

HOW FAMILIES WORK (SOMETIMES)
Developing Your Family's Coping Skills

Romans 5:1-5

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/developing-your-familys-coping-skills/>

I have a friend, a licensed therapist, who worked several years as a counselor to students at a prestigious liberal arts college on the East Coast. She said she was appalled that many young adults were arriving on campus with money, attitude and lots of privilege, but without the ability to cope with disappointment or failure. Mark it down. If you are a family of one or twelve, you will eventually face tribulation of some kind: divorce, financial setback, joblessness, infidelity, children having trouble at school, run-ins with the law, domestic violence, sexual abuse, mental illness, physical illness, car accidents, death of loved ones.

It's time we who follow Jesus reminded one another that science and technology can't fix everything in our lives. And that reason and logic cannot explain all that's wrong. We need to hear from God.

Of course, coping skills begin with a sure foundation. In Romans chapters 1-4, the Apostle Paul has just relentlessly described the power of sin (not "sins," but "sin," our human condition). It is our rebellion against God. He then shows us that peace with God means that when we turn to Christ, the rebellion is over and we are in a direct relationship with God. "We have peace with God" (v. 1). Do you hear that? Present tense. Sometimes, parents make sure their children have food, shelter and education but forget about showing their children friendship with God. Verse 2 says we "have obtained access to this grace."

A few weeks ago, I was attending a funeral at FBC Sedalia, where I served for 12 years. Before the funeral, I sent my kids a picture of the space that used to be my office. Joel replied that he remembered, as a small boy, sitting beside my desk, drawing. And then I remembered. I had a rule which my secretary understood. Unless I was in a meeting, my children could come in any time. They had access!

The Greek word for access was also used in Paul's day to describe the place where ships came into harbor, a haven in the storm. Think of the storms your family experiences. God's grace in Christ provide you safe harbor in those storms.

Yes, Paul is upfront and realistic about the hardships of life, but tribulation is one thing mentioned among all these gifts from God: peace, access, grace, love, hope. This is why we need to practice gratitude, giving of thanks, in our family settings. Thanksgiving puts our heartaches in perspective. Yes, suffering comes, but it never comes alone. It comes in a context of God's grace and care.

Families (children, adults) need to learn not to waste our troubles. Listen to vv. 3-4. Suffering (tribulation) is the word that meant pressure, as in the pressure of squeezing the grapes, so that the rich liquid might be released. Character was the word used to purify metal, as it passed through the fire to cleanse it. So our heartaches help us in this life, by maturing us.

As Paul makes clear, we don't get to choose our suffering; we DO get to choose our response to it. At a golden wedding anniversary celebration one time, the husband was toasting his bride of 50 years. He said, "Bess, you've been with me during drought, during the flood, when the tornado hit the barn and when fire destroyed the milk shed. Come to think of it, Bess, you're just plain bad luck!" Think about this for a moment. When we turn inward with our tribulation, we become brooding. When we turn outward with it, we become bitter. And when we turn on each other in the family, we become backbiting and quarrelsome.

Then Paul says that tribulation can not only lead to maturity in this life, but to future glory in the life to come (v. 5). Hope! How about giving our children an anchor to their lives stronger than soccer, dance lessons and good grades? Stronger than money, success, status? I love v. 5 because it reminds us that one of the Holy Spirit's distinct jobs is continually pouring God's love into our hearts (the verb is perfect tense, meaning an action that has continuous results). The Triune God, holding us in our all our trials! Let's face it. Even in the best families, the love and hope we experience will be sporadic, flawed, unsteady. But God's grace in Christ, His love and hope are secure and permanent. As *The Message* says in v. 5, "We're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary--we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit."