

Trouble Now—Glory Then

Seven devotionals for times of suffering

Skip Ryan

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

—Romans 5:1-5

"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

"For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ."

—Colossians 1:24–2:5

DAY 1: Steady, reliable hope (Romans 5:1-5)

Have you ever watched a horse being broken? Some horses panic and bolt. Others stand still and quiver. Christians aren't much different when they encounter suffering. Some of us panic under trial and bolt, but others stand still, quivering, perhaps, but holding their ground by God's grace. Suffering steadies them as they stay grounded in Christ and His gospel, rejoicing in the truths they know.

Now don't misunderstand. Rejoicing in suffering doesn't mean a stoical stiff upper lip. It doesn't mean grin and bear it. No, we rejoice in the midst of suffering, not in spite of it. And it is not masochism, either. Believe me, you shouldn't go out looking for suffering. No, it will find you. I guarantee you.

And let's not pretend that we are happy when we are not so happy. Rejoicing here is something that we need to work on with God's help and grace, but there are going to be times in our lives when we shouldn't put on a happy face. Biblical rejoicing in suffering is deep. And there is a difference.

How can you rejoice in the midst of difficulty? One theologian said this: "We have a knowledge of an insight into God's purposes and methods with respect to us." Isn't that amazing? Because of God's revelation in His Word, we have an inside track on knowing what God is doing. We understand that God intends suffering to produce perseverance, and perseverance then produces character, and character produces hope.

Perseverance, literally that means "to abide under or to stay with the pressure of something." When we are under pressure, we want out from under it. But with perseverance we stick with it. As we do, proven character is produced. It's a bit like engineers testing the metal in a bridge at various times as they build it to make sure it will hold the weight for which it is intended. God uses suffering in our lives in the same way. The weight of our faith is tested for its reliability.

The apostle Peter says, "*Your faith is more precious than gold*" (1 Pet. 1:7). How do you test gold? Under fire, where all the dross is burned out of it. Proven character is like gold refined in the fire of perseverance in tribulation. Proven character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint. Hope gives confidence, boldness—not arrogance, not cockiness—but confidence in the midst of stress and difficulty.

Have you ever noticed that in the fire of tribulation those who are actually in the very middle of it often are the ones with the most resilience? They have the inside track on what God is doing, and it will prove glorious.

DAY 2: Trouble now, glory then (Colossians 1:24-2:5)

The normal Christian disciple's life is discovering along the way that the plans we had are not going according to schedule. The things we anticipated—the marriage, the right house, the right job, or anything else that may have constituted the normal life in our minds—have not happened as we thought. There are children who do not come to Christ when we pray for them, and children who do come whether we pray for them or not. God provides plenty of twists and turns in our lives because He has something else in mind for us than we usually expect. It may be gloriously exciting—or very hard and deeply challenging in all the ways God intended for it to be.

Someone once said, "I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish He didn't trust me so much!" How can the apostle Paul say, "I rejoice in my sufferings."? Is he psychotic, deluded, or just plain masochistic? What kind of person rejoices in suffering?

Paul can say that because he knows this: Every time we experience suffering as a Christian we are participating in a pattern that was established by Jesus Himself. Here it is: *trouble now, glory then*. "*We suffer with Christ in order that we may also be glorified with Him*" (Romans 8:17). This is a direct statement of the Bible's clear intention for how we are to understand our lives, particularly the parts that are not going the way we wish. We suffer with Christ in order that we may participate in the glory into which He Himself has already entered; and which He is preparing for us. Here is a my promise to you: get a firm hold of this truth and it will change everything about your life. Real followers of Jesus Christ participate in His suffering because they deliberately follow the pattern He established. That doesn't mean we seek out pain, oh no; it will come to us easily enough. But how will we deal with it?

Can you agree with Paul?: "*And if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us*" (Romans 8:17-18). There is a time of suffering, and after that a time of God's glory. It was the pattern of Jesus' life: "*who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross*" (Heb. 12:2).

You cannot have one without the other if you are a disciple of Jesus Christ. Are you in Him, knowing the fellowship of His suffering? Then you also endure for the joy set before you. Are your eyes on the prize at the finish line? It makes all the difference.

DAY 3: Effective suffering (Colossians 1:24-2:5)

Imagine you are driving in a city and find yourself in a seedy part of town. The trees are bare, the street is dotted with pot holes, weeds grow through cracks in the sidewalk, and dilapidated houses line both sides of the street. You approach an intersection and decide you'll turn and find your way out. You flip on your blinker, make the turn, and, all of a sudden, the street before you changes into a leafy green, smoothly paved, mansion-lined boulevard. You are surrounded by loveliness. This is your life. You are driving down the road of life, and your turn indicator better be on. Right now it isn't all pretty, but you are going to turn the car. Paul says, "*That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead*" (Philippians 3:10-11). Trouble now, glory then.

Paul also says, "*In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body*" (Colossians 1:24). That is an odd expression, open to misunderstanding on its own. Paul knows that reconciliation with God was accomplished by Jesus' work on the cross, and that work is complete; there is nothing to add to it. Even our faith does not add to the work of Christ, only rests in it. Why then does Paul say that his sufferings are filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ? The issue is not one of effectiveness but of timing. There are appointed sufferings for every Christian that fill up the period between Christ's sufferings and the end of history, which is glory with Him. Some commentators believe the implication here is that there is a fixed and precise amount of suffering that must take place before the end comes.

We suffer. Sometimes we wonder if God has forgotten us. Does He even know we are going through this hard thing? Why is He allowing it to happen? It's like calling some bureaucracy in Washington D.C. with a question and being put on hold forever. Quite the contrary. Suffering does not indicate that we are not in God's plan; rather it is actually a sure indicator that we are precisely in the middle of His plan for history, and that we will be with Him when this suffering is over.

If there is no trouble now in your life, and you think that is a blessing, beware. Paul tells us, "*We rejoice in hope of the glory of God*" (Romans 5:2b), because "*suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope*" (Romans 5:3-4).

Want glory later? Let suffering do the work that prepares you for it now. The eternal purposes of God are playing out, and we can rejoice in the hope of that.

DAY 4: The mystery revealed (Colossians 1:24-2:5)

What if someone came to you asking about your faith and wondering if Christianity is true. Wouldn't you introduce the Christian life to him by listing all the wonderful benefits that will come to him if he becomes a Christian? You would not be likely to remind him of all the difficulties that are going to come his way if he joins the faith. But would that be honest?

Becoming a Christian means that somewhere in the future something of the sufferings akin to those of Jesus and Paul will come. In fact, if you don't experience these sufferings, you must ask yourself if you really know this same Savior. Do you know the One who told us that the Christian life is trouble now and glory then? At Paul's conversion, when he was knocked to his knees on the road to Damascus, Jesus said of him, "*For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of My name*" (Acts 9:16). What an introduction to the Christian life!

Paul's approach to suffering and glory is the opposite of what the world of Colossae understood. It saw suffering as the result of fate. Paul calls it the result of faith. He believes that God has entrusted to him a certain amount of suffering, and that is why he uses the word *stewardship* to explain it. Paul compares himself to the executor of someone's estate. He has a serious obligation to administer the property according to the plan established by the benefactor. Of course, the benefactor is the Lord, and Paul is a steward; but he is not a steward for a program or a plan, but for a Person who has entrusted a message to him. Paul's good stewardship is to make this Word of God entrusted to him fully known.

Paul speaks of this Word of God as a mystery: "*The mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to His saints*" (Colossians 1:26).

Mystery religions—cults claiming secret knowledge—were rampant in the ancient Greek world and particularly in Colossae, and some Christians were saying, "What those guys have looks pretty good. We need to incorporate some of that thinking."

Paul is trumping these Colossian mystery cults by saying, in effect, "Do you want mystery? Let me tell you the real mystery, the one you really need to know. It has been gradually revealed in the Old Testament, but now it has been fully revealed to the saints in Christ. It has not been revealed to a select group, but to all mankind." The mystery is Christ, and the truth of His gospel isn't just for certain kinds of folks, but all kinds. Tempting "mysteries" in our day and age allure our minds and imaginations through books, film, and even church teaching. But we who belong to the mystery, Jesus Christ, need know no more but Him crucified. Are you satisfied with Him? Have you received the message of His gospel?

DAY 5: Incarnational suffering (Colossians 1:24-2:5)

Is Jesus still suffering? This is a trick question because, on the one hand, you want to say no, that His suffering is finished, once and for all. He's in His glory already. But think about it—He is indeed still suffering, in the church, in His body, and its members. When Saul was stopped in his tracks on the road to Damascus on his way to persecute Christians, Jesus asked him, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*" (Acts 9:4b). Jesus was already in heaven; how could Saul be persecuting Him? Saul was persecuting the body of Christ.

Charles H. Spurgeon said, "Do we not become members of the body of the divine Person of Christ? Yes. The same blood that flows in the head flows in the hand; and the same light that quickens Christ quickens His people. '*For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*' If Christ suffered, you and I as His hands and feet, eyelashes and kidneys, and kneecaps and toenails, will suffer."

Do you think these promises of suffering are physical in nature? Paul says, "*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed*" (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). Is that physical, emotional, spiritual, or psychic suffering? All the above. Paul explains it: "*Always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh*" (2 Corinthians 4:10). There it is again: Trouble now, glory then.

There is a happy footnote to all this suffering: the glory begins now. To the degree that you are experiencing the sufferings of Christ in some measure, the promise of God is that you are also beginning to experience a foretaste of that glory which, admittedly, you will not completely experience until you are with Him. In the body we suffer, and in the body we will experience glory. Paul says, "*For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality*" (2 Corinthians 15:53). No church leader in the last 2,000 years invented this plan. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in eternal counsel, prepared the plan—that we would grow closer to Jesus by sharing His sufferings now; and that one day that will be consummated when we experience His glory completely.

God came down and became flesh. It is in flesh that we will experience trials and suffering, and it is in flesh that we will experience glory. One day we will see Jesus in glory, but we will also see the nail marks and the wound in His side. Your suffering, just like Jesus', is going to be glorified, as painful and as hard and as difficult as it may be now. Watch for the finish line, dear Christian. It is coming.

DAY 6: Glimpses of glory (Colossians 1:24-2:5)

As I get older, I am around more people who are getting sick and whose lives are declining as their physical conditions deteriorate to the point that they must spend more and more of their time just trying to maintain their bodies. I have joined that group myself. Now I hear that older folks must exercise their brains as well as their bodies in a very regular, disciplined way to keep them working! If I did not believe that a place was being prepared for these dear people (and for me!)—in glory, then it would be very depressing.

Through sufferings Christians enter into the Kingdom of God. In Acts 14 we read about Paul being stoned in Lystra. I can't think of anything more incarnational than stoning. Do you think when Paul was being stoned, he was saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones."? No. It hurt to be hit by those stones. He suffered in his body, in his flesh, so why could he say he rejoiced in his suffering? Did he like being a martyr? No, he could rejoice because he knew his suffering was going somewhere.

And so is yours. The result will be better than anything you could imagine. Your sufferings reveal a mystery: Christ in you, you in Christ; Christ belonging to you, you belonging to Christ. The marks of that belonging are that you share in that affliction. All true Christians, will suffer in one way or another. For some it will be outward suffering, even persecution. For others it will be inward, a long slow battle with sickness.

Here is another kind of suffering: bearing the hurts of others. We bear the hurts of others as Christ bore our hurts. Perhaps your suffering is the anxiety or pressure of taking a position of leadership in Christ's church. Do not eagerly seek to become a deacon, an elder, a Bible study leader, or a Sunday School teacher without first being aware of what you are getting into. With these responsibilities will come a certain measure of suffering that will grow from the responsibilities attached therein. Others have a lifelong, unrelenting, wicked struggle with a temptation of one kind or another. Others suffer with doubts and uncertainties which accompany the obedience of faith. Paul says to rejoice in all of these things because they are signs that the mystery of Christ in you, of you hidden in Christ, are being revealed. That is why we can rejoice.

Paul says, "*So we do not lose heart*" (2 Cor. 4:16). If all we had was trouble now without glory then, you bet we would lose heart. It is the glory then that means we don't lose heart, because we now live, somehow, in the reality of that glory. We taste it and get glimpses of it by God's good grace. Do you need a glimpse of that glory right now? Just a peek at the finished side of the tapestry? Ask your Lord Jesus for one. He delights to encourage you. He loves you, remember.

DAY 7: The wait of faith (Colossians 1:24-2:5)

After looking at suffering for several days now, we are back where we started: "I know that God will not give me more than I can handle; I just wish He did not trust me so much." C.S. Lewis put it so wisely and deeply: "We are not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us even in our suffering; but we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be." That is an honest question.

Do you know how to have trouble now? Marry a minister. My wife has learned more about trouble by being married to me than she ever could have learned any other way. One night before I was to preach a sermon on suffering, I seriously struggled with it. I had thought I was ready to deliver it the next morning, but when I looked it over about 6:00 pm it made no sense to me. I ended up having to cut it up in pieces, spread it all over the floor of my study, and paste it all together again. In the middle of this process, my wife Barbara walked in and said, "Oh, cut-and-paste time. We're in for it now."

Then she brought me her journal and read to me what she had written that very morning in her devotionals—"coincidentally!" She titled it "How to suffer purposefully." She wrote: "Remember Christ's pattern. Remember the past times of suffering when God has brought you through and given you a glimpse of His glory in and through it. Remember that. Let it be encouragement to you. Pray that you will have eyes to see His daily provision in the midst of your suffering, and pray that you will know how to take your position and stand, not seeking your way out of the suffering but looking to Him, which is called the wait of faith—to know how to cast your burden on the Lord and leave it there in prayer." When I suffer I think too much about it. Oh, I pray, but then I grab it back and start planning my own schemes for how I can get out of this suffering. Leave it there.

Barbara continued: "When you suffer, still continue to minister to those with needs in your midst. Even through your own suffering, continue to give your life away. Keep the song of the gospel alive in your heart, the undercurrent of chorus in your life. [The undercurrent is that *Jesus paid it all, and suffering now means glory then.*] Cease striving to control and enter the rest of God in the midst of your difficulties."

This is not a masochistic pattern that springs from delusion or pretends that the real world isn't there. No, this is precisely the opposite. This pattern recognizes what the real world is and lives in it. Live in it, friends. Live in it, following Paul, who followed Christ. Trouble now, glory then—but keep your eyes open in the meantime for the little sparks of glory that God lets us see along the way. And wait in faith. He is faithful.