

FORWARD

Week Three | January 21, 2018 | Moving Forward in Our Character, Part 1

PREPARATION

GETTING READY:

Before your group meets next time, spend some time alone in God's Word reading through Romans 5:1–4, 8:28–30, and Hebrews 12:3–11. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truths of this text and how it applies to your life.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God moves us through all of life's circumstances, including suffering and discipline, to make our character more like Christ's.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

When we view life's circumstances as punishment for our sins instead of opportunities for character growth, we miss what God is doing in us and His ultimate purpose for our lives, to make us more like Jesus.

MEDITATE

"We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." (Romans 5:3–4)

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

Q: *Why is it difficult to see changes in our character on a daily basis? How is this similar to the experience of staring at a tree, waiting for it to bear fruit?*

Q: *Think of the seasons of your life when God deeply developed your character. Describe the season of life you were in.*

A well-known story about character development goes like this:

“A man once bought a home with a tree in the backyard. It was winter, and nothing marked this tree as different from any other tree. When spring came, the tree grew leaves and tiny pink buds. ‘How wonderful,’ thought the man. ‘A flower tree! I will enjoy its beauty all summer.’ But before he had time to enjoy the flowers, the wind began to blow and soon all the petals were strewn in the yard. ‘What a mess,’ he thought. ‘This tree isn’t any use after all.’ The summer passed, and one day the man noticed the tree was full of green fruit the size of large nuts. He picked one and took a bite. ‘Blah!’ he cried, and threw it to the ground. ‘What a horrible taste! This tree is worthless. Its flowers are so fragile the wind blows them away, and its fruit is terrible and bitter. When winter comes, I’m cutting it down.’ But the tree took no notice of the man and continued to draw water from the ground and warmth from the sun and in late fall produced crisp red apples. Some of us see Christians with their early blossoms of happiness and think they should be that way forever. Or we see bitterness in their lives, and we’re sure they will never bear the better fruit of joy. Could it be that we forget some of the best fruit ripens late?”

— from *Hope and Glory*, Sam Gordon

Just like this man with the apple tree, many of us endure various seasons of life, wondering what in the world God is up to. How could anything good be developing in us during times of suffering or hardship? How could He use every season to bear the good fruit of character in us?

Whether we find ourselves in the coldest of winters or in the not-quite-ripe days of spring, the passages we study this week will show us some amazing promises. We will see that God is working in us all the while, moving our character forward to look more like Christ. As we study this week’s Scripture, we will learn that God can use any circumstance or season to bear the fruit of Christlikeness in our hearts and minds. In our earthly perspective, the season we are in may look like dead leaves or taste like bitter kernels. But God is developing us at just the right pace, using every season to do it, until one day we will look just like Christ in glory.

Q: *Share about a time God used a “cold” or “wintery” season to make you more like Jesus.*

Q: *Can you think of any biblical stories where God used both horrible and wonderful circumstances to develop a person’s character?*

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Last week we saw that God gets us through difficult circumstances. This week will show us that He doesn’t just move us through them, He actually produces something good in us as we go. There is not just survival on the other side of hardship, but fruit, the fruit of good character! In Romans 5:1–4, Hebrews 12:3–11, and Romans 8:28–30, we will see that God’s people don’t just make it through the various ups and downs of life, they are different people on the other side of it. God moves us forward in each situation, and He moves our character forward as we go. We will note three things that move our character forward as we seek to be more like Christ.

- 1. GOD MOVES OUR CHARACTER FORWARD IN SUFFERING**
- 2. GOD MOVES OUR CHARACTER FORWARD IN DISCIPLINE**
- 3. GOD MOVES OUR CHARACTER FORWARD IN ALL THINGS**

GOING DEEPER

+ *This next section will help show what God’s Word says about this week’s particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week’s biblical truth.*

GOD MOVES OUR CHARACTER FORWARD IN SUFFERING

■ ROMANS 5:1–4

Q: *How do non-Christians view seasons of setbacks or suffering, as moving forward in life or backward? How has this type of thinking impacted you?*

Q: *Why do you think it's difficult to believe God is actively working in our lives during dark seasons?*

In this part of his letter, Paul tells the Romans about all the wonderful joys of being a Christian. First, being a believer means we are justified, declared righteous by God because of Christ's work on our behalf. Next, being justified means we have peace with God. We aren't at war with Him as His enemies. Instead, we are now His children.

Because we are no longer at war with Him, Paul then tells us we should view times of suffering as times to rejoice. Why? Because they are not forms of punishment or anger, but places where God is working on our character! As believers justified by Christ and at peace with our Father, we can move forward in life, believing that any form of discouragement or suffering is not God paying us back for our sin. Christ took that sin-payback for us, so we no longer have to fear God's wrath or punishment (Romans 5:9; 1 John 4:18). Now, as we endure suffering, we can trust that God is lovingly moving us through it, developing our character the whole time.

And God is not developing our character in an arbitrary way. He is forming our character into a very particular mold, the mold of Christ! While non-believers conform more and more to the world during hard times, Christians are able to become more and more like Christ instead, provided they cooperate with God's purposes and seek to look like Him (Romans 12:2; Colossians 3:10). As we endure various seasons of suffering, God makes our character more like Christ, who endured suffering with joy (Hebrews 12:2). Our character was always meant to look like Christ's character, and God uses our seasons of distress and sorrow to do just that.

Knowing this, we can rejoice. No season of pain is without purpose. There is no such thing as pointless suffering for the Christian! Even in the darkest times, God is always working to make us more like Christ. When we get through seasons of suffering, we won't have just survived, we will be more like Jesus because of God's work in our hearts the whole time. The world sees seasons of suffering as "moving backward." But believers can rejoice, knowing that dark seasons can move us forward into the image and character of Christ.

Q: *Explain how we'd be unable to look like Christ if we never went through times of suffering.*

Q: *Share about a time that God used a season of hardship to bring you closer to Christ and His character. How did this experience make you more like Jesus?*

Q: *What would be missing from our character if we never went through difficult seasons?*

GOD MOVES OUR CHARACTER FORWARD IN DISCIPLINE

■ ■ HEBREWS 12:3–11

Q: *Do you consider discipline a positive thing, a negative thing, or both? Why?*

Q: *Do you think discipline and punishment are the same thing? Why or why not?*

Q: *What are some things God uses to discipline us, as seen in this passage?*

In this passage, God brings even more clarity to the way He moves our character forward. He tells us that developing our character happens through seasons of not just general suffering, but discipline. As the passage points out, discipline can encompass many things, whether that's receiving hostility from others (v. 3), internally fighting sin (v. 4), or being reproved by God for times we disobey Him (v. 5). Again, discipline is not the same thing as punishment. Christ has absorbed all the divine punishment for our sin. Though God does not require us to pay for our sins, He does allow for the natural and earthly consequences of our sins to unfold, helping us realize the dangers and effects of disobedience. When we brazenly touch the white-hot stovetop against His instructions, so to speak, He wants us to sometimes feel its heat—not to punish us, but to teach us not to do it again.

As we submit to God's discipline in our lives, whether positive disciplines (like spiritual practices we build into our lives) or negative disciplines (like enduring the consequences for our wrong choices), God promises we will be rewarded. And the reward isn't random; it's specific. We will be rewarded with "the fruit of righteousness" in our character. This purposefully conjures up the idea of fruitfulness after long seasons of growth. It takes a while for fruit to grow, but once it's ready, the harvest is bountiful and beautiful. However, "the fruit of righteousness" is described as "peaceable fruit," the outward effect of divine chastening (v. 11).

God wants us to see seasons of discipline that way. Though discipline feels painstakingly slow and uncomfortable, it

always produces the fruit of Christlike character in us on the other side. The Bible names this fruit love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22–23). In all these ways, we are promised our character will look like Jesus on the other side of discipline. Again, just as in our times of suffering, God assures us we won't just survive seasons of discipline, but we will be better people on the other side of it, people whose character looks like Christ's.

❧: *Does the world around us consider character a good reward? What would the world rather have as a reward for hard seasons? Why should Christians see things differently?*

❧: *Share about a time when God let the natural consequences of your sin take effect. How did this make you more like Jesus in the end?*

❧: *Compared to your first day as a Christian, in what ways can you see an increase in the “fruit” of Christ's character in your own heart?*

GOD MOVES OUR CHARACTER FORWARD IN ALL THINGS

❧ ROMANS 8:28–30

❧: *Explain how this passage relates to the other passages we've studied so far.*

❧: *Who is this promise given to? Why does that matter?*

❧: *What do you think God's “purpose” is in this passage?*

While God certainly uses hardships like suffering and discipline to move our character forward, Romans 8 teaches us that the Lord is not limited in what He can use to develop us. In fact, God can use any circumstance for the good of our hearts—the bad, the good, and everything in between. In this passage, we see that God uses “all things” for our good, but who is “our” and how is “our good” defined?

First, this passage tells us that this promise only applies to a certain group of people, those who “love God.” The verses go on to tell us that those who love God are those who God has chosen and called to salvation, has justified upon their conversion, is sanctifying presently, and who will one day be glorified in perfection (both bodily and morally), just like Christ is! In other words, the “our” in this passage refers Christians who are becoming more like Christ now and will one day be fully like Christ in the resurrection.

What does God mean when He says He works all things for our “good.” How does God define what’s “good” for us? Verse 29 tells us point blank—“to be conformed to the image of his Son.” In other words, “good” in God’s eyes means our character becoming more like Christ’s character! So there we have it. God is working all things together—every hardship, every joy, every surprise, and every sorrow—to move our character forward into the very character of our Savior. As we look to Him daily, trusting Him to do this, He will change us little by little into the kind of Christians we should be (2 Corinthians 3:17–18), those who look like Jesus in heart and mind, and one day even in glorified body. We can take heart that God is committed to moving our character forward, using every life experience we face along the way to do His work in us.

- Q: *Share about a time God used a season of joy to make you more like Christ in your character.*
- Q: *What situations in your life do you usually doubt God could use to conform you into the image of His Son? Why do you consider these situations “off limits” for God to use for your good?*

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God’s Word to your daily life. Process how what you’ve learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

- Q: *How can you better respond to suffering happening in your life right now, seeing it as a way God is shaping your character instead of as punishment?*
- Q: *What kinds of discipline are you resisting in this season, whether positive or negative, that God might be using to move you forward in your character?*

Q: *When do you usually forget that God is working on your character? What changes can you put in place to stop and remind yourself that God is using “all things” to make you more like Jesus?*

Q: *Who in your life has shown great strides in their character development? How can you encourage this person this week in the ways God has grown them?*

PRAY

+ *Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.*

- God, give me eyes to see suffering as an opportunity for You to move me forward in my character instead of as punishment for sins that Jesus has already paid for.
- God, help me submit to seasons of discipline You have for me. Give me the strength to trust that You use these seasons to make me more like Christ.
- God, remind me often that You are using every circumstance in my life to develop my faith and my character. Do not let me hold any area of my life as “off limits” for Your hands to work.
- God, show me a person You've been developing that You'd like me to encourage.

COMMENTARY

ROMANS 5:2 The “grace in which we stand” refers to our secure and eternal position with God through the justification Christ accomplished for us. Now that we are made right with God and have become His children, nothing can take that status away from us. The “hope of the glory of God” refers to the promise that Christians will be glorified and perfected at the last day, a hope that results in joy.

ROMANS 5:3–4 It's important to note that we should rejoice in present trials and sufferings, not because trials are pleasant or somehow gain us more favor with God, but because they produce a step-by-step transformation that make us more like Christ. This passage does not affirm masochism or self-harm in the pursuit of holiness. It simply offers us the promise that when sufferings come our way, God uses them as a tool for our character development.

HEBREWS 12:3–4 Though these believers are experiencing persecution, the writer makes sure to help them see that they are not martyrs in the way Christ is. Facing suffering in areas of life that are not one’s fault does not mean that one is not sinful in other areas. Believers struggle against persecution, but also against their own sin. Being hurt by the sin of others does not excuse believers from dealing with their own sin too. The author is reminding us we are all a mixture of “sinner” and “sinned against,” and God uses both our suffering and our sin struggles to change our character over time.

HEBREWS 12:5–6 The author refers to Proverbs 3:11–12. In hearing an obvious proverb, Jewish listeners would have understood that the author was instructing them how to face painful tests of life. Since proverbs were generalized forms of wisdom, the listeners would not have tried to fit each specific life circumstance into the author’s instructions. Instead, they would have seen these verses as God’s way of giving them an overarching view of the ups and downs of life as opportunities to bear the fruit of good character as they endure.

ROMANS 8:29 “Foreknew” reaches back to the Old Testament, where the word “know” emphasizes God’s special choice of, or covenantal affection for, His people (Genesis 18:19; Jeremiah 1:5; Amos 3:2). See Romans 11:2, where “foreknew” functions as the contrast to “rejected,” showing that it emphasizes God’s choosing His people (1 Peter 1:2, 20). This is further confirmed by the word “predestined.”¹

**All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes and the NIV Compact Bible Commentary.*

END NOTES

1. Vine, W. E., Unger, M. F., & White, W., Jr. (1996). *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Vol. 2, p. 257). Nashville, TN: T. Nelson.

