

## **Romans: The Promise of Righteousness (part 4 of 6)**

### Unworthy Sufferings

Romans 8:18-25

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*<sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Romans 8:18–25 (ESV)*

### “Keep Calm and Carry On”

I’m sure that you have seen this culturally popular British sign from WWII. This mantra was developed in 1939 as part of an effort by the British government to encourage its people in the face of the adversity related to the war effort. The government developed three signs to boost morale in order to counteract the discouragement from the German victories at Dunkirk, Greece, Northern Africa and the relentless bombing of English cities, an air campaign that destroyed a million homes.

The first two signs were used extensively. One of them read “Your Courage, Your Cheerfulness, Your Resolution – Bring Us Victory.” However, they held the 2.5 million copies of “Keep Calm and Carry On” for the almost-certain German invasion. The sign, with its simple message, bold colors, and prominent display of King George VI’s crown was going to be the final message during the country’s darkest hour. It was designed to give the people of England a common vision of how to live in the midst of great suffering.

Interestingly enough, the “Keep Calm and Carry On” signs were never displayed because Germany was defeated. And it wasn’t until 2000 that the sign was rediscovered at a second-hand bookshop in Northeastern England. Over the last fifteen years, the sign has grown in popularity and in its parody. For example, there is a sign mocking the French: “Eat Cheese and Surrender.” There is sign advocating revenge: “Keep Calm and Quietly Plot Revenge.” And there is a sign embracing panic: “Freak Out and Throw Stuff.”

So what is your mantra for suffering or hardship? If I were to interview your kids or your friends or your parents, what would they say your sign looked like? Everyone has a philosophy of suffering, whether they realize it or not. Everyone has a stated or subliminal mantra that they live by when it

comes to difficult moments in life. So how does a follower of Jesus think about suffering? How should you think about present sufferings and future challenges? We all have a philosophy when it comes to suffering and hardship, and in Romans 8:18-25, we get a clear picture of Paul's view of sufferings.

Today we are going to see how Paul continues to apply his robust vision of "no condemnation" to real life by examining how the gospel changes our view of suffering. In other words, when you understand the gospel vision of Romans 8:1-17, you have new categories to understand and to embrace suffering with a different mantra.

Let's look at four categories that emerge out of this text:

### **What You Value (v. 18)**

Verse 18 serves as the positional statement of verses 18-25, as it identifies the central truth that changes how a believer suffers, namely, that the glory of what is received in the future is far greater than what is lost through sufferings in the present. When one weighs the value of glory in comparison to **our perceived** value of suffering, there is no comparison. That's the point, and the question is whether or not we see or understand or embrace the value difference.

Once again verse 18 begins with the word "for." Paul loves this word because he is not spouting off individual and unrelated truths, but he is building a case in Romans 8 for a robust vision of a gospel-driven life. So this section is tied together, and it is linked to verse 17, where we learned that the followers of Jesus are children and heirs who will be glorified with Christ and who will suffer with Him. Therefore, suffering is not an unusual anomaly. It is to be expected, and this entire section explains why.

Paul is arguing for a particular way of thinking about sufferings, and that is why he says, "I consider." The word can mean to think about something, to keep a mental record, and to keep a record of debits and credits. It is an accounting term, and we talked about this when we studied Romans 6:11.<sup>1</sup> The idea here is "doing the math" and adding up what is true. In Romans 6:11 we applied this concept to the fact that believers are to consider themselves dead to sin and alive to Christ. The issue is not whether or not we feel like this is true. We must "do the math" and see that it is.

In Romans 8:17 Paul uses the same word when it comes to suffering, and there is something very basic that you must understand here about a Christian understanding of suffering and pain: a biblical view of suffering is based upon fact, not feeling. Now do not get me wrong. Feelings are certainly part of suffering. But feelings should not be the loudest voice or the leading influence. To consider means that you have weighed something, counted it, and evaluated it.

This is where some of you could be greatly helped today. There are many believers whose mantra is "Feel It, Believe It." And one important step of maturity in regard to suffering and other realities that we have yet to talk about is coming to realize that just because you feel something doesn't make it true. Christian suffering requires strong feelings but within the right categories.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/how-to-be-an-instrument-of-righteousness/>

So when I say that suffering relates to what you value, I mean first something that you value in your mind ("This is true!") and then I mean something you value in your heart ("I love it!"). Christian suffering requires a biblical consideration based upon what the Bible says to be true, not just what I feel to be true.

Now what is it that Paul is considering? The proposition is this: the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. As Paul "does the math" of the sorrows of this present life and all the hardships that go with it, he assesses its value to be incomparably small next to the glory of what is to come.

You might wonder what Paul has in mind with the phrase "sufferings of this present time." Does he only have persecution in mind, or does this include all kinds of struggles and hardships? Given what follows about the created order (v. 19-22) and the scope of what cannot separate us from God's love in verses 8:37-39 ("*neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything in all creation . . .*"), the sufferings should be understood as any aspect of our struggle to live as Christians in a broken world. Whether the cause is hard people, the hatred of Satan, or a hurtful created order, we are called to see suffering through a different lens.

Finally, we need to understand what this future glory is all about. Let me give you a number of thoughts about this:

- It is connected to our status as the children of God who are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17)
- It involves honor, immortality, and eternal life (Rom. 2:7)
- Glory is rooted in our standing in grace by faith (Rom. 5:2)
- It is incomparable in value and is being prepared for those who suffer (2 Cor. 4:17)
- It is tied to the glorification of our bodies, the final step in our salvation (Phil. 3:21)
- Glory is what we share with Jesus (Col. 3:4)
- It is what salvation in Jesus Christ brings us (2 Tim. 2:10)
- It is the beauty of God reflected in us (2 Cor. 3:18)

The word "glory" encompasses everything related to who God is, what He has done, His plan for redemption, and the reflection of that reality in and through us by the Spirit because of the work of Jesus. In other words, glory is the endgame because glory is what God is full of and what sin has marred in human beings and in the world (Rom. 3:23).

So considering sufferings as unworthy of future glory is not just about you and what you are going through. The real question when it comes to suffering is whether or not you value the glory of God above everything else, including your plans for an easy, pain-free, make-your-own-way life. Suffering is hard because it asks us to weigh what is really, truly, and eternally valuable. And so often we settle for a lesser glory, or we have such strong feelings for lesser glories. Christian suffering calls us to "do the math" when it comes to the beauty of God.

## Where We Live (vv. 19-22)

The second category that emerges in the text is in regard to where we live or to the context for these sufferings. Paul moves from the micro to the macro. In verse 18 he was addressing an internal value system, and in verses 19-22 he identifies that the entire creation is a part of this unworthy suffering drama.

Verse 18 created a sense of anticipation as we look for that future and the more worthy glory. And verse 19 expands that idea by showing us that it not just believers who are waiting for the “Great Revealing,” but also the entire created order is waiting “with eager longing for the revealing of the Sons of God.” The reason will become more apparent as we walk through these verses, but I simply want you to note here the scope of what Paul has in mind.

Suffering is very personal, but it is not only personal. There is a real temptation when you are walking through suffering to become very self-focused. Your praying, conversations, hopes, and thoughts can all swirl around your pain and your longing for its relief. While that is understandable at one level, it is really important and deeply biblical to understand that there is a macro plan, a sovereign plan that God is unfolding. This text reminds us that our suffering is not entirely about us. We are not the only ones waiting for relief! The entire created order is waiting and longing for the restoration that is tied to the revealing of the Sons of God, and verses 20-22 serve to unpack this even further.

Verse 20 tells us that the creation is characterized by the tension of futility and hope. The futility is due to the fallen state of the created order because of the introduction of sin. Genesis 3 records the curse upon the ground: *“cursed in the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you . . . by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground”* (Gen. 3:17-18). The earth is not the way it is supposed to be. Sin has fundamentally perverted the place where we live.

Now with that concept of futility in mind, look at the next phrase: *“not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope”* (v. 20b). What does this mean? Paul is saying three very important things:

- The force of futility was something that happened to creation from outside itself. The curse and its effects were not the created order’s choice. It was received.
- God, in response to sin, was the one who subjected the created order to suffering. In other words, the hardship, difficulties, and sufferings connected to a fallen, futile world still fall within the parameters of God’s rule. This is a really challenging thought if you only see suffering at a micro scale (“Why did God allow cancer in my wife?”). But it helps to pull back and to see that there is a much larger context, a macro reality (“We live in a broken world filled with disease”). What is clear from the text is that ultimately God is behind everything, even suffering.
- And yet this futility is not pointless because the text talks about hope. The passage says that God subjected it to futility in hope. Now this is crucial to understand. When it comes to biblical suffering, you must have two categories that lie side-by-side: pain and providence, or hard and not bad.

People who do not suffer well are those who do not have a view of God that includes all three of these realities. Or they think that events cannot be both hard and good, painful and merciful. For them, it is an either-or dynamic, and events cannot be subject to futility and hope at the same time. But that is not how the Bible talks about suffering. A biblical view of suffering has a robust view of the brokenness of the world and a robust view of hope. They exist side-by-side. Hope can eclipse suffering, but it doesn't remove it.

Now what is creation hoping for? Verse 21 explains that creation is longing for deliverance from "its bondage to decay" or futility or the curse of sin. In other words, the entire created order longs for the brokenness to come to end. We long for the end of death, terminal illnesses, dysfunctional families, marital break-ups, viruses that make us sick, or the people who put them in our computers, and all kinds of other maladies connected with the human race. The creation longs for the end of beheadings on youtube, Ebola outbreaks, mass shootings at a newspaper, houses that are blown-up for money, racism in all its forms, people who try to sneak guns on planes, generational poverty, murders that put Indy on the top ten most dangerous cities, and even deflated footballs. Our world has a fundamental brokenness built into its fabric. So, suffering should not be surprising.

However, there is still hope, and that is why Paul uses a very poignant metaphor. In verse 22 he describes the condition of the world as "groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now." This is Paul's way of helping us to get pain and hope more closely linked. The sound of painful groaning in the Hospice Unit is not the same as the groaning on the OB floor. You may hear a similar sound, but it has a totally different meaning. One signals death; the other signals life.

A biblical view of suffering requires that we see where we live through this framework. And there are a number of implications:

- Do you still hear the groanings around you? Do not become so accustomed to the brokenness that you lose the reality of what it means to live in broken world. Maybe you need to ask God to open your ears to the global groaning.
- Resist the temptation to think that your suffering is God picking on you. Realize that suffering is a part of the created order, and see if you can get a bigger view of both the scope of what is wrong with the world and the redemption that is needed through Christ.
- Remember that any pain that the creation is experiencing is not a pain that leads to the morgue, but a pain that leads to the nursery. See the pain as giving birth, not giving up the ghost.
- Remember that our ultimate longing, and the longing of creation, is for the redemption of mankind, which then includes the redemption of the earth. So any time that we get a small taste of this redemptive restoration in relationships, at work, in families, or in neighborhoods, it is what everyone and everything in creation longs for.

We live in a broken, groaning, pain-filled world that is longing for restoration. And in order to suffer well as a Christian, you need to know where you live.

## **What We Feel (v. 23)**

Having taken the macro look at suffering and identified how the created order is affected, Paul returns in verse 23 to how believers deal with suffering. The creation is waiting with eager longing (v 19), and it is groaning in the pains of childbirth (v 22), but there is more: Believers groan in the pains of childbirth too! The followers of Jesus share creation's grief and sadness at the state of the world.

Suffering is a part of our human experience, individually and collectively. Verses 18-25 contains nine references to "we" or "us," and notice the emphasis with the words "we ourselves." It is as though Paul is saying, "The creation is groaning because of the brokenness, but all of us – every single one of us – groans as well." We feel the weight of sin in us and around us.

Now to be sure that we keep perspective, Paul adds a statement about the Spirit. He describes believers as those "who have the firstfruits of the Spirit." We have already talked a lot about the Spirit in our study of Romans 8:5-18, and Paul is not adding anything new. This phrase serves to remind us that what we have received in the Spirit is a pledge or down-payment for what is yet to come in terms of our redemption (see Eph. 1:13-14). That is why the verse concludes by talking about the redemption of our bodies. The Spirit is the firstfruit of the coming physical redemption.

However, the most important phrase in verse 23 is "we . . . groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for the adoption as sons." If you are reading carefully, it might strike you as odd that Paul would say that we are waiting for our adoption because 8:15 tells us that we already have the Spirit of adoption. What gives? Well, this is a case of the already/not yet dynamic in Scripture.

The followers of Jesus have been spiritually adopted by the Father. There are many passages that point to this in terms of both adoption and being a part of God's family.<sup>2</sup> Romans 8:23 is not negating Romans 8:15. Rather, since adoption is a metaphor for our redemption, we are waiting for the full effect of our adoption to take place. We are waiting for the redemption of our bodies or glorification as it was identified in verse 17. In other words, we are waiting for the final act in the drama of our redemption, where God makes everything new and eradicates sin in us and in the world.

There is coming a day when hurtful people, the harmful devil, and hard circumstances will no longer be the norm. There is coming a day when God will restore the world to its sinless state, raise the dead to life, eternally punish the devil and all his followers, and give every follower of Jesus a glorified, sinless body. In that moment, there will be no pain, no death, no sorrow, no brokenness, no conflict because there will be no sin. What a day!

But we are not there now, and that is why the text says that we groan inwardly as we wait eagerly. How do we groan?

- We feel the groaning within us when we see the brokenness of the world, knowing that it shouldn't be this way. We see the tragic decisions of others and we groan.

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<sup>2</sup> See Gal 4:5-7, Eph 1:5, 2:19, 3:6, Heb 2:10-13; 12:6-7, 1 John 3:1-2

- We feel the groaning within us when we see the characteristics of the cosmic chaos. When tornados, car pile-ups, failed adoptions, birth-defects, earthquakes, national rebellions, and political gamesmanship are a part of our existence, we groan.
- We feel the groaning within us when we look at ourselves. The older we get the more we realize how far we have to go, how immature we really are, and how hard change really is. We groan because of what we know about ourselves.
- We feel the groaning within us because while we see some glimmers of victory for righteousness in the world, they are often few and far between. We groan, not because we are cynical, but because the gravitational pull of brokenness is so strong.

Do you feel this? Now I'm not suggesting that we become Eeyore Christians - always depressed and down about the state of everything. But I am suggesting that, in the midst of the hope that is coming next, we really feel the weighty groaning of a seriously messed up world. We need to see it in the world and feel it in ourselves. Because if we fail to feel the "groan," we will misunderstand suffering as something that is unusual or unfair.

In order to embrace a Romans 8 view of suffering, we need to see that part of our mantra in suffering is an appropriate groaning because of sin around us and in us.

### **How To Respond (vv. 24-25)**

The final category is also the conclusion to Paul's introduction of suffering. He will give us more help in verses that follow by going deeper in regards to the Spirit's role (vv. 26-27), the sovereignty of God (vv. 28-30), and the assurance of victory (vv. 31-39).

Paul ends here with a clear focus on one word. What is it? Hope. It is use five times in these two verses. And if you have ever experienced suffering, hope is what you long for and struggle to lay hold of. In many respects, suffering is a battle for hope. The gravitational pull of hardship is frustration, bitterness, and depression. Yet the Scriptures offer hope, and that shows us how to respond.

Now the hope that Paul has in mind here is a forward-looking, faith-filled perspective. Hope, in verses 24-25, takes the long view when it comes to suffering. Paul has in mind the future fulfillment of God's redemptive plan, and that is why he says, "in this hope we are saved." He is referring back to verse 23, to the redemption of our bodies and the final adoption as sons.

The word "saved" may be a bit confusing since sometimes the Bible talks about being saved as a something that is a present reality (see Rom. 10:9-10), and there are other times (such as here in Rom. 8:24) where salvation is a future reality. You need to see salvation as both. Like the reference to adoption in verses 23 and 15, "saved" can refer to something presently experienced with a yearning for more that is to yet to come. Think of salvation like an inauguration that announces a new reality, but the full expression still has a future context to it. That is how it is with salvation.

Why is that important? Well, if you fail to understand that salvation is something that is yet to be fully accomplished, then you will not have any room for suffering and hardship. Some people come to faith in Christ in order "trade up." They love hearing that their sins are forgiven and that heaven awaits

them, and they do not realize that to receive the gospel means to become an alien in the world. Without understanding salvation as something yet to be fully accomplished, you can easily fall into hypocrisy or anger. You will either pretend that everything is fine, faking it because real Christians never struggle. Or you will become angry with God because you believe that suffering is not what you signed up for and that God is not keeping His side of the deal. So this category of hope is very important.

What's more, notice that hope, by definition, is something that is not seen. Once you receive it in a tangible and real way, hope is no longer the right word to use. So hope yields to the demand of "I've got to see it to believe it." For many believers this sounds like "I've got to be able to make sense of this. It just isn't fair."

But hope sees with a different set of eyes. It looks beyond the present circumstances, with the eyes of faith. It looks to the work of God, the big picture of what He is accomplishing, and a plan that is beyond the reach of our minds. It looks at the world through the lens of groaning brokenness so that we are not surprised by trials, temptations, or sufferings (see James 1:2-4, 1Peter 1:12-13). What's more, we rejoice because we can see the context of what is really happening.

Where does all of this leave us? Verse 25 sums it up: "If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." This ties the entire passage together since verse 18 told us that our present sufferings were unworthy of what it yet to come. So what is the response of people who "get it" when it comes to biblical suffering?

They respond with patience. Knowing the problem and the plan in the world, believers are able to bear up under the heavy and painful hardships in the world. They embrace endurance, trusting that God has a plan and that somehow someday, he is going to make everything right. They patiently wait, knowing that God is working out His divine will to not just deliver individuals but to deliver all those who put their faith in Jesus.

So if you find yourself in a hard place today, I want to call you to a biblical view of suffering that groans and waits. I want to call you to become a weeping worshipper, a clinging saint, and a God-centered sufferer. I do not want your mantra to be "Keep Calm and Carry On." Instead, I want your mantra to be "Keep trusting the One who keeps you trusting."

Let's be the kind of church where weeping, suffering and struggling people can be prayed for, exhorted, and encouraged to endure to the very end. Let's remind one another that what we experience in the word is unworthy sufferings. Hard is hard, but hard is not bad.

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