

“Responding to Suffering”
Romans 8:18-30
March 5, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

The middle part of this glorious chapter is all about suffering. There is something paradoxical about a chapter being noteworthy both for its statements about the absolute security of God’s children and at the same time saying so much about suffering. We have noted before how this chapter begins with the statement of no condemnation and ends with a lengthy and eloquent statement of no separation from the love of God. Between these two is a section on suffering. The paradox makes perfect sense, though, for it is in the midst of suffering that we need the anchoring effect of knowing that we are completely secure in the love of God.

The topic of suffering was introduced by Paul’s statement in verse 17 that as children of God and heirs of Christ, we both suffer with Jesus and are glorified with him. The path that leads to glory is a path marked by suffering. As a pastor, I have had the privilege and responsibility of walking with many people experiencing terrible suffering. These have included numerous deaths, including those of children and young parents, chronic and debilitating illness, divorces, abusive relationships and much more. And I have witnessed a variety of responses people have had to their suffering. Some have grown angry at God and walked away from the church, while others have experienced a deepening of faith in the midst of great suffering. Still others respond somewhere in the middle, just stoically pushing through while missing the opportunity suffering affords to draw near to God.

One thing that is clear both from my experience and from the teaching of this passage and that of the rest of the Bible is that times of suffering come to us all, though not to the same degree. That is certainly taught clearly in verse 17. The path to glory passes through suffering. Being a follower of Christ does not shield us from suffering. What it does is to give us resources to be able to endure suffering. In these verses, Paul speaks of four responses to suffering.

I. We Consider – v. 18

Paul begins speaking about this by telling us something we should think, indicated by this word “consider.” Other translations say “reckon.” It means to make a mental calculation, and that calculation is **“that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”** Paul would know something about this, because he experienced suffering far greater than anyone I know. He catalogues it in 2 Corinthians

11:24-27. **“Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.”** Paul had also tasted something of our future glory, being once taken up into heaven itself (2 Cor. 12:2). In verse 18 of our text, Paul puts the two on the balance scale—his suffering and his taste of glory. And he says that there is no comparison. The glory is so much greater than the suffering that no comparison is adequate to express the difference. Think of the difference between a small atom and the universe, and even this is an inadequate comparison. The glory is so much better than the suffering, and Paul wants us to take that to heart and remember it.

It is a common part of life to endure a little suffering now for a greater gain later. We endure a little hunger in order to promote the healthy result of keeping our weight in check. The relatively minor pain of exercise yields a valuable health benefit. Or we deal with the pain and disruption of personal conflict in order to preserve and even deepen a relationship. These are sufferings we choose for ourselves by the same logic Paul is urging upon us here. The difference is that the sufferings Paul speaks of are ones that God chooses for us. But we are to accept these with the realization that the God who has sent them knows better than us the weight of glory that awaits at the end of this path of suffering.

Early in my ministry, I would often talk to a man who had suffered more than most in his life. When I would point him to a text like this, he would respond by saying that there is no amount of glory that would ever make his suffering worth that glory. His suffering was in fact significant, though it was nowhere near what Paul reports of his own suffering in the passage quoted earlier. What became evident is that this man had an insufficient grasp of the glory that will be revealed in us. I can't blame him for that, because I think we all have an insufficient grasp of that. So we must take Paul at his word and always remember that no matter how great our suffering, the glory will be incomparably more.

II. We Groan – v. 19-23

The word “groan” appears three times in our text, and its initial mention makes it evident that it is a groaning of intense pain. **“For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now”** (v. 22). I was with my wife during the labor and delivery of all of our children. Though she has a very high level of pain tolerance, labor pains

reduced her to loud moans and groans. Paul here offers creation as an analogy of our situation. When the human race fell into sin through Adam, creation was **“subjected to futility”** (v. 20). The word “futility” is the same word that occurs repeatedly in the book of Ecclesiastes as “vanity.” It evokes a state of always falling short of what it could be. We Alabamians witness the pain and futility of creation in the frequent tornados that roll over our state, or the hurricanes that strike our coast. California vacillates between severe drought and flooding. Earthquakes have devastated many areas, Turkey and Syria most recently. Though we can still see something of the original glory of creation, it is clear that things are not as they should be. The earth is like a severely out of balance wheel on your car. It is off center and shakes horribly.

Like creation, we groan too. This helps answer the “why” of suffering in a general way. We suffer because we are residents of a fallen creation marked by suffering. Complete deliverance from suffering would require that God remove us from this groaning world. If Christians were removed from the world at the moment of their salvation, there would be no church on the earth, and we would be following a path different from that of Jesus. He came into this fallen world to save it from sin, and now he calls us to follow him into suffering for the sake of those who have not yet come to know him.

Two applications of this come to mind. First, as residents of a groaning world, we should expect suffering. Christians get cancer and diabetes just as often as non-Christians. Tornados and floods don’t distinguish between the houses of Christians and non-Christians. Second, it’s okay to groan when such suffering comes to us. It is not required of Christians that we always manage to put on a happy face. Though we groan just like suffering non-Christians, there is a distinction in our suffering, and that brings us to our next point.

III. We Hope – v. 24-25

Just like creation itself, we suffer with hope. Paul says of creation that it **“waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God”** (v. 19). His point is that we are to follow the example of creation and be marked by this same eager longing. The Greek word for “eager longing” is derived from the word for head. It means to “wait with the head raised.” It is the opposite of hanging your head low, of despairing over your circumstances. It’s the look you see on someone’s face who is waiting at the passenger arrival section of an airport when a loved one who has been away for a time is returning. This is a promise of the restoration of creation at the return of Jesus, and it will be simultaneous to our full adoption (v. 23). We have already been adopted (8:15), but the revealing of our sonship still awaits. Until then, creation itself will remain in **“its bondage to corruption”** (v. 21). But when Jesus returns and we enter the full experience of our sonship, with our resurrected and immortal bodies, creation itself will finally realize its grand purpose of testifying to the

glory of God. As the Psalmist writes of that time, **“Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together”** (98:8).

When the Bible speaks of hope, it means something different than a mere wish. It is more like a confident expectation of something yet future. If you invest \$1000 in a one-year bank CD paying 5% interest, you give up the use of those funds for the year with a confident expectation that you will be paid \$50 by the bank at the end of that 12 months, plus the return of your original \$1000. Christian hope is similar but even stronger, because it is based not on the promise of a bank, but on the promise of God. Our salvation was based in hope as we took God at his word that forgiveness comes through the shed blood of Jesus, and now God promises to finish our salvation with the full **“redemption of our bodies”** (v. 23).

Paul applies this in verse 25. **“But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”** If we believe that the future is what God says it is, and if we believe that we have this bright future by God’s grace instead of our own effort, then we can wait on it patiently. But how do we know that we’re going to gain this bright future? Is it possible that we might mess it up? That brings us to our final point.

IV. We Trust – v. 26-30

God is our greatest resource when we must endure suffering, and our need is to trust him. In the concluding verses of our text, Paul gives us two reasons for trusting God: the Spirit of God and the sovereignty of God. The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness by praying **“for us with groanings too deep for words”** (v. 26). The Spirit’s praying is contrasted with ours in its content. Part of our weakness is that we often don’t know what to pray for. Should we pray for healing, for some kind of relief of the suffering, or should we pray for endurance and God’s sanctifying work through the suffering? This is especially the case for those who are suffering and nearing the end of their lives. Many tell the Lord that they want to go home and be with him. In some of those cases, he takes them home, while in others they linger. We just don’t know enough to pray knowledgably. But God does, and he prays for us in the person of the Holy Spirit. He always prays in accordance with the will of God for us, something we are not always able to do because of our weakness.

We shouldn’t leave this point without noting the exalted position of prayer here. While we often go to prayer as a last resort, when nothing else has worked, the Holy Spirit goes there first. It is easy for us to minimize the importance of prayer, but the Holy Spirit never makes that mistake. Further, he prays for his suffering people like a suffering parent whose heart goes out to his children. Note that the Holy Spirit groans too. The God of the universe is so connected to his people that he suffers pain when they are suffering.

The second reason for trusting God is his sovereignty. The well-known verse 28 is a great verse on the sovereignty of God. **“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good.”** The statement that this is true for those who love God should not be read as a condition, but as a statement of fact. This is a promise for all of God’s people, and to be a child of God means that we have at least begun to learn to love God. Though this verse is sometimes used inappropriately to give an easy answer instead of the hard work of listening and entering into another’s pain, we shouldn’t let its misuse lessen its force. Note the force of the phrase “all things.” Does that include sin? Augustine thought it did, as he noted that “even the sins of the saints...advance their salvation.” I think the Bible backs him up on that. Joseph’s brothers sinned when they sold him into slavery, but the sin ended up working for their benefit in the eventual move of the whole family to Egypt. And there is no better illustration of this than the crucifixion of Jesus.

In his sovereignty, God weaves together all the circumstances of our lives to bring about his good purposes for us. He doesn’t promise to work all things out as we might want them to be worked out. Rather, he does so for our sanctification and ultimate glorification. One application of this is to turn our response to bad decisions we may have made from self-condemnation to gratitude to God.

The final few verses here expand on the good that God brings to us and the absolute certainty of his good purposes for us being achieved. It takes us through what theologians refer to as the *ordo salutis*, Latin for the order of salvation. It begins with foreknowledge, and then moves to God’s predestination of his people, then calling, justification and finally glorification. Think of these as different stages of our salvation, but note that God loses none along the way. All those whom he foreknew end up at the finish line of glorification. This is so certain that our glorification is put in the past tense, even though it is still future for us all.

CONCLUSION:

Our closing hymn today is the well-known “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” which is a meditation on Lamentations 3:22-23. That Old Testament passage was written at a time of great suffering for Israel, and this hymn was written by a minister who was familiar with suffering too. Thomas Chisholm was ordained at the age of 37, but served only one year until his health failed him and he was forced out of the ministry. The final verse of this hymn expresses well the hope of the Christian. “Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide, strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!”

Discussion Questions
Romans 8:18-30

1. Describe a time when you have suffered in your life. What do you find comforting and helpful in such a time?
2. Verse 18 highlights the staggering imbalance between suffering and glory, an imbalance that Paul tells us we should “consider.” How does such an imbalance help us when we suffer? Does a practical application come to your mind as you think about this?
3. Creation’s groaning and eager longing is mirrored in our experience. Do these statements about creation tell us anything about how we should practice creation care?
4. Paul says that hope should help us wait with patience (v. 25). How does hope help us patiently endure in times of suffering?
5. Part of our weakness in responding to suffering is that “we do not know to pray for as we ought” (v. 26). Can you think of any examples of suffering times in your life when you haven’t known what to pray for?
6. What do we learn about prayer from the fact that the Holy Spirit responds to our suffering by intercession on our behalf?
7. Can you think of some practical examples in your past of the truth of Romans 8:28?