

Romans 12:9-21

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] Please turn with me to the passage we read in Paul's letter to the Romans in chapter 12.

Now, we read the section that begins there in verse 9 through to the end of the chapter, but we want to focus our attention on one verse near the beginning of that section, verse 12.

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. We all suffer in lesser or greater measure, and Christians are not immune from all manner of afflictions.

Now, you don't need me to tell you that. You know that that is true. And that is our reality in this sin-sick world in which we live.

Given that reality, the question that emerges is as follows. Is there a distinctly Christian response to suffering?

[1 : 1 6] We all suffer. If we're Christians or if we're not Christians, we all in some measure suffer. But the question is, is there a distinctly Christian response to suffering?

And I'm not talking here about suffering as some kind of abstract philosophical concept that we need to grapple with. You know, you have maybe people giving talks on, you know, how can you believe in God given the suffering in the world?

Now, there's a place for that, to deal with it from that apologetic or philosophical perspective, if you wish. But that's not my concern this evening. My concern is how do we respond to suffering as a personal reality that we experience as believers?

Paul, as he writes this letter, was writing to Christians who were subject to trials and tribulations of different kinds. And they needed guidance as we do, as Christians in every generation do.

They needed guidance as to how to respond to such suffering or how to live in the midst of such suffering. Now, it's a subject that Paul, on numerous occasions, broaches in the different letters that he writes.

[2 : 3 0] But there's one occasion here in Romans chapter 12 where he addresses the question in what we might call bullet point fashion. You know, verse 12, you could almost imagine the bullet points for these three very direct challenges.

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Indeed, this whole section is almost like one long list of bullet points concerning the Christian life and Christian duties.

But here in verse 12 in particular, these three distinct charges that he levels at in a helpful way, directs at the believers that he is writing to.

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Though they're distinct exhortations, they are connected or related one to another.

And what connects them, or certainly what can connect them, there may be other ways in which we can see connections, but one way in which they are connected is the manner in which they revolve around this reality of suffering and our response to it.

[3 : 46] And we want to think about each of them separately, but also try and see what the connections are between them. And we'll begin with the middle one of the three, because it is the one that mentions explicitly this matter of affliction.

So the second of the three exhortations there in verse 13, patient in affliction, implicit, the verb is there also, be patient in affliction.

So be joyful in hope, be patient in affliction, be faithful in prayer. So we'll start with that one, be patient in affliction. And what I want to do is simply think about the two core words that we find in it and just comment on them to draw out what Paul is challenging us to do.

So first of all, the word affliction. One thing that we could mention, and it's in a way quite an obvious thing to say, but it's worth making the point explicitly, is that as far as Paul is concerned, affliction is a given.

You know, Paul doesn't say to the believers, you know, if you're afflicted. He doesn't even say, you know, for those of you who are afflicted. He says simply be patient in affliction.

[4 : 57] It's a given for Paul that that will be the experience of those that he is writing to, as I said at the beginning, in lesser or greater measure. And, you know, it's a providence that we don't understand why some believers have to endure far greater suffering than others.

It's a reality. Indeed, in the course of our lives, there are times when we suffer greatly and other times when our afflictions are very light afflictions. And why that is is difficult for us to understand.

But what is certainly true is that Paul takes it as a given, that this is the common, the regular experience of believers, that they endure or experience affliction or suffering.

But what can we say about this affliction? I want you to note a couple of things. First of all, the intensity of it, but also the nature of it or the provenance or source of it.

So, first of all, the intensity of this affliction that Paul is making reference to in this challenge. The word that he uses, the word there translated affliction, is a word that is helpful in what it reveals about what Paul has in mind.

[6 : 12] The literal derivation of the word there translated affliction is from the Greek verb to press. The idea of being pressed in or even the idea of being crushed.

The idea of being trapped. Of being in a situation where there appears to be no escape. Pressed in. And so, the word itself carries with it this sense of acute suffering, of serious trouble.

Now, it can be used of the whole range of afflictions. It can be used to speak of lighter afflictions, but it certainly carries very particularly the sense of quite acute suffering.

So, the intensity of it is hinted at in the language that Paul uses. As to the nature of this suffering or its provenance where it comes from, I think we can identify two distinct categories.

Paul doesn't go into that level of detail. And so, we're assuming that he has in mind these two categories, I think reasonably. What are the two big categories, I suppose, of suffering or affliction that we can suffer?

[7 : 22] Well, the first kind of suffering is that suffering that is common to all in our sin-sick world. You know, whether we're Christians or whether we're not Christians, we can be subject to ill health of one kind or another.

Be it physical ill health or mental ill health or a combination of both. We can know the suffering that can accompany poverty, financial limitations, unemployment.

We know the suffering that comes with difficult relationships or when relationships break down or when people we love let us down or when we let other people down. And the suffering that comes alongside that.

The suffering that can come from unfulfilled dreams or frustrated aspirations. The suffering that comes from being the victims of ill treatment or injustice of one kind or another.

And we could go on. The kind of suffering that men and women in every age and in every place and every generation experience.

[8 : 25] You know, we could watch a news bulletin of 20 minutes and as we go through the news bulletin, we will be presented with there many people who are suffering for different reasons. Some of them may be Christians.

Most of them won't be Christians. But that's the reality in this world. So, the afflictions that Paul speaks of that we are to be patient in include these that are common to all.

But, of course, I think Paul also, and in what he immediately goes on to say, it would seem to confirm this, he is also considering those afflictions or that suffering that is particular to Christians.

That is the direct consequence of our love and loyalty to Jesus. So, just in the following verse or two verses down, he makes reference to those who persecute you, bless those who persecute you.

And so, almost in the same breath, he makes reference to persecution and, of course, the suffering that comes with persecution, with being marginalized, with being denied opportunities for employment, with being put into prison, with your name being dragged through the mud, with being maligned and lied about, and all the different forms that persecution can take.

[9 : 42] Suffering that is particularly the result of our Christian convictions. And Paul, of course, speaks about that on many occasions.

Let me just read one verse, or a couple of verses, where he speaks explicitly about that. In the first letter, or the second letter, rather, that he writes to Timothy in chapter 3.

Listen to what he says. It's a very all-encompassing statement. In 2 Timothy 3, in verse 12, he says, We read that, and we almost struggle a little bit with, well, is that true?

In the sense that, is that the experience of all Christians in every age and every time? Certainly not in the same measure, but nonetheless, Paul makes it clear that this is to be expected.

This is the norm, to suffer in this way, because of our commitment to Jesus. We've prayed this evening for, and we have done on a number of occasions in these past few months, for Andrew Brunson, the missionary who's in Turkey and was imprisoned.

[11 : 01] Still is deprived of his freedom, but as I was mentioning in prayer, is now no longer in prison, but under house arrest. And, of course, we mention him by name because he's been brought to our attention, but, of course, he represents so many others.

I was also mentioning in prayer many who are imprisoned in Eritrea, simply because they are Christians. And for that reason, they have been deprived of their liberty, their suffering.

But the category of their suffering is suffering because of their faith. So there's these two categories of affliction, those afflictions that are common to all and those that are particular to Christians.

When we think of the second category, we are grateful for the freedoms that we currently enjoy in Scotland and the UK. But that could change. Some might say that is already changing.

So affliction. But then, particularly, what are we to do in the midst of this affliction? How are we to respond to this affliction? Well, the exhortation is clear enough. Be patient in affliction.

[12 : 04] In the face of affliction, we ought to be patient. And the word carries the idea of steadfast endurance. This is not passive resignation. It's not a fatalistic, *que sera, sera*.

It is the deliberate and conscious decision to stand firm in the face of affliction, in the face of suffering. Not to buckle.

Not to give up. Not to throw in the towel. Not to curse God and die. Many of the things that we might be tempted to do in the face of suffering, especially when it is severe and seemingly mindless and seemingly serves no purpose.

Of course, we're persuaded that it does, but that isn't always evident. It's not always apparent. And we are to be patient. We are to stand firm. We are to endure. We could also note in the passing that implicit in the call to be patient or to be steadfast is the assumption that suffering can be or will be prolonged.

If suffering was fleeting, then there would no need to be patient. You wouldn't need to endure a suffering that was fleeting because it would be gone. It would be over. You wouldn't need to be patient. But the very fact that Paul says be patient in suffering implies that suffering often is long-term.

[13 : 25] It is the prolonged experience often of the believer. Now, it's one thing to understand what is being asked of us, to be steadfast, to be patient. But it's another to actually be steadfast.

But it is possible. Paul, of course, exhorts us from a position of experience and authority. He is a man who had endured much suffering and who had remained steadfast in the face of that suffering.

And so, his words are not only true, but they carry great authority because of that. So, it is possible, but how? I think that's where, or at least in some measure, the preceding and following exhortations fit in.

They help us to answer the question, okay, we need to be steadfast in suffering, but how are we to do that? Affliction in these three challenges is wedged between hope and prayer.

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. So, wedged between hope and prayer is affliction. And that reminds us perhaps of the words of the hymn of John Newton, glorious things of thee are spoken.

[14 : 44] And I'll just carry on reading the first verse of that hymn. Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God. He whose word cannot be broken formed he fought his own abode.

On the rock of ages founded, what can shake thy sure repose? And then particularly the following words, with salvation's walls surrounded, thou may smile at all thy foes.

I'm not so sure about the smiling. I think God requires us to smile at our foes or at our afflictions, but certainly the language of with salvation's walls surrounded. We're hemmed in, as it were, by God's grace and God's salvation, by hope and by prayer as a means of seeking God and knowing God's help.

Affliction wedged in, as it were, to use the language of this writer, between hope and prayer. As one writer has expressed it, thus hedged in, affliction is kept firmly in its place and made to do duty as an instrument of grace in the hand of God.

But let's explore a little more, just briefly, these two associated exhortations that hedge in the call to be patient in affliction. And the first of the three is be joyful in hope.

[16 : 13] What has this got to do with affliction? How is it relevant to the question of suffering and being steadfast in the midst of suffering? Well, the key concept is hope.

The joy is the fruit of hope. The joy that we can experience surges from or is born in the hope that we enjoy.

What hope? What hope is it that can help us in the face of suffering? Well, if we just turn back a few chapters in the same letter to Romans, in Romans chapter 5 and in verse 2.

We can start from the beginning of the chapter and just make our way through to what is said at the end of verse 2. 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 then notice what Paul says, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. So this language of rejoicing and hope is then further explained, if you wish, by this expression, we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

[17 : 27] This is the hope that gives us help in the face of affliction. This is our assurance that we will be glorified and made perfect on the last day, that we will be freed from all suffering and pain, that we will see our Lord face to face.

This hope in what is a future, unseen reality sustains us and grants us joy in our present suffering. Paul quite often draws that comparison between our present suffering and how we are to compare that with our future glory, with the purpose of helping us put our present suffering in its place, if you wish.

Let me just give you one example that I'm sure will be familiar to you, and we don't need to go out with Paul's letter to the Romans. In Romans 8, and in verse 18, what does Paul say?

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. And he goes on. But you see, he's doing this.

He's saying, yes, there are present sufferings, but in my estimation, they're not to be compared to the glory that awaits us. They're real. They're painful. As we endure them in the present, they seem to be and indeed are severe, but they're not to be compared with what awaits us, with the hope that is ours.

[18 : 58] And so it is fitting that sandwiching, as it were, this call to be patient in suffering, there is this exhortation to be joyful in hope.

This hope that Paul speaks of here, notice, also has, I suppose, what you could call a circular aspect. The joy that is the fruit of our hope sustains us in affliction, but affliction in turn produces hope.

That's Paul's argument that he goes on to make in that chapter in Romans 5, or in what he goes on to say in Romans 5. So at the end of verse 2, he told us, or he stated, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

And then notice what he says, 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. So not only does hope sustain us in the midst of affliction, affliction is used of God to produce or to enrich that hope.

[20 : 14] How so? Well, in suffering, we discover and experience the faithfulness of God, and so are enabled to trust in God and His promises more securely. We discover for ourselves that God is faithful, that He delivers on His promises.

We don't only read it in the Bible and say, well, it must be true, but we actually experience it. And so that, in turn, produces or further cultivates, if you wish, that hope.

So be joyful in hope. But there's a third exhortation that helps us answer the question, how can I be steadfast or patient in affliction? And the third one is, the third of the three, be faithful in prayer.

How or where does prayer fit into the call to be steadfast or patient in affliction? I think we can say maybe three things that tie in prayer with affliction.

First of all, prayer prepares us for affliction. A man or woman of prayer enjoys a tight grip on God and consequently is better prepared for the storm of affliction when it comes.

[21 : 26] So first of all, it prepares us for affliction, but also prayer, or more importantly, the one we pray to, is our refuge in the midst of affliction. But while we state that to be so and believe it is so, we also need to be careful.

If we're not in the habit of prayer before affliction strikes, it will be no easy task to just flick the switch and start praying. You know, if we're careless in prayer while things are going well, while life is comfortable, and then there's a change of circumstances and we're confronted with suffering, and suddenly we say, oh, well, what do I do?

Well, maybe I should pray more. Well, by all means, you know, try and do that at that point, but it's going to be much more difficult than for the believer who has been cultivating that life of prayer, that relationship with God, in good times and bad, to then find refuge in God in and through prayer when suffering strikes, as it were.

So, prayer prepares us for affliction. It's our refuge, or the one we pray to is our refuge in the midst of affliction. But I think also that prayer or diligence in prayer is the measure of our steadfastness in affliction, the very thing that we're called to, to be steadfast.

In summary, prayer is the means ordained by God for the supply of grace sufficient for every trial. You know, we were thinking just very briefly of the words in James chapter 4 this morning, words that James is applying in a particular circumstance, but I think can be legitimately applied in other circumstances, that God is the one who gives us more grace.

[23 : 08] And that's something that we can experience in suffering, perhaps in a way that we won't experience when all is well. God gives us more grace. But though God is willing and able to give us more grace, there are, if you wish, channels that He chooses to employ to dispense His grace.

And I think we could see prayer as one of those channels by which God dispenses His grace to us. So, prayer. But particularly, Paul says, we are to be faithful in prayer.

And the word that Paul uses implies constancy and effort engaged in or devoted to prayer. And such prayer will prepare us and sustain us in the dark hours of affliction.

And so, the question for us to ask ourselves is simple enough, is this true of us? Are we faithful in prayer? Is this something that you need to work on? And my advice to you in this matter of being faithful in prayer, if you come to the honest estimation, well, actually, I don't know if I am.

My advice would be don't despair. Don't be wracked by guilt. But simply do what Paul proposes. Be faithful in prayer. And today is as good a day to start as any.

[24 : 27] So, three bullet points, if you wish, that in different ways respond to this big question that we all have to confront in the course of our lives.

How do we respond to affliction? What is to be our distinctly Christian response to affliction, whatever the nature or character of it?

And there are these three challenges that, as I've suggested, can be seen as complementing each other or forming a package, if you wish, of three bullet points to help us in this matter.

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. We began just a few minutes ago saying the following, we all suffer in lesser or greater measure, and Christians are not immune from multiple afflictions, and then pose the question, is there a distinctly Christian response to suffering?

And while it's not an exhaustive response, I think the words of our text do provide a helpful response. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

[25 : 40] Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the manner in which it deals with life as it is. It grapples with, and not only grapples with, but provides instructions for us and wisdom for us in how to live our lives in a broken world where suffering and pain is a reality.

we do pray for those who are experiencing in particular measure afflictions of one kind or another, and we pray that You would indeed give them more grace, that You would give them grace sufficient, that You would give us grace sufficient for every trial.

We thank You for the particular challenges that we've been confronted with this evening, and we do pray that You would help us, each of us in our own circumstances, to respond to these challenges, that we would know what it is to be steadfast, to be patient in affliction, that we would know what it is to rejoice in hope, and that we would know what it is to be faithful in prayer.

And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.