

How to Get the Best Out of Your Trial

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Romans 5:3-4

*And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance;
4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope.*

Surely the Lord could perfect us instantaneously. It would not be difficult for the Almighty to take a new convert and instantly make him or her spiritually mature. The question has often been asked, “Can’t God make us good without making us miserable?” Of course He can, but that’s not the point. The point is that He doesn’t develop us without suffering and pain. And since He never makes a mistake and cannot do so, it is safe to assume that instant is not good and the process is.

The Lord Jesus had a cross and so do we. He told us to pick up our crosses. When they put that cross on our Lord Jesus’ back He bore it to Calvary and there He was nailed to it. To be given a cross to carry was a one-way ticket to your execution. You did not come back. Most of us don’t mind to pick up our cross; it’s the being nailed to it that we resist. God could do much in our lives without crosses but He chooses not to do so. He chooses to use a cross. There must be something about our faith that without suffering and trials and tribulations it cannot mature as it ought to. In fact, suffering and difficulty—and how you respond to it—is one of the greatest proofs of whether or not you are a child of God.

I’ve seen this play out and prove itself over the years. One man will have a trial and it seems like his faith withers, he’s devastated, he drops and finally decides God is not worthy of his allegiance and he ceases to follow the Lord. And yet another goes through much the same trial and his faith blossoms, it’s strengthened and he grows into greater maturity and Christlikeness. There is something in the way God designed our faith that suffering, tribulation, and trials are absolutely necessary. If it is necessary, I feel compelled to do all I can through the Word of God to help you get the best out of your trials. This is what the apostle is doing here in this text.

I. We Do Not Glory in Tribulations For the Sake of Tribulations

You don’t glory in the pain and suffering. There is nothing pleasant about pain. If you get pleasure from self-inflicted pain, then you have some really serious problems. No one in their right mind enjoys pain. There’s no pleasure in it. In fact, Paul is not telling you to glory in the pain or the problem. You know that by one word in the verse:

*“And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, **knowing** that tribulation produces perseverance;” (Romans 5:3)*

It’s not the tribulation we glory in, it’s what it does for us, what it produces, what it manufactures, that’s what we’re glorying in. We’ll talk more about that in a moment.

A. It is not a Gladness For the Pain.

The Bible never tells us to glory in our pain or the problem.

“Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” (Hebrews 12:11)

Pain is not pleasant. That’s not what the Apostle is driving at. The pain for the present is painful but it yields a peaceable fruit of righteousness.

In his book, *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis seems to be amazed at these people who seem to not have any problem with pain. They seem to go through their trials altruistically as if they were above the pain and the problem. He wrote,

What do people mean when they say “I am not afraid of God because I know He is good”? Have they never even been to a dentist?

The point is the dentist will do you good, yes, but it’s sometimes very painful and therefore very frightening. Who wants to go to a dentist?! Yet, His work on our behalf is very beneficial. God is good, that’s right, but sometimes His goodness hurts. Sometimes it’s wearisome and very difficult to bear.

What does the Apostle Paul mean to “glory”?

B. It is a Boasting.

This is what this word *glory* means. Some of your translations say *rejoice* and there’s nothing wrong with that, but it’s not really at the heart of what Paul is trying to say. He’s talking about a bragging, a boasting, not because of the tribulation but because what it will produce in me. The activity of God is at work in me. In fact, I know I’m His child because this is what’s happening to me. Once again, one of the greatest evidences that you are a Christian is not that you suffer tribulation but how you respond to it. Does that tribulation produce certain effects, certain fruits, certain results? For the child of God it will.

Some of us aren’t advancing as far as the Apostle Paul but the child of God will learn to respond and when he or she does it will be a glorying and boasting in God and His activity in their life. That’s what this means. Why should I boast? Because God is at work in me, not leaving me where He found me, working in me, conforming me. Why?

II. Perseverance Needs To Be Developed

Perseverance needs to be developed. That is why the trial. And this is the first result of these tribulations.

*“And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance;”
(Romans 5:3)*

Perseverance is patience. Through my trial God is working in me something for the long haul. Not the short term. We all are too short-termed in our outlook and thinking. You’ve heard this before and you’ll hear it again. We want instant gratification. We don’t like to wait. We often jokingly say, “Hurry up and wait,” we’re simply acknowledging that there is something in our natural state that doesn’t like to wait. What do you do when you go to a grocery store or to a retail place and there are several checkouts? Do you choose the longest line? Not hardly. You select the shortest one. You make a mad dash for it. You’ll run in front of somebody just to get in line before they do so you won’t have to wait as long. Why? It’s natural to you. That’s the state in which God finds us and He teaches us patience and perseverance.

Now the question is why is patience so important? Because God is patient. Look how long He’s been waiting for you.

God is patient and if we are to be conformed to His image He must develop in us patience.

A. This Perseverance is More Than Stubborn or Heroic Determinism.

It’s more than stoicism. Do you know what I’m talking about? There are some people who are naturally stoic and able to go through life and they never get too excited about anything. They’re able to handle great difficulty in a very determined and resolute way. You hear about non-Christians who, in a time of war, are captured and are tortured and maybe even go through prison war camp for long periods of time and they come through strong. That’s not what I’m talking about.

In fact, there was a study done by the American Journal of Psychiatry, which lasted from 1940-1973 where they took 173 Harvard graduates who graduated from Harvard University in the early 1940s and they watched their lives and studied them. They determined there is a secret to a satisfied life. They said the secret may lie in a person’s ability to handle life’s blows without blame or bitterness. The study said that the one potential predictor of wellbeing if you could emotionally handle your problems. Unsaved people can do this and some do it every day.

What the apostle is discussing is something completely different. We’re talking about something supernatural or spiritual. This is God’s grace in you. This is not natural; it’s supernatural.

This is God’s grace producing in you, not a stubborn determination that you will not lose or be defeated, but that you can trust Him. That’s the difference between a human stoicism and a

spiritual endurance. One is based upon a man's temperament and the other is based upon the faithfulness of God. He is trustworthy. Although you can't trace His hand you can trust His heart. That's supernatural, that's a spiritual patience and that's what God is after in you. That's why you don't understand the trial right now. He would be wasting the trial. He would then be cruel and harsh if He inflicted the trial and then told you what He was doing it for.

You say to me, "I don't understand? If I knew the specific purpose of the trial, then I could find it easier to endure." But I say that is not true. The purpose of the trial is not to understand it but to develop patience and the only way the Lord can do that is to get you to trust Him regardless, to trust Him even when you don't understand. There's the epitome of faith.

I wish we could see our definition of faith changed. These prosperity preachers have corrupted us. Even though we deride them and don't subscribe to their doctrine they have infiltrated our thinking. For example, we have defined faith as the removal of the mountain, but sometimes God doesn't remove the mountain but requires that you tunnel through it. And I'm telling you, when you're tunneling through the mountain and the sun isn't shining because you're in the heart of the earth; you need to be able to rest in the faithfulness of God. When you are in the heart of the problem, and there is no visible light to show you the way, my dear friend, but you can say, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him," that is the epitome of faith. There is no greater faith. God is not seemingly around and you feel abandoned but you know you're not. You cling to the fact that He has not abandoned you and you put your trust in Him, this is the trial of your faith that is working this blessed patience.

A pastor friend called me recently with the diagnosis that he has Alzheimer's. He was crying on the telephone, saying, "I feel like I'm in a great darkness, Brother Michael, a great darkness." I quoted to him Isaiah 50:10, "Who obeys the Lord, that obeys the voice of His servant, that walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God." There are times and seasons that are absolutely dark but what is going on here? God is teaching you that in your darkness you are not alone. He's right there and you can trust Him.

B. This Perseverance Often Does Not Occur.

Most of the time this is not what happens. Sometimes the more we suffer the more faith begins to wane. What happens to a man or woman who say they are Christians but then in the midst of a trial they throw in the towel and say they're done with Jesus because He didn't help them? That happens. I've seen it and you've seen it. They expected God to do this one thing and He didn't do it and now they have completely dismissed the idea that there even is a God or they simply say He didn't help them when they needed Him so they won't be there for Him and they don't walk with God any more.

In this case tribulation didn't produce perseverance it brought them to a fatal end. What's the answer to that? Why didn't they endure? Jesus gives us the answer in the famous parable of the four soils. He said there was one seed that was sprinkled on rocky soil and it seemed to be do-

ing good, but when the sun came out it withered and didn't survive. He said this is what happens when someone professes faith in Him but there is no root. He said it this way,

“yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.” (Matthew 13:21)

The answer is they were not a Christian, the root of God was not in them. What about for the Christian? I know of Christians who, when they go through great trials and adversity their faith doesn't grow. Their patience doesn't enlarge but rather it seems to shrink. There's a text that answers that, one that is similar to the text that we're looking at now and it's James 1:2-4. In that first chapter of James, he tells us that if your faith is to grow, if your perseverance is to increase, there is a responsibility you and I have.

“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials,”

He's not saying that you ought to be happy, he's saying boast because God is working.

knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” (James 1:2-4)

“But let patience have its perfect work.” There's the answer. So many of us do not seem to be strengthened but diminished when we undergo our tribulation because we're not letting patience have its perfect work. We're hindering and shortcutting the work of God's activity in us because we're not *letting* patience have its perfect work. Why do we do that? Because of the second reason for trials: Character needs to be developed.

III. Character Needs To Be Changed

“and perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (Romans 5:4)

What is character? It's who we are. It's your personhood. Why you do what you do is based on your character. Your strengths and weaknesses lie in your character.

What is the condition in which God finds your character when He saves you? The answer, of course, is not a very good state. In fact, we could characterize it in one way: selfish.

A. The Condition of Our Characters.

He finds us in a position of selfishness. Our characters are centered upon ourselves—self-love. This is where our character is found and this is where God begins. Yes, you are a new creation the moment God saves you, but don't think that means you are perfected and God has no more to do with you. You've been given a new heart and new spirit but your character still needs to be developed. Selfishness still rules your character and so God has to work in you the character of

Christ, namely fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5. This is the work of God. This is what He's doing. This is why the tribulation to produce the patience—your character needs to be changed.

It is completely natural for us to avert and avoid anything that would threaten comfort, ease, and security. It's completely natural for you to want to bring these problems to a quick end. That's normal. You shouldn't think that uncommon or even unspiritual. You ought to avert pain and avoid it as much as possible. It's completely right for you to not seek out pain and problems because there is no truth to the teaching—and many have fallen prey to it over the centuries in Christianity—that if you really want to be holy you've got to suffer more. These who believe this create problems, they create misery, they cause themselves suffering and self-inflicted pain, thinking that's what holiness is. It isn't. It's quite natural for you and I because we love ourselves to do anything and everything to prevent discomfort, unease, and insecurity.

B. The Purpose of Trials is to Transform Our Character.

This is the heart of everything I want to say to you. Everything that I've said has been leading to this and everything I will say will go back to this.

If you want an explanation of why you're going through a difficulty, here it is. The trial is a threat to self-love and self-centeredness. That's it. Any problem or difficulty or adversity has come to address this part of you and me in our character that loves ourselves too much. The trial is to threaten self and therefore expose what it is we want to protect. It reveals the weakness. It reveals the areas of your life, your character, your attitudes that dictate your behaviors, there is weakness in there and the trial is coming like a light to expose that area.

Why is this necessary? Because we over estimate ourselves. We think we're better than we really are, stronger than we really are, more sufficient than we really are, so we overestimate ourselves. "That's not my problem," you say. "I don't have any confidence at all." That too is self-love and self-centeredness although it's expressing itself in a negative way. I've dealt with that before and won't take the time to go back. What God does in these tribulations and trials is He comes and aims the gun of trial, the weapon of affliction, at the very point. He's trying to deal with in your character and work to transform it so that where there is weakness He exposes it and you know it.

The very reason you are hurting this morning and crying is the reason for the tribulation. "No, you misunderstand, Pastor. I'm weeping today because of..." and you give you me your circumstance. I'm telling you that the Bible says you misunderstand. The pain you're feeling right now is the reason for the trial. I know that makes God sound very sadistic, but He's not. We'll deal with that in a minute. He is not sadistic but He is intentional to make sure that there is pain, there is sorrow, because the reason for the pain and the sorrow is the very weakness He's trying to transform.

Since we do tend to overestimate ourselves, let me give you some things to help you understand and recognize the weaknesses in your character and conduct that God is trying to deal with.

Listen to your complaints.

When you're suffering difficulty and trial your complaints will often tell you the very place self-love is ruling through an idol. What is your complaint today? "My complaint is that I've been misunderstood and now I've got this controversy with this person or they have it with me and it makes me terribly uncomfortable. I'm grieved about this. This person lied about me. They didn't tell the truth." Listen to your complaint because it exposes your idol. In this case, isn't it true that they lied about Jesus? They lied about the Apostle Paul. Many of the martyrs today are being martyred in the name of religion. They're called blasphemers. They're lied about as well. Yes, you're being lied about. Jesus was lied about. Paul was lied about. What's your problem with being lied about? Ah, it exposes something about us, doesn't it?

What does it expose? We like the praises of people. We like the approval of people. We don't like it when our reputation has been lied about. There's the idol of self-love and that's why God has brought this confrontation and controversy in your life. He's wanting to expose the reason you're feeling agitated is because of an idol. It's because of self-love and an overcompensation of your own strength and sufficiency. Listen to your complaint.

Pay attention to the fear, anger, despondency.

Maybe you're full of fear this morning. You're afraid. Pay attention to that and ask yourself why you're afraid. Maybe it's a lack of finances, you can't pay your bills and you're afraid. What does that tell us? Think with me. What does it tell you if you are afraid of making your bills? "Pastor, I don't see that is a bad thing, you would be afraid too if your bills were not paid." But what would that tell me about me? Here's what it would tell me: I love security. And my insecurity is exposing my idol of security, which is an idol of self-love.

When you can't make your bills you feel out of control, and that means you have an idol of self-control. That's where the insecurity is coming from. Insecurity always comes from a result of being in a position where you don't feel you have any control. Which should tell you, if you're trusting yourself for control and you know you're out of options and there's nothing you can do, then you're not trusting God and there's the idol. Self-trust and no trust in God.

What if it's anger? You're angry in a relationship with someone, ask yourself why it's bothering you so much. Trace it back and you'll find that if you're bothered by someone's non-cooperation it means they aren't living up to your expectations and if they're not living up to your expectations, then what does that tell you? It tells us we can only love and be loved if people are fulfilling our expectations. That's not love. That's selfishness.

Pay attention to these complaints and they'll tell you why the trial has come. God wants to expose our hearts. It can be even something you desire that is good and spiritual and biblical but God has not given it to you right now and you have a sense of dissatisfaction, that there's something missing in your life. Maybe you desire to be more spiritual. Why do you desire that? Even

self-love can take the desire to be spiritual and twist it into idolatry. You're vindicating yourself, you're approving of yourself, and you're desirous for everyone to know you are a spiritual person. That's self-love.

God does not put us through pain needlessly. He is not someone who delights in making you miserable. Not at all. If a son of a physician breaks his arm and the doctor has to re-break the arm in order to properly set it, he will do so, will he not? Because he loves the son. Will he enjoy the pain he inflicts? Not at all. God does not enjoy the pain He inflicts upon you, even though He knows it is for your good. He has a great capacity for empathy. He can feel your pain. Listen to what He says to Paul when He arrests him on the road to Damascus,

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

He felt the pain of every one of Paul's subjects whom he had mistreated. He felt it as if it was His own. He knows every tear that is coming out of your eye this day and it is a diamond to God. It's precious in His sight. He feels your pain, He's there in the midst of it, but in the midst of your pain He wants you to understand why it's necessary. He wants you to know that He loves you enough to transform your character.

The trials will continue until there is a transformation. This is very important for you to understand. Many Christians go through one problem after another problem after another problem simply because they do not learn the glory of God's activity in suffering. There are some times when that's not true. Sometimes God leaves the thorn in to keep you desperately dependent upon His strength and not your own but either way it's God's activity and therefore God is not only wanting to increase your perseverance and patience so that your character be transformed but so your hope will be transferred.

IV. Hope Needs To Be Transferred

“and perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (Romans 5:4)

A. Hope Need Not Be in Ourselves.

What do I mean “hope needs to be transferred”? Before the trial where was your hope? In yourself. You said, “I can handle this problem.” And what do you do? Exactly what every one does, you try to make a short work of the problem and find a solution as quick as possible.

There's not a person in this room who simply kicks up their feet and says, ‘Man, this is great, I'm suffering for Jesus. Let this thing go on as long as possible. Come on, Lord, give me more. I can handle it.’ Again, if you have that problem, you are a very sick individual. None of us do that. Our hope is that we can somehow find a solution so we begin the search.

Some try to theologize their problems away and say, "Oh, it's just the Devil and I need to resist Him." Do you know how you resist the Devil? You submit to God! When we have these problems our first aim and target of accusation is the Devil. "He's after me. I'm being attacked by the Devil." Have you forgotten that the Devil is God's messenger boy? Have you forgotten the whole point of Job? This is God's activity! If you want to resist the Devil, fine, but first submit to God's activity in your life. You can't resist the Devil without first submitting to what God wants to do in you. Hope needs not be in ourselves.

B. Hope Needs to be in God Alone.

So what happens? God brings tribulation and in that tribulation you begin to work out your solution and begin to figure out what you're going to do. You craft a plan and implement the plan and then the plan doesn't work. Now you begin to be impatient and the problem continues. Now you've come to the point where you can't solve the issue so you go to Brother Bobby, or myself, or Brother Whitt, or one of the deacons and you say, "I really need you to help me with this." You are still trying to work it out on your own. And no matter the advice, it may be the most biblical counsel; it will not work because you are still hoping in yourself.

What do you do then? When you run out of all of your human resources, who then do you turn to? You finally turn to God when you understand you are not sufficient. What is happening? Our hope is being transferred from us to Him. That is a sign that your character is being transformed. You don't hope in yourself as much as you used to, you're hoping in God.

C. This is The Reason for the Glory.

"Tribulations produce perseverance and perseverance, character; and character, hope."

The hope He begins with is the hope He will end with. Look at Romans 5:2,

"Through whom we also have access through this faith in which we stand and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

Here we are. We've been saved now, changed by the redeeming love of God and we have hope. Hope in what? Hope in a future that we're going to enjoy the glory of God with Him in heaven. There's hope. And in this case, hope is the progenitor. One person said it this way, "Hope is both the parent and the child." This hope gives birth and it births hope. Hope in God in all things. We begin with the hope in God that we are going to share in His glory, verse two, but by the time tribulations and trials have their work in us and producing patience and character we have hope again. But not just hope in a future glory but our hope is in His activity right now in the present to work out everything to our good and to our completion.

This is the reason for our boast.

A couple lost a child and many friends sent cards and condolences. One of them emailed the couple telling them that because God had not done His duty and kept this from happening that he would toss aside his faith. The mother wrote this reply:

I know that things such as these are hard for us to understand, but God is always good. I know it, trust it and cling to it in times like these. My God loves me and will never forsake me.

God was gracious enough to take this little one home to himself. I can't think of a better place for my child to be, but with the Saviour and creator.

My hope is in Him who created me.

I pray that you would not harden your heart to the clear truth of the gospel.

“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials,³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.⁴ But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” (James 1:2-4)

The whole point of your pain today is not a miracle, the whole point of your pain today is that God transforms you so that your faith rests in Jesus alone and not you. As long as you keep hoping in you, the trial will continue.

A businessman during a recession lost his job, a sizable fortune, and his beautiful home. To add to his grief, his beloved wife died; but in all of this he held to his faith. One day while out in search of employment, he stopped to watch some men doing stonework on a large church. One of the men was chiseling a triangular piece of rock. “Where are you going to put that?” the broken businessman asked. The workman said, “Do you see that little opening up there near the steeple? Well, I'm shaping this stone down here so that it will fit in up there.” Tears filled the man's eyes as he walked away, he knew the Lord had spoken to him. God was shaping him down here so he would fit in up there.

That's what He's doing to you. He's not sadistic. He's not being cruel. He has a place reserved in heaven just for you and He's preparing you, getting you ready down here to fit in up there. And when you draw your last fleeting breath, the fiery furnace of tribulation will still have its work even in its dying flames, perfecting you, getting you ready down here to fit in up there. You can trust Him.

It's my prayer today that God not change our situation but rather change you and me so that we can glory in these situations, so we can glory in God that He is not finished us, He's not abandoned us. He's perfecting us. He's maturing our faith so we can trust in Him and not ourselves. We have failed a thousand times over but He has not failed us nor can He. Put your confidence in Him. He can handle it. Because He's shaping you down here to fit in up there. Glory in God's work today. Amen.