

LESSON 9

Suffering and Faith

And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. This hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

— Romans 5:3–5

You rejoice in this, even though now for a short time, if necessary, you suffer grief in various trials so that the proven character of your faith—more valuable than gold which, though perishable, is refined by fire—may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

— 1 Peter 1:6–7

Suffering raises the question of whether God has left us. Scripture answers it at the cross, where God proved his love, and in the trial itself, where he is proving our faith.

Three in the Morning

A HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM HAS ITS OWN KIND OF QUIET AT THREE IN THE MORNING. The television is on with the sound off, and the vending machine hums. Somebody down the hall is on the phone, talking low. If you have sat in one of those rooms while someone you love was on the other side of the door, you know the question that comes in the dark, and it usually comes out plain: Where is God right now?

Every Christian who lives long enough asks it, and it comes with the diagnosis, the phone call, the layoff, the marriage that ends, the child who won't come home. Lesson 8 dealt with the flat seasons, when we feel nothing. This lesson is about the seasons when we feel too much, and the pain raises the question of whether God has gone.

Scripture lets people ask that question out loud. The psalmist's neighbors asked it of him: *Where is your God?* Psalm 42:3. Jesus asked something very close to it from the cross. So the question is allowed here, and this lesson looks at how two apostles answered it for suffering churches.

Three Boasts

Romans 5 begins with what is already settled: *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*, Romans 5:1. Paul adds that we stand in grace and *boast in the hope of the glory of God*, Romans 5:2.

Last week's reading asked us to count the boasts, and there are three. We boast in the hope of glory in verse 2, in our afflictions in verse 3, and in God himself in verse 11.⁴⁸ The boast about suffering sits in the middle, with hope on one side and God on the other. Paul could only boast about afflictions because of what stands on either side of them.

And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, Romans 5:3. Notice that Paul says *we know*. He knows what the afflictions are producing even while they hurt. *Affliction* is a word for pressure, the weight that presses down.⁴⁹ *Endurance* is the strength to stay under that weight without running out from under it.

Paul knew affliction firsthand. By the time he wrote Romans, he could say, *Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked,* 2 Corinthians 11:25. When he says *we know*, he is reporting what he found out in places most of us will never see.

Then the chain keeps going: *Endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope,* Romans 5:4. *Proven character* is a tester's word, the kind of metal that has been through the assay and come out genuine. Lesson 4 met the same family of words in Romans 12:2, where a renewed mind can *discern* God's will.⁵⁰ Suffering, Paul says, puts our faith through that test. What comes out the other end is hope, and that is where Romans 5 started.

Love Poured Out

This hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us, Romans 5:5. The hope will not leave us standing there embarrassed, holding a promise that came to nothing. *Has been poured out* describes something done in the past that is still true now.⁵¹ The love was poured, and it is still there.

Lesson 3 said the Spirit of God lives in every Christian. Here Paul tells us something the Spirit brought with him. The love of God is already *in our hearts*, given *through the Holy Spirit who was given to us*. Paul states it as a fact about every believer, as settled as the Spirit's presence itself, and it holds on the days we can't feel it.

Then Paul tells us how we can know God loves us, and he goes straight to the cross. *For while we were still helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly,* Romans 5:6. *But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us,* Romans 5:8. In five verses Paul describes us four ways: helpless, ungodly, sinners, and enemies. God loved us in every one of them.

Paul argues from the greater to the lesser. *For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life,* Romans 5:10. If God loved us enough to die for us when we were his enemies, how likely is it that he will walk away from us now that we are his children? Paul's *how much more* is the answer to the question in the waiting room.

We are not meant to measure God's love by the weather. Circumstances rise and fall, and if we read his love off of them, we will conclude every hard week that he has left. Paul points us to the one measure that does not move. God *proves* his love, present tense, and the proof is a cross that has already happened and can never be undone.

For a Short Time

Peter wrote to Christians scattered across what is now Turkey, people who were slandered for their faith and treated as outsiders in their own towns. He opens with praise: *Because of his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,* 1 Peter 1:3. The inheritance is *kept in heaven for you*, and the believers themselves are *being guarded by God's power through faith*, 1 Peter 1:4–5. *Guarded* is the soldier's word Lesson 4 met in Philippians 4:7, a garrison posted at the gate.⁵²

Then Peter turns to their trouble: *You rejoice in this, even though now for a short time, if necessary, you suffer grief in various trials*, 1 Peter 1:6. Look at how carefully he says it. The joy and the grief are both real, and they are both present tense. Peter lets them grieve, and he tells them the grief is *for a short time*, short against the length of what is coming. Then he adds *if necessary*. The trials come under God's hand, and only as far as they must.

Various means many-colored,⁵³ because suffering does not come in one shade. Some of it is loud, like a crash on the highway, and some of it is a slow ache that lasts for years. Peter's word covers all of it.

Gold in the Fire

Peter names the purpose: *So that the proven character of your faith—more valuable than gold which, though perishable, is refined by fire—may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ*, 1 Peter 1:7.

Here is the tester's word again. Peter and Paul use the same family of words in our two core texts, and James does too: *the testing of your faith produces endurance*, James 1:3.⁵⁴ Three writers reached for the same picture. A refiner puts gold in the fire to burn off what is not gold. Peter's point is that gold, refined or not, will still perish someday. Tested faith won't. It is headed for *praise, glory, and honor* on the day Jesus is revealed. Paul says the same about that day: *And then praise will come to each one from God*, 1 Corinthians 4:5. The faith that held on in the fire will hear God's praise for it.

Peter goes on: *Though you have not seen him, you love him; though not seeing him now, you believe in him, and you rejoice with inexpressible and glorious joy*, 1 Peter 1:8. They were suffering for a Christ they had never seen, and they loved him anyway.

When It Hurts

None of this makes suffering small. Paul and Peter both wrote from inside it. What they refuse to do is let suffering tell them who God is.

So, when the hard season comes, grieve honestly; Peter assumes you will. Tell God the truth about it, the way the psalmists did. Stay close to God's people, because Paul's *we* in Romans 5 means we are meant to endure this together. Most of what the church does for a suffering brother or sister is simple: we show up at the hospital, sit in the waiting room, bring the meal, and keep showing up after the first week. And when the question comes in the dark, measure God's love by the cross, where he proved it. What has your suffering been telling you about God, and does the cross agree?

On the cross Jesus asked the question himself. *And at three Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lemá sabachtháni?" which is translated, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"* Mark 15:34. He was praying the first line of Psalm 22, and he still called God *my God* while he prayed it.

The psalm he quoted does not end where it begins. Later it says of God, *He did not hide his face from him but listened when he cried to him for help*, Psalm 22:24. On the third day after Jesus prayed that first line, the tomb was empty. The word he cried, *abandoned*, is the same word Paul used when he wrote *persecuted but not abandoned*, and the same word God uses in a promise to everyone who belongs to Christ: *I will never leave you or abandon you*, Hebrews 13:5.⁵⁵

Key Concepts

Complete each statement. Answers in endnotes.⁵⁶

Deeper

6. Peter says trials come *if necessary*. How do you hold on to that when you can't see why a particular trial was necessary?

7. Read Mark 15:33–34 and Psalm 22:1–2, 22–24. What does it mean that Jesus prayed a lament from the cross, and still called God *my God*?

Journaling Prompts

15–20 minutes. Nobody reads these but you.

1. Write about the hardest season you have lived through as a Christian. Where did you think God was during it?
2. Look back at that season. Write down anything you can see now about what it produced in you that you couldn't see then.
3. If you are suffering now, write a prayer that tells God the truth about it and still calls him *my God*.

Weekly Practice

THIS WEEK. Read the proof.

Read Romans 5:1–11 aloud every morning this week. Each time, stop at verse 8 and say it a second time. Then write the name of one person you know who is suffering, and pray for them by name every day. If you can, tell them you are doing it.

Looking Ahead

Lesson 10 – Gratitude and Contentment, Philippians 4:11–13; 1 Thessalonians 5:18

Lesson 9 asked whether God leaves us in the hard times. Lesson 10 asks how to be content when the times don't change, good or bad.

Paul says he *learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself*, Philippians 4:11. He wrote it from custody, and the verb he chose admits it took time.

Read Philippians 4:10–20 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 before the next class. In Philippians 4:12, count the circumstances Paul names, and notice how many of them are good times.

⁴⁸ *Boast* is *kauchaomai* in all three verses. In 5:11 the CSB renders a participle, *we also boast in God*.

⁴⁹ *Affliction* is *thlipsis*, from a verb meaning to press or squeeze. *Endurance* is *hypomonē*, built from *hypo*, under, and *menō*, to remain.

⁵⁰ *Proven character* in Romans 5:4 is *dokimē*. *Discern* in Romans 12:2 is the related verb *dokimazō*, used for testing metal and approving it as genuine.

⁵¹ *Has been poured out* is *ekkechytai*, a perfect tense: a completed act with a lasting result. Luke uses the same verb of the Spirit poured out at Pentecost, Acts 2:17 and 2:33.

⁵² *Guarded* is *phroureō*, the same verb as Philippians 4:7. Paul uses it in 2 Corinthians 11:32 of the governor who had Damascus *guarded* in order to arrest him.

⁵³ *Various* is *poikilos*, many-colored or of many kinds. Peter uses the same word in 1 Peter 4:10 for *the varied grace of God*.

⁵⁴ *Proven character* in 1 Peter 1:7 and *testing* in James 1:3 are both *dokimion*, from the same family as Paul's *dokimē* in Romans 5:4.

⁵⁵ *Abandoned* is *enkataleipō* in Mark 15:34, in 2 Corinthians 4:9, and in Hebrews 13:5, where it carries the strongest form of denial Greek has, *ou mē*.

⁵⁶ ANSWERS: 1. endurance · 2. character · 3. disappoint · 4. gold · 5. abandon