

## Biblical Purposes for Conflict

Over several weeks we have explored the fact that conflict is a 'given' in a fallen world. However, not just because of our fallenness, because we also discovered was that conflict actually started in the idyllic setting of the Garden of Eden and instigated by Satan's deception of Adam and Eve. Now, what that tells us, is that conflict is as much to do with our creaturely embodiment as it is with our fallenness.

In reality, our fallenness has everything to do with Adam and Eve's wrong handling of an intentional learning opportunity that God had allowed to happen in order for them to discover more about the relationship their Creator had brought them into.

We described conflict as: Clashes of interests, of values, of actions, or planned directions, often simply residing in human differences.

We also saw that Jesus said:

*In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*  
(Jn 16:33)

This sounds like a whole variety of conflicts to me!!!

Paul understands this 'conflicted' dynamic that Jesus is referring to very well indeed. He specifically expands on in his letter to the Romans – let's look at it in Rom 5:1-5

*<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup>through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.* Rom 5:1-2

Notice that Paul starts with the short version of what he has been discussing in the previous four chapters. It's a bold statement of faith of what Jesus has done for us, and the status he has secured for us as ones who are now standing in the Sonshine of God's grace, and the amazing future that awaits us as we enter into God's glory.

But suddenly, there is a dramatic shift of gears!!! – Why??? Let's take a look:

<sup>3</sup> ***Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings***, - this seems to be a really surprising turn in Paul's discussion here – we are supposed to glory in our sufferings????

We need to unpack this a bit more to get our heads around the way he is thinking!

The Greek word he uses here for 'suffering' is *thlipsis* - some translations say 'persecutions', others 'tribulations', or 'afflictions', or 'trials', or 'troubles' – it's the same word that Jesus used in Jn 16:33 – *thlipsis* – primarily means 'pressure' - typically, external pressures which often create their own internal pressures, so it has a wide range of potential meanings.

### **Some examples:**

2Cor 8:13 - the pressures of financial burdens and expectations

Matt 13:21 - the pressures and challenges of living as a Christian in a fallen world

Jam 1:27 - the practical and emotional vulnerabilities faced by orphans and widows

1Cor 7:28 - the pressures and challenges of marriage and family life

Jn 16:21 - A woman in child-birth - she forgets her anguish because of the joy of her child.

So what Paul is referring to here are the struggles, the challenges, the difficulties, the problems, the conflicts, and sometimes even the persecutions that we all face as limited and dependent creatures in our God-created, but limited, physical and fallen world – these ‘pressures’ simply become part of our discipleship.

Here now comes the reason why we need to learn how to cope well with these pressures of life that result from our limited creaturely embodiment –

***<sup>3b</sup>because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup>perseverance, character; and character, hope.***

***suffering produces*** - these pressures, that are simply part of everyday life, are actually working for us – they are producing something in us that nothing else can as we respond to them in faith. They are actually working for us – they are part of the plan!

Paul suggests three things that these challenges, and struggles, and difficulties produce:

- **Perseverance** - the ability to stand up under pressure; to bounce back – resilience.
- **Character** - proof of genuineness through testing – becoming one who is tried and true.
- **Hope** - the confident expectation of God’s faithfulness to his promise through the continual experiences of God’s presence and provisions in our daily lives.

### **The Apostle Paul’s Practical Personal Experience**

The Apostle Paul found himself in a situation, which to natural thinking was a totally hopeless one. This is one of the most exciting, action-packed narratives in all the New Testament. Let me paint the picture so we can all grasp the reality of the game-changing power of perseverance, character and hope (Acts 27:13-44).

Luke, the writer of Acts, was there, and is giving a first-hand account of what happened. Paul was a prisoner of the Roman Empire, and having previously appealed to Caesar, was being taken by ship to Rome by an armed guard of soldiers under the command of a centurion named Julius from Caesar’s crack Imperial Regiment. We are told that there were

a total of 276 people on board the ship, so this no little row-boat, and Paul, as a prisoner, was on the lowest social rung of the ladder of everyone on that boat, nonetheless, the centurion clearly held Paul in high regard.

This becomes clear when we realise that Paul is included in a discussion between the ship's owner, the harbour pilot, the centurion and would you believe it, Paul the prisoner. There was conflict as to the best way to move forward, and Paul's suggestion was:

*"Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also" (Acts 27:10).*

But the centurion sided with the boat's captain and the harbour pilot, and they set sail with a gentle breeze. But in no time cyclonic-like conditions arose and the captain was forced to simply allow the ship to be driven by the wild winds. The situation became desperate:

*<sup>20</sup> When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved (Acts 27:20). (For fourteen days and nights)*

The turning point comes when Paul had an encounter with an angel from God, who spoke God's word to him, resulting in his unshakeable faith in God, which empowered him to speak life and hope into a seemingly hopeless situation.

*<sup>21</sup> After they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. <sup>22</sup> But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. <sup>23</sup> Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me <sup>24</sup> and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' <sup>25</sup> So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. <sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island."*

(Acts 27:21-29)

*<sup>33</sup> Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food—you haven't eaten anything. <sup>34</sup> Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head." <sup>35</sup> After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. <sup>36</sup> They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. (Acts 27:33-36)*

They did run around on a little island – all were saved!!!

Paul used the difficulties and pressures of that harrowing experience through God's grace and empowerment to become the less anxious presence to a boatload of people as an expression of perseverance, character, and hope!!!

Paul's experience give us a graphic picture as to why we need to learn how to 'rejoice in our sufferings' – in the pressures of life that will always come our way because they work the intangible strengths of perseverance, character, and hope for God's better future into our lives!!!

This is the journey of our discipleship with Jesus!!!