

TOUGH LOVE

Romans 12:12

Dr. George O. Wood

Scripture today is Romans 12:12: “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer” (NIV).

I also want to read the parallel reading, the first eight verses of Luke 18, where Jesus told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: ‘In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’ For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!’ And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?’” (Luke 18:1–8, NIV).

Father, we just look to You in this moment—to be strengthened through Your Word, to be open to receive the ministry You have for us this day. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

In the Scripture, our relationship to the Lord takes as one of its models the relationship of husband to wife. On the day of marriage, the bride and the groom solemnly pledge to one another that they take each other for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health. The assumption of that pledge is that love is based not on the circumstances of the person, but is based instead on the person themselves. So our love for the Lord takes on this kind of quality. It is, if you will, for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health.

TOUGH LOVE

Romans 12:12

We do not become related to the Lord out of the prospect that our circumstances might improve, although they will in the ultimate sense. But we become related to the Lord because of who He is.

Romans 12:12 addresses those moments in life, as Christians, that we run in to, where we are really in a fog, in a bind—when life gets rough. Paul is saying in Romans 12:12, “When life gets rough, our love hangs tough.” When we most need hope is when we are in despair. When do we most need constancy in prayer? It is when we’re facing something that just staggers us. When do we need most a sense of God helping us? It is when we feel most the sense of our need.

In the middle of verse 12, Paul uses a word which will be key to our thinking today. It is the word “tribulation.” The idea of rejoicing in hope and being constant in prayer, both of those tie in to this central theme of being steadfast in tribulation. For in the midst of tribulation, we are to rejoice in hope. And in the midst of tribulation, we are to be constant in prayer.

I have two basic questions today in regard to tribulation. Do you have it? And if you have it, how do you get on with it? How do you get through it?

I would like to propose that you have it—if you haven’t found it yet, I’d like to suggest that you will—literally, the word “tribulation” means “to press, to squeeze, to rub, to hem in.” In a literal sense, it is found in Mark 3:9, which describes a physical occasion where Jesus told His disciples to have a boat ready for Him because of the crowd, lest they should crush Him. The word there for “crush” is the same word used here in Romans 12:12: “tribulation.” Lest they should hem Him in—squeeze Him, afflict Him. In the figurative sense, the word that can be used in the literal way to describe the crush of the crowd is used to describe the crush, the affliction, and the harassment of circumstances of life.

TOUGH LOVE

Romans 12:12

According to the Scriptures, the believer—in one degree or another—goes through tribulation.

Jesus says in John 16:33, using the same word here He used in Romans 12:12, “I have said this to you that in me you may have peace. In the world, you have tribulation.”

Another example is Acts 14:22, when Paul was comforting the believers in the churches which he founded on his first missionary journey. It said that he and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith and saying that “through many squeezing we must enter the kingdom of God.”

Paul tells the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 3:3: “Let no one be moved by your tribulations, by your pressures. You yourselves know that this is our lot.”

And John bears testimony at the beginning of his Revelation, “I, John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance.” Notice it’s not simply, “I share with you the Kingdom. But it is, “I share with you also the tribulation.”

How does tribulation come to us? Do we recognize it? This past week, I took the opportunity to do a word study to see how that word “tribulation” is used throughout the pages of the New Testament. Most frequently, I think we as Christians use it as something that comes at the end of the age—the Great Tribulation. It’s true that it does have that meaning. But there are many tribulations up to that moment.

There is tribulation that comes from the hostility of the world to the Christian, simply because of his union with the Lord Jesus Christ. In Acts 11:19 we find that the saints were scattered because of the persecution. And the word “persecution” there is this word in Romans 12:12. They were scattered because of the squeezing, the pressure, the tribulation. Jesus tells in His story about the sower and the seed about those who have momentary faith—but who, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the Word, they wither and fall away. We are to expect that because of our faith in Christ. There is a price to be paid.

TOUGH LOVE

Romans 12:12

One of the things that I do when I'm teaching a class that requires books to be read (I hate to give tests on books, and I hate to read book reports!), a convenient way I've found to assure myself that the student has done the work is to give a very simple true and false kind of a quiz, which anybody who has a modicum of sensibility at all can easily pass the test. But the clincher is the first question: "I have conscientiously read this book." I say, "If you answer that false, then no matter how you do on the rest of the questions, your grade for the test is zero." That always presents a moral choice for the student. Inevitably, about halfway through the semester, I'll have a student coming to me saying, "That's not fair. I know so-and-so. And he didn't read the book, and he's getting credit. I'm working my head off and I did worse on the test than he did. And yet I don't get the credit he does. I think you ought to do something about that." I light up like a light bulb on that occasion, clap my hands, and say, "You've learned one of the most important lessons in this course. It pays to be honest. You're going to find that in the world."

Jesus certainly bears testimony to this. Because of our faith, because of the standard of ethic and morality which we have in Christ, you can expect the condemnation of the world. The sneers and the comments, "Don't tell me you're really that conscientious."

Another thing associated with tribulation—and this may be what's causing pressure in your life—is poverty. In Acts 17:11, when Stephen describes Joseph and the famine which occurred in Joseph's day, he said, "There was a famine and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food." Why was there the afflictions for Jacob and his sons? Because of the impoverished conditions.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians said, "The Macedonian churches, in a severe test of affliction, gave out of a sense of abundance of joy. Extreme poverty has overflowed in a wealth of liberality" (2 Corinthians 8:1-2). The word "affliction" or "tribulation" is used there in connection with the fact that they were in poverty.

TOUGH LOVE

Romans 12:12

To the Smyrna church in Revelation, the Lord says, “I know your tribulation and your poverty.”

It may be that as you look at life, you’re faithfully serving the Lord, but you’re having a rough time making ends meet at this present moment in your history. You’re undergoing some pressure. So you can put yourself in this category. This sermon is including you today.

Let’s go on to some other kinds of lists that are present with this word “tribulation.”

The word “tribulation” or “pressure” can refer to someone who has had a devastating personal experience which is so intimate and personal that later, when testifying, they can only talk about it in generalities and not specifics. Paul has an experience like this when he writes to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 1. He talks about the affliction, or the tribulation, he experiences in Asia, when “we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. We felt that we had received the sentence of death.” He never describes what this was. Did he fall under a tremendous siege in his body? Was he before Roman justice? Was he in danger of an assassination attempt? It was something that worked against him. He goes on to describe this: “Even when we came unto Macedonia, our bodies had no rest. But we were afflicted, in tribulation at every turn, fear within and fear without.”

Does that sound like a strong Christian? I thought a strong Christian wasn’t supposed to have any fears outside and fears inside. Yet here is the apostle Paul saying he is in affliction, he is trembling. He is fighting fears without and fears within. You may have that kind of emotional turbulence in your life today.

There’s tribulation that comes as a result of bad breaks. In Acts 7:10, Stephen describes Joseph in this way: “God was with him and rescued him out of all his afflictions.” I would translate “afflictions” in that Scripture as simply “bad breaks.” He did get some terribly raw deals.

Affliction may occur as the result of the loss of a loved one. James 1:27 admonishes believers to “visit orphans and widows in their afflictions.” The word “affliction” there is the same word as

TOUGH LOVE

Romans 12:12

in Romans 12:12. In their “tribulations.” An orphan, the loss of a mom or dad or both. A widow, the loss of a husband. That is an afflicting, crushing, squeezing moment of life.

Did you know that marriage can also be included as a tribulation? Paul, writing in 1 Corinthians 7:28 says, “Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles.” And the word for “troubles” there is identical to 12:12—worldly tribulations, squeezing, pressure, a relationship which needs more working on. Sometimes a relationship which has, perhaps, a lot of despair in it and a lot of trouble. There is no hurt like the hurt that can exist within marriage.

Another way that trouble comes to us is in our agony for others and our inability to change the situation. And wrestling, and sweating, and praying, and interceding that that situation will be changed. Paul had this when he said to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 2:4: “I wrote you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears.” He’s deeply upset about the behavior of some of the people in the Corinthian church. He loved them, and because he loved them, he was squeezed, pressured in his spirit in regard to the affliction for them.

We also can be in affliction because of the process of death which is at work in our bodies. Paul writes, “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction [What is this slight momentary affliction? It is the outer that is wearing away. This slight momentary affliction] is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Corinthians 4:6-7).

I think of a reference in Scripture to a person who died. It says they fell sick and died. That falling sick can be the process of death in our bodies.

We find ourselves in tribulation. This word “tribulation” can refer to almost anything. As Paul uses it in 2 Corinthians 1 he talks about “the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our afflictions so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction.”

TOUGH LOVE

Romans 12:12

Revelation says that Jesus, when He comes and receives us to himself, will wipe away every tear. The assumption behind that is that there have been tears. The assumption behind there being “no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4, NIV). Notice “pain” here is used of those who have believed in Him. But now no more. The fact that He wipes it away is a statement that, indeed, it did exist. So, tribulation.

Look at the sources. And if you’ll look at the categories, one way or another, we all fit. This message that Paul brings to us, this admonition of how to handle tribulation, then comes into focus. If we start in the middle of the verse and then work backward, and then work forward, we kind of get a handle on how we handle tribulation.

I. The first thing Paul tells us to do in regard to tribulation, as he writes under the Spirit’s guidance, is be patient.

In regard to tribulation, he says, be patient. I submit that patience is not a very positive word. I’m not a very patient person. I’m a person who likes to be punctual. I get very frustrated when I’m not punctual, when I am in some way delayed. So patience for me is not the kind of quality which always endears itself. Patience carries the idea of passiveness. You can’t do anything, so you just wait. You’re locked up waiting.

But the word which Paul uses here for patience does not convey the idea of passivity. It carries the idea of being as active as possible, enduring as much as possible, in the midst of very restraining circumstances. Literally, the word which Paul uses means, “to stay behind.” Or it can even mean, “to be underneath.” It is used of Jesus in a physical way in Luke 2:43. Remember when Jesus went to the temple and His parents later had to come and find Him? Luke 2:43 says, “The boy Jesus stayed behind.” The same word that Paul uses in Romans 12:12 is the word here: “stayed behind.” The Lord Jesus endured. Literally, the word carries with it the idea of standing

TOUGH LOVE

Romans 12:12

fast, persevering, remaining under pressure. It can signify, in a figurative sense, courageous resistance, energetic resistance to hostile forces.

In Hebrews 12:1-2, we see how this word is used in a true sense for us as Christians in being patient. The author says, “Let us run [as King James put it] with patience.” Modern translations put it, “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and the finisher of our faith, who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, despised the shame, and is sitting at the right hand of God.” Let us run with perseverance the race.

How do you run a race patiently? You don’t run a race patiently by sitting on the sidelines and watching everyone else run. There is the idea of stamina. You keep going, and you keep going, and you don’t give up. That’s essentially what Paul is saying in regard to tribulation. Don’t get out in the sidelines. Don’t become passive in the sense that patience (in the English) is passive. Don’t just throw in the towel, but keep in the race and keep running. And as you do, look to Jesus—who also had a race to run, and He kept on the track. And even though the cross was set before Him, He endured.

Christ causes us now to begin experiencing the fact that afflictions, the power of them is broken. We know that in heaven, the power of affliction will be broken. The power of tribulation will be no more. But Christ allows us, even now, through the victory of faith and endurance, to break the power of affliction. So a theme Paul has stated earlier in Romans 8 is true for us: “What can separate us from the love of God?” We find as we look at our experience, as we endure, as we persevere, that indeed, nothing can separate us from that love. We’re called to hang in there.

A favorite way I have of describing endurance is when we ask God to remove a burden from us, He can do one of two things. He can take the burden off of our back. Or He can give us strength to carry the burden. The way the word “endurance” is used is that kind of strength which God

TOUGH LOVE

Romans 12:12

gives when a burden is not lifted, and we're given the strength to carry it on down the road. Paul says in tribulation, endure. Persevere.

But that's not the only way to get a handle on trouble.

II. If we move backward in the verse, we find Paul is saying, "Rejoice in hope."

It would be terrible to run a race if there was no object to the running of the race. If it were all just nothing and you were going to have to keep on the track eternally, running around lap after lap after lap. There is a prize at the end. It is the hope of our calling in Christ Jesus. Paul is saying to us, by using the words "rejoice in hope," we're to do more than set our teeth and grit them and go through difficulty.

More than that, he says in Romans 5:3, we are to rejoice in our sufferings. We're to rejoice, as well, in our hope. I would submit to you that the way we use "hope" as a word, it has a very vague quality to it. Like, for example, a person may say, "I hope I get a good grade." Maybe hope in that way is simply a wish. Because there's no substantial evidence that the hope is going to be realized. Or a young person may say, "I hope she likes me." Or, "I hope he likes me." That may too, unfortunately, often be a wish. But if I say, "I hope the night will come," there's a relatively reasonable standard of assurance that unless someone detonates the universe today by about six o'clock tonight, the night will come. All I've got to do is keep on the track until the night comes. "I hope the night will come." It's coming. Or when I say, "I hope Christmas will come." There's no way the year is going to not have Christmas. We're going to either celebrate it on earth, or we're going to celebrate it in heaven. But when I say, "I hope Christmas will come," that's just certain reality.

Our hope in Christ is this way. It is a reality. When we say that we rejoice in hope, it doesn't mean that sometime in the by-and-by we really hope that all of this we've been reading about in

TOUGH LOVE

Romans 12:12

Scripture is true. We don't wish that it's a great story that works out. But it's a solid thing that is assured to us. Jesus is risen from the dead, and He has guaranteed it.

Jesus puts it in this kind of a fashion. He describes the process of childbirth in reference to tribulation and hope. He says, "When a woman is in travail [And that word "travail" there is this word "tribulation"] she has sorrow because her hour has come. But when she is delivered of the child she no longer remembers the anguish, but the joy that a child is born into the world" (John 16:21). You mothers have had that experience. If you're going into childbirth and there's no hope of the baby being born or you coming through, you could not ignore that experience. But knowing that the child is being born, knowing that you're going to come through it makes it possible for you to endure it for the hope of looking into the face of that little baby boy or girl, and, for the first time, welcoming them into the world. It's a great hope. Jesus says that's the way our faith is. It is hope.

Our hope as Christians is similar to having a seed catalogue in the wintertime—giving us a powerful vision of what spring and summer will feel like. Paul says rejoice in hope. The many afflictions, tribulations—in and of themselves, we cannot rejoice in them. We rejoice in what waits. God's purposes are being worked out. There is going to come a moment when all tears are wiped away.

So this admonition: Remember the glory, remember the goal that is set before you, endure, don't drop out, keep going. And rejoice in hope. Know that God has a brighter day, that the rainbow attends the storm.

III. Then Paul says, "Be constant in prayer."

Another way to get through trouble is be constant in prayer. The word "constant" here means "to stay by, to persist at, to remain with." It's used to describe a boat. In Jesus' ministry—again, the reference to Mark 3:9—the crush around Jesus was so great that He told the disciples to have a

TOUGH LOVE

Romans 12:12

boat ready for Him. The word that is used to have the boat ready is the same word used here in Romans 12:12 as “constant.” To have a boat ready means as Jesus is on the shore side teaching and the crush of people are packing against Him, that boat must be following along with Him in case that jam becomes so great He can get into the boat and teach from its prow or bow. It had to be there, easily accessible to Him so He could get into it. Paul is saying this is what we’re to do in regard to our troubles. We’re to keep prayer like a ready boat tied up at the harbor of our life. Not that every moment of our life we are praying. For then we couldn’t do anything else. But to be constantly in prayer means that we get out of this jam by, for a few moments, getting into the boat. Getting into the Lord’s presence and seeing things from His viewpoint, and receiving His comfort.

Like the parable I read this morning of the woman and the unjust judge from Luke 18:1–8.

Recall as I read that she kept badgering the unjust judge. The Lord says, “How much more will the heavenly Father vindicate those who cry out to him?” But notice that vindication in this parable does not come until the end of the age. Because Jesus says, “Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” In other words, some are going to give up.

They’re going to say, “The Lord’s not going to come through.” But the Lord assures us that He’s coming.

One of the main features of prayer that I think we sometimes err on is we regard prayer as going to God with requests and getting answers. Whereas, the Scripture teaches us that prayer basically is getting into the presence of God, of laying hold upon Him and having fellowship with Him. So having a boat ready doesn’t mean we have a boat of answers always there so we can spell them out in A-B-C fashion. Although, thank the Lord, this has indeed happened. God has given us instant answers. But whether the answers come or not, the boat that is tied up in our lives in the harbor of our soul is for the sake of coming to the Lord in prayer.

TOUGH LOVE

Romans 12:12

I thought of a way I could illustrate this. Theologians have a term called realized eschatology. I love that term. Eschatology is the end of the age. It's the study of last things. It's the promise of a new heavens and a new earth, of the kingdom of God in its ultimate sense. Realized eschatology simply is a way of saying that already, in the present, we begin to experience some of the blessings of the future age. It is realized. It is brought from the *then* into the *now*. In this regard, we find, I think, how prayer fits in. By getting into the backbone of our relationship with the Lord, we find that some of the age to come has moved right into our life—and the peace, and the security, and the being able to lean upon the arm of Jesus. He is there.

The way I'd illustrate this is, periodically, I carry a tee in my pocket. I don't want anyone to think I go golfing a lot. At the most, it's about once a week. I love to get out there for about three hours or so and see God's green earth and blue sky. It's funny how if I have one of them in my pocket, I reach in and I put my hand on it, and all of a sudden—even if it's a rainy day, or maybe I'm in the middle of doing something which requires me to stick to it—my mind momentarily slips away to the green grass and God's earth and the beautiful sky. I see myself out there walking and relaxing. This is realized eschatology. It's moving some of the *then* into the *now*. And for a moment, I experience it and assure myself that when the rain is over and the schedule clears and the time allows that moment of acting upon this will come again.

In a very real sense, what we have in our Christian life now is the blessings of the future age are moved into the now. The blessing of being related to God. We begin to taste, in this age, God's blessings. If we neglect being constant in prayer, having the boat ready to get into, to enjoy our relationship with the Lord, it's going to be very difficult to get through trouble. These three things go hand-in-hand: steadfast endurance, rejoicing in hope, being constant in prayer.

In this particular section of Romans that we're in, Romans 12:4–21, seventeen of these eighteen verses on the deepening of the spiritual life find Paul stressing our relationship to other believers.

TOUGH LOVE

Romans 12:12

In only one verse, the verse we looked at today, does he stress the development of inner qualities.

It's striking that in that regard, when we want to think how we can be more spiritual, Paul is telling us throughout the total emphasis of this section, "If you want to be more spiritual-oriented, then behave yourself better towards others in the body.

That's his basic message. But in the midst of this basic message he sinks this one "well" very deep in terms of tapping the resources for developing the spiritual life in trouble. But even here—although we're tapping individual resources of rejoicing in hope, enduring tribulation, and being constant in prayer—even in that kind of a context we're not to go alone. It's our tough love, individually and as a Body, which helps one another. And we're much encouraged, when we look at tribulation, to be with one another and to share with one another our trials. As the Bible says, "Bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). Or, "Confess to one another your faults" (James 5:16). And we receive strength and help by doing that.

As we come to communion this morning we remember that what the Lord asked us to do, He modeled. This is not just good advice. "Who for the joy that was set before him, He endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2). So as we come today and you look at needs in your own life, get in that little boat of prayer which is offered at the harbor of your soul. And in it for a few moments, sit down and talk with the Lord and worship Him. And rejoice in His presence.