

You're listening to What Does the Word Say, a series of podcasts on biblical theology produced by Grace and Glory Media, and I'm Dr. Spencer. Our usual host Marc Roby is not with me today because we are both obeying the stay-at-home order issued as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. We are also taking a break from our continuing series on systematic theology and instead, I am going to present a short meditation on the Scriptures to encourage all of us in this troubling time.

As I noted in Session 143 on *The Proper Christian Response to the Corona Virus Pandemic*, as Christians we should not be anxious about anything. We know that our God is sovereign over all the affairs of man and he has promised us, as we read in Romans 8:28, that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."¹ Therefore, we can face trials with great confidence. In fact, as Christians we can rejoice even when we are experiencing troubles.

Now you might be thinking, "He's gone too far this time, how on earth can I rejoice when the stock market crash has taken away a third of my retirement savings?" Or "How can I rejoice now that I've lost my job?" Or "How can I rejoice while I'm afraid of getting Covid-19?" You might be thinking that to rejoice in times like these is simply irrational. But that is not what the Bible tells us, so let's take a look.

First, let me say that I am *not* saying we rejoice in the fact that we are experiencing trouble. But we can rejoice even when we experience trouble because we know that God is completely in control and therefore, the trouble cannot destroy us. Also, we know that God's grace will be sufficient for us as we go through the trouble and we know that God can bring good out of it.

In Romans Chapter 4 the apostle Paul makes the argument that Abraham was justified by faith. He had faith to trust God's promises even when he couldn't see how things could possibly work out. If we go back to Genesis Chapter 17, we see that God had promised Abraham that he and his wife Sarah would have a son even though Abraham was 99 years old and Sarah was 89. We read in Genesis 17:19, "your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him." Now think about that promise from a human perspective, sometime in the next year Abraham and Sarah were to have a child, when he would be 100 and she would be 90 years old. That is impossible based on normal human experience. And yet, Abraham believed God.

Now, this is the episode Paul was referring to when he wrote in Romans 4:20-22 that Abraham "did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness.'"

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Brothers and sisters, it glorifies God when we trust his promises. Note that Abraham was strengthened in his faith. How was his faith strengthened? He thought back on all that God had done for him already and he reasoned about the nature of God. God is the omnipotent Creator of all things. God cannot lie. God cannot change. As Abraham meditated on these truths, his faith was strengthened and he gave glory to God. True faith is based on facts, not wishful thinking or nebulous feelings. As the Rev. P.G. Mathew put it in his commentary, “Faith is not self-delusion, positive thinking, or repetition of a mantra. Faith proclaims, ‘I can do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthens me’ (Phil 4:13, author’s paraphrase).”²

God had spoken to Abraham personally. But what about us? Mathew notes, “Unlike Abraham, we meet God today in his word. Therefore, the more we read and meditate on the Scriptures, the stronger we will grow in God.”³ And so that is what we are doing today. We are looking into God’s Word and meditating on it in order to increase our faith so that we can stand in this trial and glorify our great God.

And note that Paul said Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness. It doesn’t say that Abraham truly *was* righteous in himself, although he no doubt was by human standards, but no one is righteous in God’s sight as we are told in Romans 3:10. Nevertheless, Abraham’s faith caused him to be *counted* righteous in God’s sight, in other words, he was declared justified.

And then, based on these historical facts from the Old Testament, Paul wrote, in Romans 5:1-5, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

Now, there is a lot in these five verses, but for our purposes today I just want to point out three things. First, we have peace with God. The biggest problem of every human being is that we are born sinners under the wrath of God. And so, having peace with God means that our greatest need has been met. That alone should give us the ability to rejoice even in times of trouble. No eternal harm can come to a soul that is at peace with God. But you must be sure that you *are* at peace with God, so make your calling and election sure or this promise does not apply to you.

Secondly, we know our eternal destiny is to be glorified and spend eternity with God. When we consider that eternity never ends, and that our eternal destiny is guaranteed to be glorious, we can see, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17, that “our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” When we compare anything that might happen to us in this life with eternal glory in the presence of God, it will be seen to truly be light and momentary.

² P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Freedom* (Volume 1), Grace and Glory Ministries, 2011, pg. 221

³ *Ibid*, pg. 220

And third, we see that suffering can be useful. Suffering produces perseverance, which could also be translated as endurance, or patience. In other words, we become less focused on our immediate pleasure and more cognizant of eternal realities and the things that are really important. We can go through momentary troubles knowing that there is a good result to be obtained if we go through them properly and profit from them. And then Paul tells us that perseverance produces character, which could also be translated as *proof* of character.⁴ If we display this perseverance or patience in suffering, it is proof that our character is being formed in a godly way. And this, in turn, produces hope Paul tells us.

Mathew points out that “In modern usage, the word ‘hope’ is full of contingencies and doubts. It usually connotes ‘hope so.’ In the New Testament, however, hope signifies absolute certainty. It is faith oriented to the future based on the promise of the good, almighty, God, who does not change his mind.”⁵ Mathew also says that “In our natural thought, we would expect that sufferings would destroy our hope of being glorified. But tribulations, in fact, strengthen our hope by weaning us from focusing on ourselves and the world, and turning us to God. Tribulations make us heaven-focused.”⁶

And so, we can see based on this passage in Romans, that the Bible tells us to rejoice even when we are suffering. We don’t ask to suffer of course. We don’t pretend to enjoy suffering. We don’t minimize or tell others who are suffering that it isn’t real. No, we have an intelligent, compassionate understanding of suffering. It is part and parcel of living in a sinful world. But good can come out of it. If a person is not born again, suffering can be used by God to turn that person away from reliance on and infatuation with this world and to turn him to Christ in saving faith instead. And God can use suffering in the lives of his children to purify us, as gold is refined in the fire.

But, I must note that whenever we suffer any kind of trial, be it personal or corporate like this current pandemic, we should always cry out to God to show us our sins so that we can repent of them. God undoubtedly has multiple purposes he is accomplishing through this trial and we can, and should, be praying that a great revival would be one of them. But we must also recognize that one of the purposes is almost surely to punish this wicked world for turning away from God. Just consider a couple of facts about our own country to show that God cannot be pleased with us.

First, according to the CDC, the leading cause of death in the United States in 2017, the most recent year for which I could find data, is heart disease. It was responsible for 647,457 deaths.⁷ But, according to the Wall Street Journal, there were about 862,320 abortions in that year.⁸ The number isn’t exact because those in favor of abortions don’t want you to know how many there

⁴ See Ibid, pg. 267

⁵ Ibid, pg. 255

⁶ Ibid, pg. 268

⁷ Data from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/leading-causes-of-death.htm>

⁸ See U.S. Abortion Rate Drops to Lowest Level Since 1973, WSJ, Jennifer Calfas, Sept. 18, 2019 (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-abortion-rate-drops-to-lowest-level-since-1973-11568827339>)

are, and so some are not reported and the number was almost certainly higher. But it is clear that there were far more abortions than there were people who died of heart disease, so the terrible truth is that Abortion is the leading cause of death in the United States of America.

My second example would be the LGBTQ movement. We have gay pride days, gay pride month and so on. But the Bible is abundantly clear that homosexuality is a sin. The prophet Isaiah prophesied to the Jewish people at a time of prosperity and he spoke about the coming judgment. In Isaiah 3:8-9 we read, “Jerusalem staggers, Judah is falling; their words and deeds are against the LORD, defying his glorious presence. The look on their faces testifies against them; they parade their sin like Sodom; they do not hide it. Woe to them! They have brought disaster upon themselves.” Does that not sound like the United States of America today?

Therefore, trouble like this should cause all of God’s children to cry out for forgiveness; forgiveness for our own sins and for those of our country. That is the first thing we should do. But then we also need to learn from Abraham and strengthen our faith by meditating on God’s Word. It has been said, and quite rightly, that when we stare at our problems, they can look too large to handle, but when we look at God and realize his awesome power and goodness, our problems shrink down to size.

And so, let me close today by taking a quick look at Psalm 42 to encourage us all. This psalm is very relevant to our situation as Christians today, living in the midst of this Covid-19 pandemic. Many of us live in places where we have been ordered to stay at home. As a result, we are not able to gather with our brothers and sisters in our local churches on Sunday mornings. And Psalm 42 was written at a time when the psalmist was not able to go the temple to worship.

Now, some scholars think that Psalms 42 and 43 were originally one psalm and were then separated, perhaps for some liturgical purpose. The two psalms can certainly be read as one and the refrain in Verses 5 and 11 of Psalm 42 is repeated in the last verse of Psalm 43, so these scholars may be right. But whether or not they were originally one psalm is not important for what I want to say today. Let me read just the first five verses for now:

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?

My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, “Where is your God?”

These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng.

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and (my God)⁹.

There are a number of things we should notice from these verses, but for today I have time to make only three quick points. First, as I said, the psalmist was, like many of us, unable to go to his normal place of worship. Notice that he says “I used to go with the multitude ... to the house

⁹ In our Bibles these two words are really the beginning of Verse 6.

of God”. As a result of his inability to go worship publicly with the saints, he cries out, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”

And that leads to an obvious question we should ask ourselves; “Do I thirst for God?” And I want us all to be very thoughtful and careful in answering that question. Think about a time when you have been extremely thirsty. When you’re really thirsty it is hard to think of anything else. It absolutely dominates your thoughts and you have an unshakable desire to go get something to drink. It is a very powerful thing. And notice that the psalmist doesn’t say his thirst is for going to be with his friends, or to hear the music, or to hear an encouraging word from the pulpit. He says his thirst is for God. Charles Spurgeon wrote that “When it is natural for us to long for God as for an animal to thirst, it is well with our souls, however painful our feelings.”¹⁰

And so we should all seriously examine our own thoughts on this matter. Do we really thirst for the living God? If we do, then let me remind us that he is present with us. We should go to church when we can and it should be a great delight to do so, but we don’t have to go to a particular building to meet with God. At the end of the Great Commission, in Matthew 28:20, Jesus told us, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” We can meet with him in our own homes. Come to him in prayer and meditate on his Word. He is present and he knows your trouble.

The second thing I will note is that the world mocks us. The psalmist said “My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’” After a recent shooting event in this country I remember there was a huge uproar against a public official who said he was praying for the victims. People were saying all sorts of stupid and downright blasphemous things about prayer not being helpful and God not being able to prevent the shooting or not being good because he didn’t. It will always be the case that unbelievers will mock true Christians. But our response must be to pray and to be obedient to God’s will.

The third thing I want us to look at, and the thought with which I want to leave us all, is Verse 5, where the psalmist preaches to himself, saying “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.” We must put our hope in God and praise him in all circumstances. He is our Savior and our God. If we hold on to those truths, we can and will rejoice even in times of great trouble such as we are experiencing now. As Paul said in Romans 8:31, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” We have a great and awesome God and as a friend of mine has been saying lately, the most important statistic of all about this pandemic is that God is 100% sovereign.

So, brothers and sisters, we must repent of our own sins and cry out for mercy for this wicked country. Meditate on the Word of God and be strengthened in your faith. Seek to know what God would have you learn through this trial. We serve a mighty God and he is able to bring about all that he has promised. And remember that you can send your questions and comments to

¹⁰ C. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, Hendrickson Publishers, 2016, Vol. 1, pg. 271

info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. And we will do our very best to respond. So, may God bless you in the coming week.