

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part forty-seven
Sunday, December 8th, 2019 - 5:30 p.m. - Teaching #2175
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THE CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSE TO THIS SINFUL WORLD - HOPE, PATIENCE, AND PRAYER

Romans 12:12-13 - "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. [13] Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality."

These verses complete the thought begun in our last study. There we looked at **Romans 12:10-11** - "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. [11] Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord." That eleventh verse, especially, can seem a bit unrealistic. We're told to keep serving the Lord, and, not only that, but to keep serving Him with a passionate and fervent heart. And it's that last part that seems out of reach.

Certainly we all have *times* where our spiritual passion soars. We have our impassioned moments. And for the other times we have come up with a theology that reminds us we don't live by feelings and emotions. We **obey** and make our feelings come to **heel and follow**. And certainly there's a certain Biblical wisdom in this.

So, in case we think Paul lived in a different world and sometimes lacked touch with our spiritual struggles, we have these wonderful words in **verses 12-13** - "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. [13] Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality."

There will be **tribulation** (12). The call of Christ is not an **easy** call. It's a **discipleship** call, not just a **feel-good** call. That's why Paul calls for our **patience**. He reminds us saints are going to have "**needs**"(13) - **burdens** so heavy no one saint can carry them alone. That's why Paul says other brothers and sisters will have to help bear them.

So, when Paul tells us to **keep** our spiritual fervor he doesn't mean we become **unrealistic** about the world in which we live. This is not some glib, trite, locker-room pep talk at half time. Today's text plots a realistic pathway to maintaining our joy and our hope as we serve the Lord in an evil, troublesome, persecuting and disappointing world.

1) **THIS WORLD IS THE PLACE OF OUR SERVICE, BUT NOT THE PLACE OF OUR HOPE**

You see this most clearly when you link together the **last** phrase of **verse 11** with the **first** phrase of **verse 12** - "....**serve the Lord. [12] Rejoice in hope....**" And Paul has already taught about the nature of hope in **Romans 8:24** - "....**Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?**" So this world is the place where we give expression of our devotion to Jesus Christ. This is where we **serve**. This is where we are to be His heart, hands and feet. This is where we build Christ's kingdom among the needy and broken.

But this world is **not** the place where we can see the object of our **hope**. Results don't come quickly in this world. Many seeds get planted that take their own sweet time germinating. The seed of labor we plant is frequently harvested by someone else - long after we're dead and gone. That means this world is a **great** place to **spend** your life in service, but it can be a **terrible** place to thrill your soul with **hope**. Paul captured this perfectly in his famous words: "**If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied**"(1 Corinthians 15:19). This world, **all by itself**, doesn't deliver when it comes to **hope**.

And that's the way it's **supposed** to be. This world isn't the object of our **hope**. It's the object of our **service**. So where does hope come from? How do we keep spending our lives for Christ in a world that frequently gives so little payback in terms of hope?

Look again at these striking words in **Romans 8:24** - "**For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?**" The phrase to note is that first one: "**For in this hope we were saved....**" Being **saved** - salvation itself - is all about coming into a realm of **hope**. It's all **about** hope. It has no meaning at all except in relation to the **hope** it gives. That's what Paul means - "**In this hope we are saved!**"

So here's the irony when we think of **service** in this world and our invisible **hope**. And we're meant to think it through. It's not "**pie in the sky**" that keeps Christians from being any earthly good. It's people who have **no** heavenly hope - **no** "pie in the sky" - who fix their hope and their destiny to this fallen world - **those** are the ones who cheat this fallen world of the passionate service it so desperately needs and deserves.

Don't be intimidated by mere **humanitarianism**. Perhaps we need to say it all over again. The Christian does **not** hope in this world. We are **not** going to change this whole world - at least we're not going to change it **substantially**.

We're not going to *redeem* this world on our own. This world is *not* going to get better and better. The Bible says so: **2 Timothy 3:12-13** - "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, [13] while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived."

We used to believe each new generation started out freshly where the last one left off, moving onward and upward. So there was just a flow of inevitable progress - each new generation standing on the shoulders of the preceding one. But outside of technological and scientific advance, not many people are gullible enough to believe that anymore.

When I was a kid we used to go outside after supper and play until it was dark. Hide and seek. Take the flag. Cops and robbers. Or baseball out on the street. We had no cell phones. Nobody could call to check that we were all right. And they didn't worry about that. No one had to call. There was never any reason to assume we *wouldn't* be all right. I never heard of anyone who worried about tearing around until it was dark and then riding his bike home alone in the dark at the end of a beautiful summer evening. I'm sure there were some tragic exceptions. But **generally** that's just the way the world used to be. Who in his right mind would say we've improved on that world today?

I never saw a police officer at my public school. There were no hand guns or metal detectors. True, there were some big moral issues. Teachers panicked if kids chewed gum in class or didn't stand up when they answered a question. Have we really, with all our sophistication and technology, made this world so much better than it used to be? Clearly, if one is setting one's hope on creating peace and love here and now on this earth, hope begins to run scarce.

No, says Paul. To serve this world with passion and joy, you have to have the big picture right. This is the same theme Paul introduced us to in **Romans 5:1-2** - "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. [2] 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."

What a great phrase! We "**....rejoice in hope of the glory of God....**" That's what we're looking forward to in hope - "**....the glory of God!**" Small pep talks and motivational techniques are no match for the blight of sin and despair that pollutes this fallen world. We can never save this world. But **God** is going to do something **glorious** in this world. Christ is returning. We are all serving with the view of a **new creation**. We cannot usher it in, but Christ has done something decisive. We have a message and we have an indwelling power through the Holy Spirit and we have a coming King. And that leads into Paul's next thought:

2) **BECAUSE WE HAVE THIS CERTAIN HOPE, WE SERVE THE LORD WITH THE STRENGTH OF PATIENCE**

Romans 12:12 - "Rejoice in hope, **be patient in tribulation....**"

What I've been saying about our hope not being rooted in our ability to change the world might easily be misunderstood. Someone might conclude that because our **hope** isn't in this world, our **service** won't long endure here either. Someone might think that an **eternal hope** will lead to **earthly indifference**.

And that's why Paul immediately tags **patience** on to the end of **hope**. We rejoice in hope **and** are patient in tribulation. Tribulation is what wars against hope. Tribulation is what pushes in the opposite direction of the **fervecy of our service** in this world. And Paul says our eternal hope brings the **quiet, persistent, strength of patience into our service**.

Christians **know** their hope for Christ's kingdom and the conquest of evil is a **certain** hope. They know, as Paul says, their labor is never in **vain** - **1 Corinthians 15:58** - "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

These are wonderful words. Our "**work for the Lord**" should be "**steadfast**" and "**immovable**" because we know, "**in the Lord,**" our labor is not **vain** labor. It can never be erased or cancelled out by any tribulation or opposition.

This **patience in tribulation** is a quiet, confident strength. It is never **panicky**. It means Christians who labor "**in the Lord**" never have to strap bombs on their bodies in desperate, self-centered, murderous attempts to get the work done. It's **going** to get done. There is an innate power right **inside** the gospel message. This is exactly what Paul meant when he said these vastly underrated words: **Romans 1:16** - "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...."

And there's more. Our divine hope brings patience when tribulation gets **personal**. Focusing on our **eternal** hope brings **temporal** strength. Being "**patient in tribulation**" means at least three things:

- a) **Being patient in tribulation means we see all trials as temporary.** Of course we know, on an academic level that nothing, including our earthly lives, lasts forever. So yes, obviously all our trials are temporary. But that's not really what I'm talking about. I'm talking about seeing all trials and troubles **compared** to the eternal nature of the engine of our **hope**:

2 Corinthians 4:7-10, 16-18 - "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. [8] We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; [9] persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; [10] always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies....16-18....So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. [17] For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, [18] as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

Paul isn't denying the **reality** of his trials. He isn't just **confessing** that they're all gone. No. He's doing something else. He's putting all his trials - his incredibly difficult, painful trials - **into another context**. He's setting his trials in the context of **his eternal hope**. He's making **hope** the engine, not the **trials**. This is how our eternal hope makes us "**patient in tribulation**."

- b) **Being patient in tribulation means allowing tribulation to teach us and produce in us the things only tribulation can.** Paul has already dealt with this profoundly in Romans.

Remember these words from **Romans 5:2-4** - "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. [3] More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, [4] and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...."

And James says the very same thing, perhaps even more stunningly: **James 1:2-4** - "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, [3] for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. [4] And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

If I told you I had a spiritual secret that could produce fruit beyond belief in your life - if I told you I had an ingredient that could actually make you "**perfect**" and "**complete**" and "**lacking absolutely nothing**" you'd think I had a religious best-seller on my hands. And then if I told you what that ingredient was, and that it was **patience under trial** you'd know why we usually look elsewhere.

- c) **Finally, being patient in tribulation means we set our hearts more fully on the second coming of Jesus and all that it will usher in.** We gain our strength - our **patience** in serving the Lord in this fallen world - we get that patience, ironically, as we "**set our affection on things above, and not on the things that are on earth**"(Colossians 3:2).

Again, you can't get anything else right until you get the **big picture** right. This longing for the things that are above - remembering Christ seated at the right hand of God and **preparing** to return to rule and reign - this is the **engine** for our patient service here on earth. This keeps us from being either **discouraged** by tribulation or **seduced** and **distracted** by wealth and pleasure. And if you have a hope that can stand against both **discouragement** and **distraction** you have an engine for service that is unstoppable in this world.

3) **ONLY PEOPLE WHO STEADFASTLY SERVE WILL BECOME PEOPLE WHO FAITHFULLY PRAY**

Romans 12:12 - "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, **be constant in prayer.**"

If prayer lives emerged from reading **books** about prayer, we'd all be prayerfully engaged - **fully** engaged. But it doesn't. I have developed a conviction that no one can **learn** to pray by reading and thinking about prayer. Prayer is born spontaneously in hearts that **serve**. Not just in hearts that **think** or **meditate** or **attend** or **read** - but **serve**.

Prayer is born in hearts that habitually give themselves over to service they know is **too big** to be done in their own strength. Prayer is born in hearts that **engage** the brokenness and fallenness of this world. You might **go** to the prayer room to pray, but you won't **find** prayer in any prayer room. You find prayer in **mission and sacrifice**. Prayer comes from being stretched in God's cause beyond your own resources. Prayer comes from knowing there is no **survival** - there will be no "**patience in tribulation**" when the tribulation gets great - apart from being "**constant in prayer**."

4) **CHRISTIANS WHO SERVE HOPEFULLY AND PATIENTLY KNOW THEY AREN'T THE ONLY ONES WHO EXPERIENCE TRIBULATION**

Let's get a running start on this final thought:

Romans 12:12-13 - "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. [13] Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality."

Immediately we're taken back to Paul's train of thought in **verses 4-5** - "**For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, [5] so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.**" If your body is healthy which part of it can be in pain and the rest of your body not feel it? If you have an absessed tooth or a screaming migraine does the **rest** of your body really feel just fine? No. When you're sick it's the whole **you** that is sick - even though, in reality, it's probably only one small **part** of you that's hurting.

Such is the fellowship of the body of Christ. We can't just be **kind of** caring for one another. The word Paul uses is the verb "**seek**." We must be on the look-out for opportunities for compassion and generosity and hospitality.

Actually, we pray about this a lot more than most people realize. Usually at the close of church gatherings all over the continent some pastor will solemnly stand with bowed head and a pious tone and say something like this apostolic blessing from **2 Corinthians 13:14** - "Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the **fellowship of the Holy Spirit**, abide with you all until Jesus comes. Amen"

There it is. The Holy Spirit creates a **fellowship**. Not just **with** you, but **between** you and the others in whom He dwells and works. He is the one who makes us "**members one of another**"(12:5b). So remember, if you want to see the Holy Spirit at work, don't just look for prophecies. Take a needy brother out for some groceries.