

## 2. Hope Nurtured through Tribulation (5:3-5)

Having brought his argumentation regarding justification by faith to a pinnacle of exaltation by his declaration that the justified person boasts in confident hope of the glory of God, Paul made what may appear to be an immediate turnabout. For, from the glories of reckoned righteousness, peace with God, a secure standing in grace, and the sure hope that attends them, he turned unexpectedly to the matter of *tribulation*.

This abrupt transition has left scholars pondering the flow of Paul's thought at this point in the epistle and what in his thinking provoked his apparent instantaneous shift in direction. As is always the case, the answer is found in a careful consideration of the contextual movement of Paul's argument and his points of emphasis along the way. Together these provide needed insight and reveal that Paul's transition is not so abrupt as it first appears.

- His larger thesis through the fourth chapter, and summarized in 5:1-2, is that human righteousness is *divine* righteousness reckoned solely on the basis of faith. That is, if a person is to be justified before God, he must fully entrust himself and his fallen condition to the God who justifies the ungodly. *And so it is that the one who is righteous hopes against hope, being fully assured that God is able to give life to the dead and call into being that which does not exist* (4:1-8, 13-22).
- This justification is the believer's entrance into a *gracious standing*, and manifests itself in the *peace* that is a fully reconciled relationship with God.
- As the *past* justifying activity of God in Christ results in a *present* reconciliation lived out in the domain of grace, so also it promises the hope of *future* glory.
- Yet, as observed above, Paul has insisted that the faith that is fundamental to these realities expresses itself in a hope "against hope." *It resolutely believes God and His promise of life contrary to the "deadness" of what is present.*

As chapter four finds its primary theme in justification by faith, so this essential quality of true faith stands as its focal point. There are at least two reasons for this emphasis: the first is Paul's intention to show what biblical faith is, and therefore how it brings justification with God; the second is to draw the unbreakable connection between faith and hope. Having introduced the principle of hope in this way, Paul then proceeded to interact with it as his core theme in the succeeding four chapters.

It is this contextual emphasis upon hope and the way it operates in the life of faith that provides the answer to Paul's seemingly abrupt topical shift from *boasting in the hope of glory* to *boasting in tribulation*. When it is understood that hope is "hope against hope" - that it is believing God and his promise contrary what is now present - the connection between hope and tribulation becomes immediately and profoundly evident. Even as it is true of the "deadness" of the believer's mortal corruption, so also life's tribulations serve as the seedbed in which Christian hope flourishes and grows strong.

Thus Paul's word of great encouragement to the saints at Rome: "*And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*"

Paul introduced this statement with a conjunction emphasizing *contrast*, but not a contrast of dissimilarity, adversity, or contradiction, but rather one of *pointed correlation*. That is, his intention was to indicate a point of contrast associated with the ideas of hope and tribulation, but yet correlated in this context by the fact of their both being the basis of the believer's exultation. In the previous two verses the Christian's boast was localized in his settled hope of future glory. Such hope is entirely and gloriously positive, which makes its appropriateness as the basis of exultation readily apparent. But now without warning Paul abruptly shifted his attention to *tribulation* - something that is, in very many ways, clearly negative. Nevertheless, like hope in the promise of glory, he insisted that tribulation, too, is the proper basis of the believer's boast. To the human sensibility this contention is far more difficult to accept.

Accordingly, some have sought to explain this seemingly awkward shift in terms of a defensive posture that arose in Paul's thinking following his declarations in 5:1-2. It is argued that his insistence upon the believer's unqualified peace with God and standing in grace would have been questioned by his readers as contradicting their present experience of difficulty and suffering. How could he speak of a life defined by *peace* when so much of every believer's day-to-day experience is anything but tranquil and free of difficulty? Even more, the first-century Jew believed that sickness, suffering, and other afflictions came upon a person as a divine punishment for sin (cf. Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-2). From this Jewish perspective, tribulation and suffering could not be reconciled with a state of peace with God. If this explanation is correct, then in 5:3-5 Paul was attempting to show how tribulation is consistent with the believer's reconciliation with God; reconciliation and the blessings that attend it do not preclude difficulty in this life. While this interpretation is plausible, it has at least two problems:

- The first is that it presupposes that Paul was shifting the topic of discussion from his main line of thought. This effectively makes 5:3-11 a *parenthesis* inserted into the flow of his contextual argument. But if it can be shown that these verses represent a continuation of Paul's thought rather than a side note, then this "parenthesis" view must be reworked.
- The second problem with this view is actually the solution to the previous one: a careful examination reveals that this passage is *not* a parenthesis, but a cohesive development of 5:1-2. Whereas it may at first appear that Paul was changing the subject, he was actually reiterating the same truth of the Christian's exultation in the hope of future glory, but from a different perspective. His introduction of the matter and significance of tribulation was not a divergence, but a "fleshing out" of the believer's boast in the hope of the glory of God.

- a. The first thing to note in this regard is that this passage continues the interplay between the time domains of past, present, and future. It was seen that God's *past* act of justification in Christ results in the believer's *present* peace with God, his standing in grace, and his hope of *future* glory. Thus the principle of *hope* has a future orientation even though it exists in the present. But for that very reason it is a hope *against hope*: it is the settled confidence in God's yet-unrealized promise in spite of what is presently seen and experienced.
- 1) First and foremost Paul has shown this hope to be associated with believing God concerning His promise of *life out of death* (4:18-25). Though on every hand the Christian sees only the "deadness" of personal sin, corruption, imperfection, weakness and mortality, he stands fast in the confidence that, even now, he has been raised with Christ and seated with Him in the heavenly places (cf. Romans 8:28-30; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:1-7; Colossians 3:1-4; etc.).
  - 2) But now, in a related way, he was insisting that the same hope extends to the present difficulties and suffering associated with "tribulations." Just as the believer's hope in God's promise of future glory looks past his present corrupt *condition*, so also it looks beyond his present *circumstance*.

The implication of this is that the Christian's exultation in the hope of glory is *overarching*. He does not exult in hope *and* exult in tribulation; he exults in tribulation *because his exultation is grounded in his hope in God's promise of glory*. In other words, because the believer's boast is localized in his confidence in God's promise to him, it is unaffected by, and therefore extends itself to, every dimension of his experience and circumstance - even his troubles. He exults in tribulation, *as he does in everything*, for the simple reason that his boast is in the God who has given him life and promised him a future share in glory.

At the same time, this insight is not the focal point of Paul's meaning in these three verses. For he makes it clear that his specific intent was to show a *cause-and-effect relationship* between tribulation and hope. That is to say, Paul's point was not that hope merely *abides* in the midst of tribulation (although this is certainly true), but that tribulation *bears a crucial relation* to hope. And what the structure of his presentation in 5:3-4 indicates is that tribulation has its *goal* in, *leads to*, and ultimately *yields itself up* in hope.

- b. The *means* by which Paul viewed tribulation as culminating in hope is a cause/effect "chain" consisting of the interrelation of paired intermediate realities. That is, "*tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope.*" From a structural standpoint, the first "pair" initiates the pattern for the other two. It does so first by establishing a pointed contrast between the things being related, and then by identifying the nature of the relation itself by the verb conjoining them as subject and object.

In order to understand this progression and the interrelation that achieves it, it is necessary first of all to understand the concepts behind Paul's terminology, and then how he understood the correlation within each pair of terms.

- 1) The first clause sets out the paired terms, *tribulation* and *perseverance*, and Paul juxtaposed them as subject and object in Greek in order to set them in sharp contrast. As previously noted, this contrast is not adversity or contradiction, but pointed correlation. Most simply, Paul's goal was to highlight each term and bind them together in intimate correspondence, with the nature of that correspondence being provided by the verbal idea.

*Tribulation* is a common biblical noun that has the underlying sense of an imposed pressure or a "pressing together." Accordingly, it refers to *outward circumstances* rather than inward struggles. Neither are tribulations confined to persecution directed toward Christians; they are difficulties imposed upon a person simply as a result of living in a fallen world. Thus they take a myriad of forms including hardship, deprivation, conflicts, physical suffering, injustice, and oppression, to name but a few.

*Perseverance* is also a common term used throughout the New Testament. It is variously rendered as *patience*, *endurance*, or *steadfastness*, and carries the literal sense of "remaining under." Importantly, whereas tribulation refers to things that arise from outside a person and are imposed upon him, perseverance finds its emphasis in the *inward attitude* and *conviction* that are the essence of a person's steadfastness.

- 2) In correlating these terms, Paul indicated that, far from calling into question the Christian's reconciliation with God, tribulations serve a vital role in it: tribulation *brings about* perseverance (5:3b). Though Paul's verb is present only in this first clause, it is implied in the entire series of correlations through the fourth verse. Therefore, whatever the relation between tribulation and perseverance, between perseverance and proven character, and between proven character and hope, it is expressed by the verbal idea rendered in the NASB by the verb phrase "bring about."

Although not at all uncommon, this verb is virtually exclusive to Paul's letters (James and Peter each use it once). In the most general sense it indicates careful and methodical activity directed in an effectual way toward the accomplishment of a purposed goal. Thus it can be *negative* as well as *positive* in connotation (cf. 1:27, 2:9, 4:15, 7:8, 13, 18, with 2 Corinthians 4:17, 5:5, 7:10-11, 9:10-11; Ephesians 6:13).

As used here by Paul, the verb speaks of the effectual activity of its subject in producing or bringing into realization that which is its object. In this first clause, the subject that is *tribulation* works so as to produce *perseverance* as its outcome.

- 3) In turn, perseverance works so as to effect *proven character* (5:4a). The implication is that, while tribulations have their goal in the production of perseverance, this is only an *intermediate* goal. Perseverance is not the ultimate end toward which tribulation works, for perseverance itself works to produce its own fruit in proven character.

This noun is well-rendered by the NASB, for it refers broadly to that which has been tried and found true, pure, or otherwise excellent or suitable. Depending upon the specific context it can connote the sense of a *test* by which something is proven out (2 Corinthians 2:9, 8:2), a point of *evidence* or *substantiation* (2 Corinthians 9:13, 13:3), or, as here, the idea of proven character or worth (Philippians 2:22). Perseverance in the midst of tribulation functions like the refiner's fire: submersion in the fire of difficulty is hotly painful, yet deeply purgative; it does not serve to destroy, but to purify and perfect.

- 4) So finally, this proven character produces *hope* (5:4b). In a marvelous way, the Christian's foundational hope, by which he looks to the promise of future glory, causes him to persevere in every form and manner of tribulation. And as he continues to persevere in difficulty his true identity as a child of God and citizen of heaven is proven out and made more apparent, even as he is progressively purged from his attachment to this present world (John 15:18-19, 17:14-16; Philippians 3:17-21; Colossians 3:1-4; 1 John 1:15-17; etc.). In turn, the more his soul rises above the present frame of things and looks to the "better country" embraced by his father Abraham, the more his exultant hope of the glory of God grows.

And so, as Paul previously insisted that the Christian's exultation is in his hope of glory, so in this passage he has shown that tribulations *themselves* ultimately act to nurture and strengthen that hope by producing in the believer perseverance and proven character. For this reason, the believer who understands the purpose for and the fruitfulness of his tribulations exults in them. This truth draws out a crucial distinction: virtually all agree that difficulties are constantly present in the Christian life, but their conclusion is that Christians are therefore to abide in them with a joyful disposition. Many read Paul's statement in this way, which is to entirely miss his point. He was not saying that believers exult in tribulations in the sense that they cheerfully "weather the storm." *Rather, his point is that they exult in such difficulties because they understand that the tribulations themselves cultivate and strengthen their hope.*

Biblical hope - the hope possessed by Abraham and repeated in the lives of his children - is a hope *against hope*. It is a hope that confidently believes God and His promise in spite of what meets the eye. *Even more, it finds its life and strength in the obstacles that argue against it* (4:18-21, 5:3-4). The Christian's hope in the promise of future glory finds a great obstacle in present difficulties, and yet, given its nature, actually feeds upon and is strengthened by that obstacle.

*“Sufferings, rather than threatening or weakening our hope, as we might expect to be the case, will, instead, increase our certainty in that hope. Hope, like a muscle, will not be strong if it goes unused. It is in suffering that we must exercise with deliberation and fortitude our hope, and the constant reaffirmation of hope in the midst of apparently ‘hopeless’ circumstances will bring ever deeper conviction of the reality and certainty of that for which we hope.”* (Douglas Moo)

The Hebrews author was in hearty agreement with this understanding, and pressed it upon his readers for the sake of their own encouragement: *“Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay. But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul”* (10:35-39).

- c. Even as *outward* tribulations act to foster and strengthen the believer’s hope, much more does the *inward* influence and power of God in the soul: *“and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us”* (5:5).

As the principle of hope was introduced in the previous chapter, so here Paul introduced to his epistle the concept of *divine love*. Furthermore, he did so by showing its relation to the believer’s hope: *God’s love keeps his hope from ever becoming a source of disappointment*. In other words, the Christian’s hope is the hope of one day sharing in the glory of God in the perfection to come. Yet this hope is continually threatened by the presence of sin and corruption as well as the onslaught of tribulations. Nonetheless, hope prevails unmoved because it is grounded in the love of God; not so much God’s affection for the sinner, but God’s redeeming, transforming love in Jesus Christ. *It is because of what God’s love has accomplished in Christ that the believer’s hope cannot be moved to doubt*. Paul will make this explicitly clear in the verses to follow (5:6-11).

The effectual work of this justifying, reconciling love is attested by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. One of God’s great promises concerning the coming of His kingdom was that it would be marked by the pouring out of His Spirit on all the nations (Ezekiel 11:16-20, 36:16-32; Joel 2:28-29; cf. also Acts 2:1-21). And this gift was proclaimed by Christ to have its basis in His atoning sacrifice at Calvary (John 14:16-29, 15:26-16:7). *This means that the Spirit’s indwelling presence is the proof of satisfaction for sin, and so also of the believer’s justification, reconciliation, peace with God and sure inheritance* (8:12-17; cf. Acts 2:36-39; 2 Corinthians 3:1-18; Ephesians 1:13-14). More precisely to this context, the Spirit’s presence *subjectively* witnesses to the fact of the individual Christian’s sonship and God’s love for him. According to Paul, the Holy Spirit is both the evidence of God’s overflowing, effulgent love, and the One through whom that love is expressed and made known to His children.