit is in us, patiently working on us,
guiding, changing, and developing us, **we are a work in process,**
and though at times, progress is slow and indiscernible,
we are being made more worthy of God's gracious love...
... a new creation that the Lord our God will surely complete.

And yes, if it were left up to us to decide,
we probably would take the easier path.
But in order to grow, our struggles and problems are necessary,
and our God loves us too much to short-circuit the process.

It is a choice to perceive the events and struggles of our lives
as much more than just simply passing through this mortal life,
but rather as preparation for God's eternal and gracious glory,
the promises gloriously fulfilled in the coming Kingdom of God.

One time a man spent the morning watching a stone mason at work
some distance from the others working on building a cathedral.

The mason, off and away by himself, was clearly in no rush or hurry
as he spent hours carefully chipping away on just one single stone.
It was so slow, and for no apparent purpose, that seemed

to have nothing to do with building the cathedral.

The man could see what others working together were accomplishing,
but that one stone he was working on had no visible
connection with anything else that he saw going on.

Finally, the man watching went over the stone mason and asked,
"I've been watching you chipping away at that one stone,
and I keep wondering why?, what are you doing?"

The mason stopped and paused for a moment, then he pointed
to an open space up high near the top of the steeple,
and explained, "I'm working on this stone down here,
because I'm shaping it so that it will fit up there."

**So too, that is the work of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
as we are being slowly and carefully shaped down here in this life,
so that we will fit, up there in the coming Kingdom of God.**

And one of the most difficult truths to understand and accept
is that sometimes we need to fail, be weak, even hurt and broken...
... which is related to God's grace and how we choose to respond.

I can say with absolute certainty and heartfelt conviction,
that I never really grasped the unfathomable depth, breadth
and unfailing fullness & faithfulness of God love & mercy...

... until I had totally messed up, crashed and failed completely,
until I was defeated, crushed and broken into total despair,
**and was stunned to find out & experience for myself
that God still loved me, and would use me, anyway.**

Now that doesn't reduce the loss or mitigate our pain and suffering,
but God can use our struggles and disasters to work for our benefit,
moving us in ways **that never would have happened otherwise.**

God doesn't cause or make our failures, defeats, mistakes or wounds,
but also, **the Lord**
doesn't allow them to have the last word or waste them.
He builds upon them, creating renewal and blessings from them...
... for in time we'll see that God was up to something amazing all along.

So, to define a life based on an event, a mistake or struggle,
is like looking at a single thread through a microscope...
... which is to miss how that thread contributes to the whole tapestry.
None of us can see the whole picture of God's work, will and purpose.

So, as we struggle with the challenges and issues of life, (such as Covid)
we can learn to look for God's hand at work in the world around us,
and more about God; God's love and grace, wisdom and truth,
as we experience them in our lives and out in the world.

God's call is for us to surrender to his will and his purpose for us,
even amid the worst of chaos, disaster and confusion all around us,
trusting that God has something magnificent in mind for us,
because we are loved and because God wants good for us.

Listen for God's gracious truth: 2 Cor. 1:3-4 and Rom. 5:5 (*The Message*)

All praise to the God and Father of our Master, Jesus the Messiah! Father of all mercy! God of all healing counsel! He comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us... .. and we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!