



## Suffering and Glory

Romans 8:18-25

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We continue this morning in Romans, chapter 8, this greatest chapter in the Bible. This morning, our text is from verse 18 through to verse 25. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. Romans, chapter 8, beginning at verse 18:

*"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, open up your Word to us. Show us the Lord Jesus Christ. By the power of your Holy Spirit, show us our duty. Show us where our hope is founded. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

How should we think about suffering? Well, we're in church, so the appropriate Sunday school answer we're expected to give is something like this: *"We're supposed to be able to handle all suffering, because, after all, God will not give you more than you can handle."* At one time or another in our lives, we've either read or someone has told us that is what the Bible teaches.

This is typically drawn from 1 Corinthians 10:13: "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." We take from this text or we've been taught from this text that it's on us, that if we can't handle it, it's our fault, because after all, God has made it so he didn't give us anything we couldn't handle.

So if we're having difficulty with suffering, we just need to pull it together and make it on our own. The interesting thing is that's not really what the Bible teaches. Paul, who wrote 1 Corinthians 10, also wrote 2 Corinthians 1. Listen to what Paul has to say here. "For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself." Does that sound like someone who can handle all things that come to him?

It is not biblical to believe we can handle all of life's problems and trials. Suffering is something that should point us to God. After all, that's what Paul continues to say in 2 Corinthians 1. He says, "Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again."

I want you to also see what Paul is saying here. He's not saying that God will deliver us exactly how we think, exactly now. He points to God as being one who raises from the dead. That deliverance may be in the world to come. So we need to think more with Paul, who says when we're weak, then we know God is strong. "My grace is sufficient for you," God told Paul, "for my power is made perfect in weakness."

So, while we don't need to seek out suffering, I do think we need to think about it biblically. I'd like us to look at three things this morning from this text. First, I'd like us to start by *thinking about suffering*. Then I would like us to look at the *reality behind the reality*, and then finally, I would like to encourage us to look at *living in hope*. Thinking about suffering, the reality behind the reality, and living in hope.

## **Thinking About Suffering**

As we come to this text in chapter 8 of the book of Romans, this is actually the first of three passages we will look at in three consecutive weeks in which Paul encourages believers in the sufferings we are called to. When we understand suffering and think rightly about it, we can have joy in the midst of life. Now Paul knew a great deal about suffering. He was persecuted. He was driven away from the work he loved. He was cut off from his family. He had a physical ailment. So Paul is a good person to teach us about the reality of suffering.

Paul begins our passage this morning with a statement about the reality of suffering. He says in verse 18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." I want you to notice something right at the beginning. Paul makes no effort to convince us of the reality of suffering. It's simply stated matter-of-factly: "The sufferings of this present time." I think that's because Paul knows we're all acquainted with sufferings. He doesn't need to convince us.

You don't need me to stand up here and give you a long lecture about how gravity exists. You experience it all the time. It's something you're well acquainted with. We must also remember the context for this statement. Paul has been writing to believers, to those who he said have no condemnation in Christ Jesus, those who are filled with the Holy Spirit, those who know they are the children of God.

All of chapter 8 is about the blessings for those who believe in Jesus. So it's not as if Paul is saying only a few people who don't listen will experience suffering. No, he knows everyone he's addressing who has the blessings that come from being in Christ will experience suffering. Paul knows what he's talking about. This is not a case of those who *do* do and those who *can't* teach. That's not what's going on here, because Paul's life *after* Christ met him was one of suffering.

We can say, humanly speaking, that Paul's life got worse after Christ met him. He was imprisoned. He was shipwrecked. He had venomous snakes come upon him. He was whipped. He was beaten. He was thrust out of cities, persecuted. It's not as if we can blame his suffering on his disobedience or his lack of following God. Sometimes that is the first place we go when we think about suffering.

We think, "Well, it has to be *my* fault" or "It has to be *that* person's fault if they're suffering. There must be some kind of secret sin that's involved." But look at the apostle Paul. He followed God's commands. He preached the gospel. He planted churches. After all, he wrote the Bible. How could we say that Paul was not a faithful follower of Christ?

The reality is that this is familiar to many of you, perhaps *most* of you. Some of you right now are struggling with health issues. It could be that you're in your 70s or 80s or it could be that you're under 10. Some of you know the pain of broken relationships and the effect of sin. Some of you know the pain of being given the cold shoulder by friends or family because you talk about Jesus. Many of you have heard about the persecution that's occurring in China, in India, in Pakistan, and throughout the Middle East.

Some of you are wondering why life has to be so hard, why people have to be so mean, and why there can't be more happiness in Jesus. I think a good deal of that problem is our American culture. Some of you may have seen in the news this past Sunday that several of the largest Protestant churches in America cancelled their Sunday services to give rest to their volunteers from a busy Christmas season. This was happening at literally the exact same time that the members of the Early Rain Church in Chengdu, China, were being arrested because they refused to stop meeting together.

In America, we expect things to be easy. We expect other people now to pump our gas. We expect other people to do our work for us. We expect to get happiness. It's our right as Americans. But right at the beginning here, Paul wants you to know that suffering is real and it is not about fault. Now, this does not excuse bad behavior. If you go up to someone and speak rudely to them or you shove them or hit them and they are harsh back to you in return, you are not able to say, "Well, you must be persecuting me because I'm a Christian. I'm suffering for Jesus."

No, there's a difference between suffering for Christ and being a jerk. We have to understand that. So the reality of suffering we experience doesn't excuse bad behavior. We are not guaranteed a happy life when we come to Jesus. I know there are people out there on the radio, on television, and in various churches who will teach that, that we're guaranteed happiness in Christ, but that is a modern American thing. It is not the experience of the church throughout all of history and of the vast majority of the church throughout all of the world today.

It doesn't help us to think that way, because then anything bad that comes our way becomes our fault. Do you see that? If we're guaranteed happiness in Jesus and I don't have happiness, I must not be sufficiently in Jesus. I must not have enough faith. It's something *I* need to fix, *I* need to clean up. It's *my* fault that I don't have the victorious Christian life. Do you know what Paul says to you? "Don't believe that."

There are others who try to blame God by saying, "It's his fault. It's out of his control. God can't help it. He would if he could, but he can't, so he doesn't." They try to replace an uncaring God, so to speak, with a powerless God. Paul will deal with that specifically later in the chapter, but again, he says to you, "Don't believe it." Suffering has a purpose in God's plan.

As Paul talks about the reality of suffering, he gives us an important qualifier in verse 18. He says, "The sufferings of *this present time*." This means more than just right now. This is actually technical biblical language. What Paul means when he says "this present time" or "the present age" is he means the time now contrasted with the age to come. He means suffering falls in the time before the consummation of all things, before the return of Jesus, before the resurrection and the revelation of glory.

Suffering is something that all Christians experience throughout all of history until Jesus comes to set all things right. This is independent of circumstances, it's independent of geography, and it's independent of the faithfulness of individual Christians. Suffering has been ordained by God for *this* time and *this* time only. It doesn't help for you to try and figure out the "Why me?" of suffering.

Don't look for the perfect way to escape suffering or avoid it. That's not how it works. The truth is that suffering is real and it is a part of being in a world that is broken by sin. Even Jesus endured suffering. He was attacked. He was betrayed. He did not have a life of ease. Suffering is real. There is a reason Paul wants us to *know* that suffering is real. He's not just trying to get us to grin and bear it.

Life is not about who can deal with the most pressure. No, he's actually trying to get us to focus on our suffering. Paul wants you to know that if you have believed in Jesus and are living in the Spirit, you can have a view of suffering that does not come to others. This is actually how he starts in verse 18. He compares suffering with the glory that is ours to come in Christ.

We've said before that Paul is a master at constructing a logical argument. You can see this in how he moves from point to point to point. If you look at chapter 8, look at how many times Paul uses the word *for*. He uses it more than 25 times. Up until verse 22 alone, he uses it a dozen times to start a sentence. He's building his argument. Each time he says *for*, he is building an argument from what has preceded.

When he is talking about suffering here in verse 18, he is building on what he has said in verses 14-17, and specifically, in verse 17. When he's talking about suffering, he's doing it in the context of describing the incredible relationship we have with God because of Jesus. We are children of God. We are fellow heirs with Christ. Jesus is our elder brother. Suffering, Paul says, is a part of the process of becoming like Jesus.

Look back with me at verse 17. Paul says, "[We are] children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." Paul does not say, "Provided that we suffer *for* him." He says, "Provided that we suffer *with* him." He's showing to us that Jesus suffered, so we cannot expect to avoid suffering, but there is also a purpose to the suffering, an end goal, and that is so we may also be glorified with him. This is the end of suffering.

That's what Paul draws our attention to. He says in verse 18, "I consider," and he compares suffering with something else: the glory that is to come. He says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." When Paul uses the word *consider*, he's using a word of reason, of thinking, of logic. He is not guessing. He is not choosing a belief that is contrary to the truth. This is his considered judgment about a truth, and it cannot be contradicted.

You'll notice that Paul does not lessen the reality of suffering. What he does is remind us of the perspective we should have. Lessening a view of suffering really isn't satisfying, is it? When someone tells you, "You don't have it that bad," that doesn't really help. We're all familiar with this. We do this in our families. What parent hasn't said to a child, "Oh, you're not hurt that badly. Don't worry about it. Shake it off"? What child hasn't said to a sibling after they've hurt them, "Oh, you're okay, you're okay. Oh, it's not that bad. Don't tell Mom. It's not that bad"?

We do this all the time, and it has no basis in reality. We just say it, and we think if somehow we speak it we can speak it into reality. That's not what Paul is doing. Paul is saying your suffering may be horrible. It may be beyond what you can endure. You may think you are at the end of your rope, but what you need to do is look to the glory that will come. Think about that. Paul is not minimizing suffering. He knows you battle with sin. He knows you see injustice and persecution.

He knows you live in a fallen world that is filled with pain, and rather than minimize it, he actually maximizes it. Suffering may be great, but glory is greater. He uses an interesting phrase: *it is not worth comparing*. There will be a day when all this suffering will end, and when it does, we will see and have glory that will make us think it all was nothing. Now, remember, that's not because our suffering *now* is nothing; it's because the glory we have is so great, beyond our imagining.

Paul puts it *this* way in 2 Corinthians 4: "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison..." Paul is giving you an illustration here. You need to think of a scale, not a scale you step on to weigh yourself but one of the old-time scales that had two areas where you could put weight. He's saying that when you put glory on the scale it is so heavy it cannot be moved. And do you know what your affliction, your suffering is like? Feathers. Again, it's not that it doesn't exist, but the comparison, Paul says, is not even worth making. It's not even close.

It's not just that we will see something. We can look at this text, "For the glory that is to be revealed to us," and think we will see God's glory...perfect sunsets, beautiful trees, animals in harmony. All of that is true, but what Paul is saying is something more than that. It's not just that we will observe or *see* glory. This prepositional phrase *to us* could also be translated *unto us* or even *into us*. It's that this glory will come *upon* us. We will be a part of the glory. Don't think you're going to be an observer. God's glory will come upon *you*, and you will be blessed in that glory. We don't just *see* it; we *experience* it.

## The Reality Behind the Reality

Paul then continues his logical argument in verse 19, once again with a *for*. "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God." What he begins to describe now is the *reality beyond the reality*. What I mean by that is we look at life, we look at what is around us in our circumstances, and we take that for reality. Oftentimes, we forget that the true or real reality is *God's* reality, not what we see.

Paul wants to describe for us what's going on behind what we see. He starts with creation. He says creation waits for glory. What he means here is this wait for glory is not just that it's true for *him*. It's not just that it might be true for *you*. There's no relativism here. He's not trying to apply the power of positive thinking. "As long as you think good thoughts, you can manipulate reality." No. What he's saying is that all of creation knows this is true, and it is waiting for the consummation.

Paul is not telling you to go find your happy place. He's saying to you that all of creation awaits the glory that is to be revealed and that what is to be revealed are the sons of God. When the sons of God are revealed is when the glory of God is present. We actually get a hint of what this looks like from the word itself. The word *revealed* is the word *apokalypsis* in the Greek, which is the Greek name of the last book in the Bible: Revelation.

If you go to the end of Revelation, you will see what that glory looks like, how the whole earth is renewed and redeemed, how there's no need for any sun or moon because God is light, where the people of God dwell in eternal blessedness with God himself. That's what Paul says the creation longs for. Now what does Paul mean here by "all creation"? I think the most helpful person on this concept is the commentator John Murray.

He says when Paul says "all creation," he can't mean the angels, because they were never subjected to futility and bondage. They've never fallen. He says Paul can't mean Satan and the demons, because they don't long for the revealing of the sons of God. He says he can't mean the children of God, because they're distinguished as waiting alongside with creation, and Paul can't mean unbelieving humanity, because they were subjected to sin not outside of their own will but because of their own choice to sin.

What he has to mean here is non-rational, inanimate creation. Now why is this important? It's important for us so we can see the effects of sin. Sin is so horrible that it frustrates not only us but creation itself. We're not the only ones waiting for all to be set right. Creation itself bears witness to that. It has been put under futility or vanity. This is the same word that is used in Ecclesiastes more than 39 times to describe a life apart from God. It is vanity. It is futility. Life cannot fulfill its purpose.

Just think about that for a moment. Does every crop that is planted by the farmer bear perfect fruit? Does every seed live and produce fruit? Is the weather always perfect and gorgeous? Are there never any storms in our lives? The answer is "Of course not." That is because creation does not experience what it was created for. It has been subjected to futility and vanity because of sin. This explains the terror and harm of creation, the storms, the diseases, the brokenness.

All of these are results of the fall, and creation longs to be set free from that bondage of the fall, but this subjection of creation has a purpose. It didn't happen by accident. Paul says creation did not do this by itself. It was not subjected willingly. It is popular in our culture to talk about "Mother Nature" and to think that somehow Mother Nature chooses to have storms or chooses to have bad weather or chooses to have life not work the way it's supposed to, when in reality, nature itself is not in charge.

We see this over and over again, because life doesn't work out the way we think it should work out. It doesn't go according to the systems and rhythms we are used to. I remember vividly years ago in Buffalo in the beginning of October there was the worst snowstorm we had had in years. Nature was so out of sorts that the leaves on the trees had not yet fallen. Nature didn't know it was even fall yet, let alone winter. The damage was incredible because the tree branches were incredibly heavy because they had not lost their leaves.

We see things like this all the time. We see floods that come upon Houston. We see hurricanes that hit North Carolina. What we need to do here is to understand that nature is not in charge of this, that God has subjected creation to futility, and he does it for a reason, for a purpose. That purpose, Paul tells us, is hope. It's hope of the restoration.

If you say, "What does that mean? Why would the creation groan? Why would that be hopeful? Why would that be good?" Paul gives you a picture, and it's a picture every mom here knows well, but I'm going to take the time to explain it to the dads and the kids. It's a picture of childbirth. Paul says it's like the woman who goes into childbirth and groans because it's painful.

I have never met a woman yet who tells me, "Childbirth is a joy, and I'd love to go through it again." I think you more often hear things like, "Why did you do this to me? Why does this have to be this bad?" That's what we think about when we think about childbirth. But then what happens after the birth pains are over and the child comes? All of the pain goes away. It's better than a prescription. The mom holds the child, and because of the joy and the glory that has come, everything is put into perspective.

Now let me ask you this question. Even the greatest partakers of Instagram, has anyone ever taken a picture of a mom in labor? I don't think so. If they did, they might not have survived. When do they always take the picture of the mom? When she's holding the baby. Right? The mom who's holding the baby doesn't look like she just ran a marathon in a swamp. She looks glorious. She looks radiant. A smile is across her face. A joy that comes through the picture comes to you. Why is that? Because the expectation of what was to come is here.

That's what Paul says. But it's not just creation that groans and looks forward. We do too. We groan inwardly because we know that the world is not right. We long for God to put all things right. This is because we know what awaits us. We're waiting for our adoption as sons. Paul has already told us we are adopted in verses 14-17, so what does he mean here that we wait for the adoption? I think what he means is the full enjoyment of all of the privileges that are ours in Christ. Not just all of the blessings but the perfect *enjoyment* of all of those blessings.

We're waiting for the redemption of our bodies. We're waiting for the mortal to put on immortality, to be free from the limits of our mortal, sin-cursed bodies and to know the fullness of life in Christ. Are you waiting for this? Do you know this world is not your home? If you do, you can have a completely different perspective when your house floods, when you lose your job, when you get a hard doctor's diagnosis. Not because these things don't matter or because you don't care. No, it's because you have your eyes on Jesus and the glory that is to come, and that fills your heart and your mind with such joy your present sufferings can't compare.

## **Living in Hope**

How, then, are we to live? What does Paul say? Paul says we are to live in hope. He has reminded us that the subjugation of the whole world to vanity was done in hope by the Lord and that the Lord has a good purpose for his children in all that he does. Here is one thought to hold onto. Jesus gains more than Adam lost. It's not that we want to regain Eden. There is so much more. We are not meant to be like Adam. We are meant to be like Jesus.

This was the purpose behind the suffering of Jesus: to gain the crown. Jesus could not skip the cross, so *we* cannot skip the cross. It's why Jesus tells us in the Scriptures to take up our *cross* and follow him, not to take up our *crown* and follow him. Have you ever noticed that? Jesus doesn't talk like a prosperity gospel preacher. Calvin, I think, puts it wonderfully. He says, "God has so ordered the church from the very beginning that death is the way to life and the cross is the way to victory."

We have this hope, and it sets a tone for our lives. We not only lament and complain about the current state of the world; we anticipate what will come. We anticipate how God will renew all things. We're waiting for how all of creation and all of existence will be renewed and be focused around Jesus. Paul tells us in Colossians that Jesus is working to reconcile all things to himself. Peter preaches in Acts, chapter 3, about the time that is coming for restoring all things.

How are we to anticipate? How are we to, as Paul says, wait eagerly? This is further proof that this world is not our home. We can't wait for the Lord to bring all things to his purpose. The phrase *wait eagerly* means to stretch forward, to strain your neck, to want to see. We just finished Christmastime, and I think there's a picture that can help us understand how we are to wait and how we are to be expectant.

When Christmas Day is about to come around, kids in the congregation, do you say to Mom and Dad, "You know, I'm not really sure we need to get up on Christmas. We could open presents next week. I'm not really into this. I know Christmas is coming, but I'm not worried about it"? That's what y'all said. Right? No.

What happens in most homes is Mom and Dad have to say, "No one is allowed to wake up before 6:00," because if you didn't say that, everybody would wake up at 5:00, and if they didn't wake up at 5:00 they'd wake up at 4:00, and if they didn't wake up at 4:00, they would do what some of you have done, which is to argue, "Technically, 12:01 is Christmas Day, and we should open up presents just after midnight."

That's the kind of anticipation we have for Christmas. That's what Paul wants you to have for the glory to come. You can't wait for it to come. Have you ever tried to talk to a kid about almost anything else on Christmas Eve? They have no conversation skills. You ask them about school, ask them about last year's vacation. They can't remember anything. Why? Because all they can think about is what's coming. That's what Paul tells us our hope should be like, our anticipation for the things to come.

Finally, hope does more than just anticipate, because we know we *are* waiting. What hope also does, we see in verse 25, is it perseveres. Paul says, "We wait for it with patience." This word *patience* is a word that's used often in the Bible. It means to have perseverance. It means to have endurance, to have steadfastness, stick-to-itiveness. It's to stick to waiting, knowing that it's not here yet but it *will* come.

Paul has already told us that part of what suffering does, part of its design is to produce this kind of enduring patience. That's what he says in Romans 5:3-4. This kind of endurance is described by Jesus seven times in the book of Revelation. He's reminding the church to be patient and to endure, and he commends the churches that are doing that. Hope perseveres because you're focused not on what you *can* see but what you *can't*.

Do you see Paul says that? He says if you can see it, it's not really even hope, because you have it. Hope looks at something it can't see. You're familiar with the phrase that we are called to walk by faith and not by sight. This is what that looks like: to be in the middle of very real sufferings, maybe even overwhelmed beyond all we can handle, and to still look to Jesus. This is the hope you *were* saved in. You already have that hope.

Have hope. Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Believing on Jesus will not allow you to escape from suffering or hardship, but it *will* have you look beyond the here and now to the day when all is made right by a powerful and loving heavenly Father. What should be on our lips as we groan under sufferings? It should be *this*: "Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly."