

“Possible Defeats/Permanent Victories”

The sun was peeking at a cloudy sky as Easter morning urged the song birds into their familiar tunes. The streets seemed lonely for the rush of traffic which was their usual companion. It was a day to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, but sadness and fear filled our minds and hearts because our child had just died through miscarriage.

For three months we had lived with the hope of our first child, but a nightmare now took the place once held by dreams, and sorrow filled the void left by death's cold hand. Yet present in the midst of this tumbling world of tragedy was the comforting touch of love through the presence of God, and those He sent to strengthen us.

Life experiences can bring us to cruel testing grounds of our faith. Whether we stand or fall the rains and floods will continue to come our way. So, we had better be sure that our house is built upon the “rock” and not the sand.

It has been my experience that the rain does fall on the just and the unjust. Being justified in Christ does not give us freedom from the tragedies of life. It does mean, however, that in Christ God can take those potential defeats and turn them into permanent victories.

In no way is this meant to deny the pain and suffering we all seem to encounter along life's journey. The intent is not to suggest that we can skip our way through life on the joy of Jesus. On the other hand, do not think that the comforting joy of the presence of Jesus cannot overcome the pain of our suffering. Because it can.

Still, it is well that we remember that Jesus not only came as Messiah, but as the suffering Servant. If we are going to love others in the love of Christ then how can we be free from the pain of the suffering in the world? We can not be free from it.

When Jesus came into the world He suffered with us and for us. Not only on the cross, but also as He sought to minister to us in His daily life. Remember the words: "Jesus wept." (John 11:35)

On this Easter morning that is remembered so well, a "Y" in the road of attitudes stood before us. One path of the road led to anger, bitterness, and the rejection of a God that would allow such things to happen.

The other path led to a deeper understanding of suffering. A time when the two of us would grow together because of the pain we shared. It also was an opportunity to learn more about ministering to others in times of sorrow, and an it was an opportunity to learn how to be ministered to by others.

One path led to the possible defeat of the witness of Christ in our life together. The other path led to permanent victory. We chose the road to victory.

By clinging to what we believed to be the truth, we had allowed our values and attitudes, which were based on God's Truth, to control our thoughts and actions. Because of this we learned more about the love and power of God that allowed our love for Him to grow.

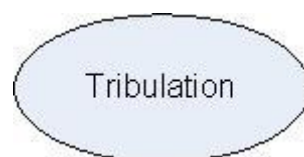
Yes, we cried. Yes, we held one another. Even while writing this a sense of loss remains. The presence of God, however, continues to provide Jesus as the solid rock for our foundation of understanding and strength. There is nothing better upon which to build one's life.

This is just one example of the many times God has upheld me in times of struggle. From experience, it has been proven we can say unequivocally that God allows us to rejoice in triumph during our tribulations as well as our times of happiness.

Perhaps this is why Paul's words in Romans chapter five presents to me a Spiral of growth which turns possible defeats into permanent victories. Let's look at it together.

He starts out by writing about our justification in Christ. The He says, "...and we exult in hope of the glory of God. And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." (Rom. 5:2b – 5)

It shouldn't be necessary to say much about the first part of this growth Spiral. In our own way each one of us probably feels at times like singing the words to the old song, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen."



(Tribulation)

We need to remember that someone does know, and that in the middle of our tribulation God is present to comfort, uplift, and strengthen us. We are not alone.

As God's adopted children we are never alone, for God is always with us. "For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" (Romans 8:15)

This is obviously true since He is within us. "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Corinthians 6:19) Again in 2 Corinthians 6:16 we find, "...For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, 'I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.'"

He has also given to us His ministry through the lives of other followers of Jesus. This is one of the important differences between true followers of Christ, and those who trust in other belief systems.

Those who have not received Christ must face the trials of life with a sense of loneliness within. This may often exist even when friends are there to help. With the presence of Christ filling us, our friends in Christ serve to compliment His ministry within us.

In an offbeat way of thinking, tribulations provide us with opportunities to demonstrate the power of Christ within us. That, however, is not why they occur. Does God cause our tribulations to occur? My opinion is "No".

From my perspective it's about time we quit blaming God for the evil events in this world as a means of trying to cope with our pain and suffering. The world is dominated by the power of Sin, and Satan will seek to destroy anything and anyone at any time that's convenient for his purposes.

This is a part of what happened to Christ on the cross. Through the satanic attempt by mankind to kill the Son of God the opportunity was given for Jesus to prove that God is victor over sin and death. Satan did everything he could through Sin and Death to utterly destroy Jesus.

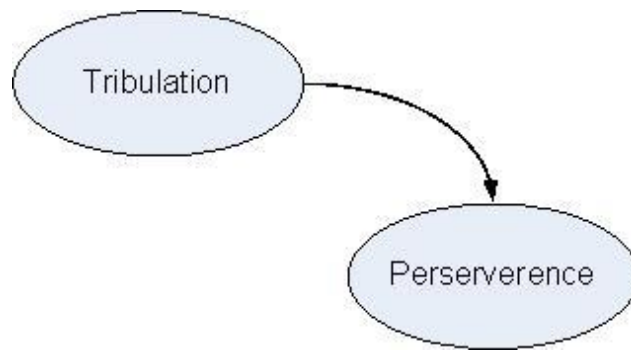
The early church proved the power of the living word through the tribulation of persecution. Did God want His followers to be persecuted? No!

The free will of people was used to choose the lies of Satan as the source of their actions. Thus, the cause for such tragic events were the decisions of people, and they bear the responsibility accordingly. The same reason applies today. Not knowing their motivation was derived from Sin was, and is no excuse.

Whenever a problem arises we too are then confronted with a choice: Will we remain faithful to our Lord and follow His leadership or not? Our life may not hang in the balance as it did for those early followers of Jesus during their persecution by Rome. Still, our potential for growth in Christ and the effectiveness of our witness in Christ will be determined by our choices.

Will we persevere in Christ? Will we remain steadfast and endure life's trials according to God's guidance, and within the power of the Holy Spirit?

Well, the question may rightfully be asked, "How do we persevere?" By trusting in the truth under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and being transformed through faith. By acting on what we know is eternal Truth, and being obedient to the Spirit under the Lordship of Jesus we will be living out the will of God.



(Perseverance)

"Yes," you say, "but when troubles comes I try to do the right thing, but even though I know what is right I find myself doing what is wrong."

Some people suffer this failure because they follow old patterns of thought and action, which can be overcome by the renewing of their mind in Christ. This means they attempt to manage their own circumstances, along with the thoughts and the emotions that arise as a result.

When they seem incapable of managing these things successfully, then they seek God's help. Do we realize that results in us trusting ourselves first, and leaving God out of our struggles until we know we need His assistance? What does seeking God first mean?

If these old patterns exist strongly enough within us to influence our thinking and actions then we must overcome them through Christ centered obedience. We need to stop making excuses for ourselves and face the fact that our choices are the reason for our weakness.

In earlier chapters we considered how to avoid this pitfall by growing within our relationship with God. Jesus always gives us the best God has for us within all circumstances. He will never

withhold His best from us. We can easily see the problem by looking in a mirror. Then we need to ask the Holy Spirit to lead us, and obey.

Ideally, we will obey God because we love Him. If we are weak then it is a sign that our love for God is weak. To love God more we must give more of our life to Him by including Him in everything we think and do (time), so we can get to know Him better (knowledge), so we can trust Him more (trust).

The problem is that we act like we are slaves to sin rather than righteousness. We would rather do what we want than what God wants for us. Even if what He wants for us is better than what we desire for ourselves.

How do we break this pattern? We must obey through Christ centered love. Perhaps we must begin by being more disciplined about our thoughts and behaviors. This is a short-term fix, however, because self-forced discipline, again, is like trying to dam up the water in the gutter on a rainy day.

God will give us the desire to be obedient through the impetus of the Holy Spirit. We need to respond to this gift from Him and finally say yes.

Many things which are worth may initially require discipline to some degree while our love of God grows within us. Through this love we will learn to be obedient because we desire God's best for us, rather than some other end result.

In Christ centered obedience we act upon the trust in God we have been given through perseverance. This helps us know better what God wants for us, and we obey even though it may differ from what we think we desire due to old thought patterns.

In this way we will slowly discover that our faith will be rewarded with a greater willingness to obey because we learn God will not fail us. This will not work if our motivation is to test God, but if we act out of a desire to please God then positive growth will be the result.

When we obey in this way we are allowing God to strengthen us. This does not mean that we are becoming strong in a stoic sense, rather in our ability to be obedient out of our love of God.

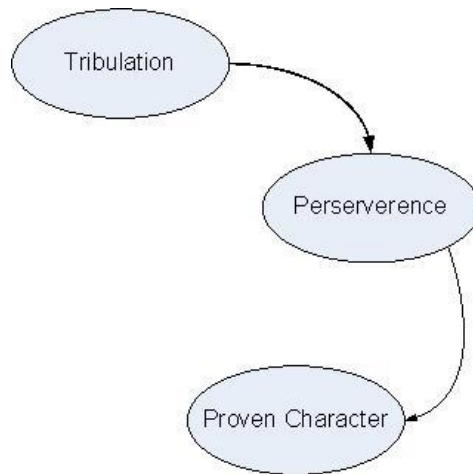
It is important that we be careful during times of trouble because such times can be our weakest moments. It seems with every opportunity to obey there comes at least an equal opportunity to disobey.

Perhaps it just seems this way because the desire to be disobedient comes from the things we have learned to trust while growing up. So, the power of such persuasion is directly linked to our desire to control our own life, and likely such thinking is what we've learned the most about.

James gives us some insight about how this happens. “But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.” (James 1:14, 15)

He also has some potent words about endurance. “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4)

So, we see that by persevering in obedience during times of tribulation we grow in our maturity in Christ. This is what Paul refers to in Romans 5:1-5 as “proven character.” No one wants these “trials” in their life, but if they come then let us exult in them because we can grow in Christ and prove to the world what it means to face life as a follower of Jesus.



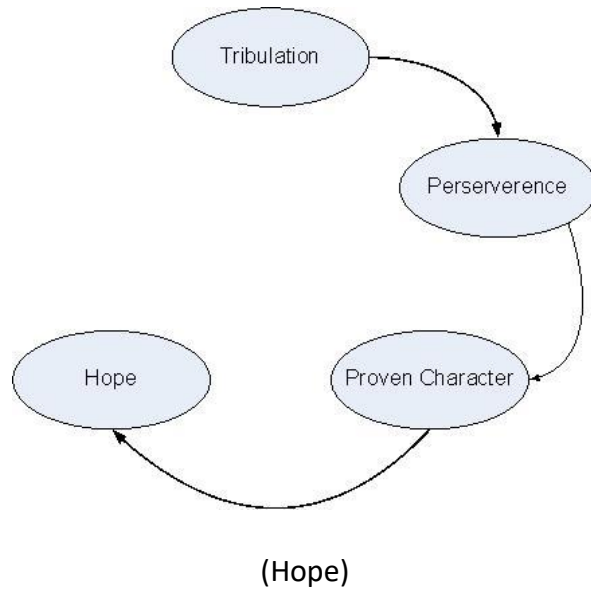
(Proven Character)

“Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in Heaven.” (Matthew 5:16)

When we allow the power of God to move through us in faithfulness to Him, it not only proves His loving power to others, but it also gives us a greater hope in Christ.

It may be similar to the experience some people have when they try to read the Bible. They know they should read it. They even know that they need to read it, but they are afraid that they will not be able to understand it.

Granted, at times it can be very much a struggle. In fact, there is much of the Bible we may never understand, but if we seek the Truth God has for us within the scriptures then we will discover that He will help us understand. This takes time. Slowly we become more skilled in our understanding, and new doors of knowledge are opened wide.

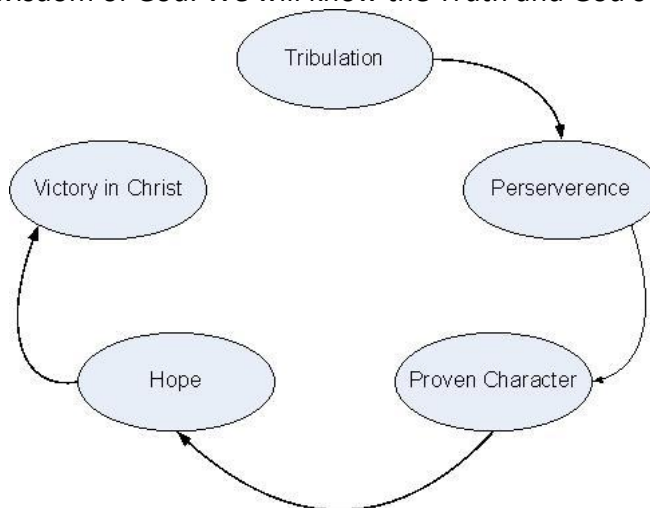


This in turn gives us hope for understanding the scriptures better the next time we read them seeking the teaching of the Holy Spirit.

The hope we have in Christ concerning victory over tribulation builds in the same way. It is not something that we “hope” will happen with a big question mark inside of our hearts. It is the “hope” we have within or trust of God, which provides our assurance in Jesus Christ that He will empower us, and if we obey Him the victory is surely ours.

This glorious Truth can become so real within us, and make so much sense to us that we can honestly say that the victory in Christ is ours already. Even before we have fully experienced that victory.

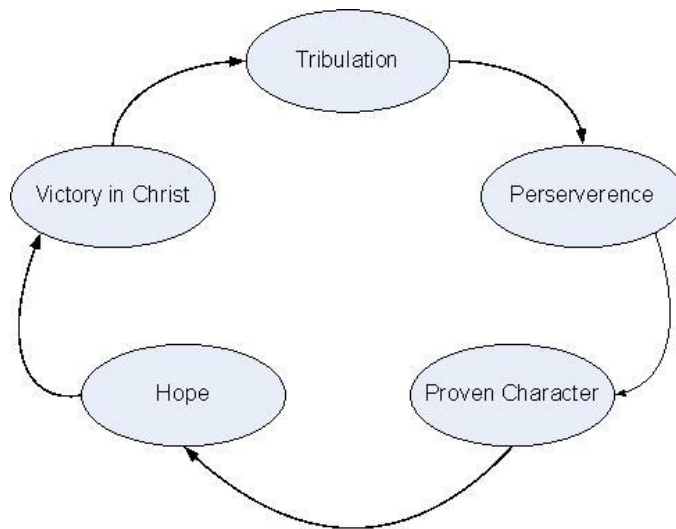
If this seems ridiculous, please remember that God operates in ways that are contrary to our worldly knowledge. Our ways are not His ways. Let go of our self-declared wisdom and discover the eternal wisdom of God. We will know the Truth and God’s Truth will set us free!



(Victory in Christ)

In this way the Spiral becomes complete because a victory over tribulation at one time in our life strengthens us for the next. The key to all of this is found in the last part of verse five where Paul answers an important question.

Why does this Spiral work? "...because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." God gives us the desire. He has given us this gift in Jesus Christ, our lord.



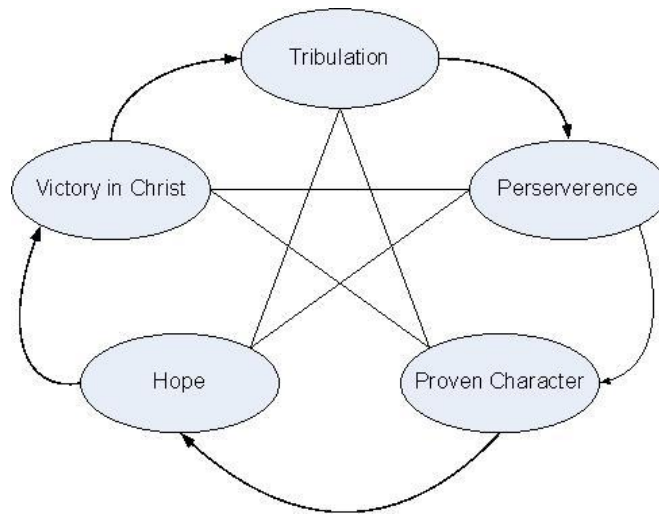
(Completes the Spiral)

Remember that Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

"Just as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in His love." (John 15: 9, 10)

The Spiral works because it is God's will for our life. He does not want any part of our freedom in Christ to be temporarily robbed from us by the tribulations of life. We have chosen to allow sin to exist in the world because we are all willing participants. God has provided a way to bring good results out of a sinful situation because He loves us, and it is love that will help us to follow His will.

From God's perspective each of the parts of the Spiral represent victory and their interactive quality move us toward a victorious life in Christ. As the Spiral repeats through each tribulation resulting in our victory in Jesus, there is synergistic growth, not only step-by-step growth in Christ.



(Interactive and Iterative Growth)

Each Spiral builds upon the other with the various parts of one Spiral helping the progression of growth created by the parts of another. Next we will try to discover how these Spirals work together, culminating in the most important results as we mature within our relationship with God in Christ Jesus.