

**Conformed to the Image of God's Son, Jesus  
God's Purposes in a Confusing Age  
Romans 8:18-30**

**Do you remember what it was like to make plans for which you had reasonable expectations of coming to pass, even if you acknowledged, "Lord willing,"? Making plans has always been contingent, even if we did not know it. The Talley motto on vacations has always been, "If you don't make plans for the week, how, then, can you change the plans?" Some of you get it.**

**I had plans for finishing our Sunday morning studies from the book of John by the end of this summer. Then, we decided to meet outside, which calls for a shorter service, so we will wait until sometime after Labor Day when the last five chapters of John can be given the attention they deserve. Lord willing. In the meantime, we will begin a series based *loosely* on the theme, "Conformed to the Image of God's Son, Jesus." I say "we," because several of us will preach between now and Labor Day.**

**There are multiple disciplines and practices that the Lord uses in our lives to conform us to the image of Jesus. If you concentrate on your identity in Christ, or on humility, as we saw in Philippians 2, or if you focus heavily on a spirit of gratitude for what God has done for you, or if you practice rejoicing in suffering – well, the Lord will use many spiritual disciplines to form you into the image of Jesus. It is like many streams heading to a river that is destined to end in the ocean. Today's text, which serves as an introduction to this series, is Romans 8:18-30. Before we look at three truths and applications from the full text, I will read Romans 8:28-30 for our initial reading.**

**28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.  
29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed**

to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.  
Three areas of focus from our text, beginning with:

1. Suffering is a key component in God's design for making us holy; therefore, do not yield to either fatalism or utopianism (Romans 8:18-25) (REPEAT)

That's a fun thought, wouldn't you agree? By suffering, I do not mean the torture you put your body through in exercise or diet for a greater good that serves you. You can see that I am untroubled by such pursuits. The suffering mentioned in Romans 8:18-25 that brings us benefits is very much like exercise and diet that lead to a better body and a better life, only the goal is different, and the suffering is not our choice. Verse 18:

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.

In so many ways, it is a shame to begin a sermon with Romans 8:18 when sufficient context cannot be given. What has gone before in Paul's letter to the Church in Rome is nothing less than the fullest and best description of who we were and how we lived *before* Jesus, plus, who we are and how we are to live *after* Jesus, and now, in the second half of Romans 8, God, through Paul's writings, will help us understand his purposes for us in a confusing age.

Verse 18 is a summary of what will be written through verse 30, and, truly, through verse 39. As you will find in many NT passages, suffering and glory are paired together, though in contrast, not by

**comparison. Paul says that suffering and glory cannot be compared and, yet – they go together. Not in my mind, necessarily, but in God’s mind. We will read Romans 8:18-25, and I will make a few observations along the way:**

**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. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 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.**

**The second half of Romans 8 summarizes what happened when Adam sinned and fell, taking God’s creation down with him, and what God is doing about the problem that is ever before us. In verse 19, the language Paul uses is akin to the universe straining its neck, standing on tiptoes, eagerly waiting for the full redemption of God’s people, because that will be the signal that all will be made right. It is absolutely right for us to care about the environment, but the earth is looking past our carbon footprint reduction, straining to see Jesus return when he will restore the world to what it was before Adam sinned.**

**Here is something else in verses 20 and 21 that may be difficult to process – God is the One who subjected his creation to futility. We did not want anything to do with the wickedness and destruction and death and futility that came with sin, but we got it anyway when Adam fell. We like to think that God does not send people to hell, so we say that we send ourselves. We want to think that God does not cause the effects brought on by sin, and surely there is truth in this. We *are* told, however, that *God* subjected the creation to futility. But he did so in hope! What is the hope? That all creation will be set free**

**from the bondage to corruption that the earth and all its inhabitants endure. Verses 22-25:**

**22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 23 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. 24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.**

**This is why I say so often that “hope” in the New Testament is not an assurance that I will get past this sickness or a hope that we will have good weather most Sunday mornings, but our hope resides in a confident assurance that we belong to Jesus through our trust in his sacrificial death on the cross, and when Jesus returns, all wrongs will be made right and will remain that way for all eternity.**

**If the world is a mess because of sin, and if it is not going to be as it should be, then what is the use of trying to change the world? Or, maybe you think the opposite – this world is absolutely a mess because of others’ sins, and it is up to us to change it. Scripture justifies neither fatalism, nor utopianism. Fallen though our world and its people are, we are stewards of God’s good creation and we are mediators of God’s love to those who do not know him through Jesus. This world is not all there is, but this world and the next are inextricably linked – suffering and glory, for goodness sake.**

**It is equally self-focused to seek to bring about utopia. 2020 has not been a good year for utopia, you might think, but some are thinking it is an excellent time to bring about change. Utopian impulses, though, always end in violence if taken where they intend to go. The only righteous reign will be that of Jesus when he returns. We**

**should, along with creation, crane our necks as we stand on our tiptoes, calling for him to come quickly!**

**Why is suffering such a key component of God’s design for making us holy? Maybe because it reminds us of our frailty and our dependence on the Maker of the Stars and the Redeemer of our souls. That is the subject of verses 26-27, in our second point:**

**2. Prayer connects us to the One whose wisdom exceeds even our own brilliance (Romans 8:26-27)**

**That is said tongue in cheek, don’t you know? *Prayer connects us to the One whose wisdom exceeds even our own brilliance.* Waiting both eagerly and patiently for Jesus’ return and our entrance into eternal glory is not an easy balance to achieve in a confusing world. In the first portion of our text we were told that creation groans, and – stating the obvious – we also groan. In verses 26-27, we are told that the Spirit groans on our behalf so that God’s will for us is accomplished:**

**26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. 27 And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.**

**In the same way that Jesus experienced limitations that arrived with his human nature, the Holy Spirit groans along with creation and with us, longing for the settling of all accounts. If I were to ask you, “Which member of the Trinity intercedes for God’s children,” you would rightly say, “Jesus.” But verse 27 tells us that the Spirit also intercedes for us. John Murray said that children of God have two divine intercessors. Quote: “Christ is their intercessor in the court of**

heaven, while the Holy Spirit is their intercessor in the theater of their own hearts. Close quote.

Perhaps the best translation for the end of verse 26 is found in the NIV where we are told that the Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans. It is not that the groans are too deep for words or that they are inexpressible, but that the words are *unexpressed*. When you are suffering, sometimes you want a friend to simply sit with you. No talking, please, just your presence. The Holy Spirit does so much more than that for us. As he groans with us in silence, he translates our prayers according to the Father's will. You may pray, "Lord, please end this physical suffering that has paralyzed me," and the Holy Spirit may communicate something like, "Father, please allow Jesus to shine brightly in her pain, pointing others to a hope that is better than anything this world can offer."

The only way that such an explanation is comforting, of course, is if you trust God at the level described in the next three verses of our text, which is the focus of our last point:

3. It is *God's* purpose for our lives – not our purpose – that conforms us to the image of his Son (Romans 8:28-30)  
(REPEAT)

Maybe one of the most frustrating things about living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that it feels like every challenge can be met. We are constantly promised that all will be fixed, by science, by technology, or through revolution, if necessary. Furthermore, it is easy to become obsessed with our purpose in life. When you read the Bible carefully, though, you discover that God is far more concerned with who you are than he is with what you do. He wants you to know and trust him more than he wants you to find and fulfill your purpose in life. Remember, God subjected the world to futility. Anything frustrating happened to you this past week? Verses 28-30:

**28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.**

**Maybe it is best that we apply Romans 8:28 to ourselves rather than seek to “encourage” others with this truth. It can only be properly understood and applied, in fact, as part of the whole text that we have read, which is placed in the far greater context of the book of Romans. The suffering of verses 18-25 that is the prayer focus in verses 26-27 is working, at God’s direction, the best possible outcome according to God’s purposes. “How,” you might ask, “can that be true with what has happened to me?” That question may never be answered in this life, but when we trust the God who said it, we can know that his purposes are being fulfilled, and his understanding encompasses all eternity. He is conforming you to the image of his Son. He is making you like Jesus.**

**God’s work in you began before he created the world. He foreknew you. The Greek word *proginosko* means that he knew you before time, or, better, he loved you before time. This does not mean that God knew that you would choose him, so therefore he predestined you to be his child. It means that he loved you before time, thus he chose you to be in his family and to conform you to the image of his Son, Jesus. How much does he love you? “Those he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Will it surprise you when I tell you that I do not have time to explain all that is found in Romans 8:30? Probably not!**

**Does God conform us to the image of Jesus in this life, or does it occur at the end of the age? The answer is *Yes*. If that does not make sense now – well, it does not have to. We are called to trust that God is working his will in our lives at all times. We like to say, correctly, that God is working for his glory and our good, but the truth is even better – he is working a far greater glory *for us* than we can imagine – a glory that will be revealed in time. This message could have been titled *Present Suffering, Future Glory*, but it is also true that God is already at work in the lives of his children, making us more like Jesus, which is in itself, glorious. We do not have to wait for eternity to begin to understand what God has in store for us in the afterlife. God’s plan for you, based on his love for you, is exquisite. Trust him in these confusing days to have your best interests at heart as he molds you into the image of his Son. Let’s pray.**