

Flourishing in the Valley

Bible Study, Lt. Amy Lewis

In our Christian walk I have heard the path we travel as we navigate life described as having mountain tops and valleys. Mountain tops are when everything is going well - we have that "top of the world" feeling. Our valleys are seen as our low points in life, when things are hard, and we feel separated from God. I can relate to these feelings as I look back over my life, but I am not quite sure that we look at them with the right perspective.

Let's Pray

When I think of hills and valleys in nature, a couple of things come to mind. In the ocean, the hill tops are warmer safer places nearer to the surface, but valleys are often dark and cold, where the large dangerous creatures live. Contrary to this when I think of mountain tops and valleys when it comes to hiking, they take on a completely different meaning. Mountain tops are usually barren. Trees and vegetation become more and more sparse the higher you go, and you can often find yourself exposed to the elements on a mountaintop. Valleys, on the other hand, are an area where thriving vegetation and wildlife can be found. Streams and rivers flow through the valley, and trees provide shade and protection. Often, abundant growth is found in the valley.

Scripture is a funny thing. The words never change, but our application of a scripture can change over time. For example, Psalm 19:14 "May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord my Rock and Redeemer." Originally, this scripture is what I used to clean up the language I spoke and to help me turn my heart to line up with God's heart. Now, its meaning has taken on a new depth of aligning my heart with God so the words I say are pleasing to Him.

Early on I was drawn to Romans 5:3-5 “³ Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” I could relate to this scripture because of my struggles with alcoholism and addiction, and all that a life such as that entails. I felt that this scripture gave validity to the struggles that I experienced that eventually drew me to the place of complete surrender, and it then pointed me to the hope that comes from that surrender.

- Take a moment to think about your walk of faith
- Can you see your high points and low points?
- Where do you see the most growth as you look back?

In our culture we seem to believe that growth is a straight line traveling in an upward direction on a graph. But if we look at our lives, isn’t it really just more of a trail of twists and turns, ups and downs, steps forwards and backwards, moving in a general direction of growth?

In studying the passage, Romans 5:3-5, it is important to start at the beginning of the chapter with verses 1 – 2, which build the foundation for verses 3-5.

Read Romans 5:1-2

- What is Paul revealing in these verses about the believer’s relationship with God?
 - The nature of justification comes through faith, and He is assuming that the reader has responded in faith to the good news. This isn’t a call to believe and be saved.

- What does “have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” mean from Romans 5:1?
 - We are either God’s child or God’s enemy, it is through our Lord Jesus Christ that we are no longer at war with God. We are at peace with God, no longer living in fear of judgement. God is no longer behind the veil; we have access to Him.
- Do you live your life knowing that you are at peace with God?
- Do you realize the free access that you have?
- Do you use it?
- Are you living your life based on the hope that is the promise of our future in glory?
- I challenge you to examine your life, where are you at this point? Do you know these things more than just to read them on the page? Do you live it out in your life? Are you living in a way that shows you truly know, accept, and believe these to be true?

Read Romans 5:3-5

The audience Paul was writing this letter to would certainly understand suffering. During this time, as people became believers there was an almost immediate backlash from those around them and Paul understood what it meant to suffer for the faith. In this country today we do not face the same suffering or threats for our faith, but in many parts of the world this is still true.

- What does this passage challenge us to do?

As God’s children we begin to recognize that the path of our trials, when traveled with perseverance, improves our character. The beauty of this suffering, and where the rejoicing comes in, is that it draws us closer to Christ. There is not any suffering that can separate us from Christ, and in our suffering, we become more like Him. Our suffering helps us to remove that which we don’t need from our lives, to draw closer to Christ.

We do need to be careful when we are going through trials, tribulations or suffering, not to question if God's love for us is real. None of these negate the power and completeness of His love for us, His children through Christ. God is using these times to strengthen our character and deepen our trust in God, giving us greater confidence of the future with Him. Another caution is not to mope about, bragging about our suffering. We are to draw closer to God, rejoicing in Him and thanking Him for the opportunity to grow each day through the annoyances and frustrations that come our way. God is good, and He is the source of the strength we need to face each struggle.

We are to rely on God to guide us through our times of struggle. We are to accept His love and guidance for us, knowing that He loves us. How we live out our struggles will also be a witness to others of the power that Christ has in our lives. Our ability to respond differently, allowing dead growth to be pruned gives new growth an opportunity to occur. Our challenges, struggles, difficulties, or sufferings and the way in which we manage them, will show others that we belong to Christ. This is the biggest challenge for all Christians. We need to take steps to make sure that our words, actions, and characteristics draw others to Christ, and we don't become a deterrent or a stumbling block for someone else.

- Looking back over your life, can you see the valleys?
- Can you see how God has used them to prune the dead growth from your life?
- What are ways that you can live this out in your life?
- What is a way you can commit to living this out in your life this week?