

## **Romans: The Promise of Righteousness (part 5 of 6)**

All Things for Our Good

Romans 8:26-30

Mark Vroegop

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*<sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. Romans 8:26–30 (ESV)*

Have you ever had an experience in life where you knew that the Lord was speaking to you, but you were not entirely sure about all of the ramifications?

In 2003 I was attending the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, and I heard John Piper preach a sermon on the life of Adoniram Judson, a missionary to Burma. The text was taken from John 12:24, where it says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Piper illustrated the meaning of this text through the life of Adoniram Judson and applied it to pastors: “God designs that the suffering of his ministers . . . is one of the essential means in the joyful triumphant spread of the gospel.”

The entire sermon was one of those moments where I knew that a man was speaking, but the Word of God struck me deeply. I left the sermon trembling under the weight of not really knowing what suffering was and just sensed that it was time to prepare. Over the next year, I began to read more on the subject of suffering, and I began to query the Bible for how to think and how to live through suffering.

A year and fourteen days from the sermon on Judson, Sarah gave birth to our stillborn daughter who was only a few days from delivery. The journey of dealing with her death, two years of miscarriages, and a blighted ovum, a pregnancy without an embryo, changed us so deeply it is hard to even fully communicate.<sup>1</sup> We felt things we had never felt before, but we also saw things about God that we had never seen before. We learned to live in the tension between pain beyond belief and divine sovereignty beyond comprehension.

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<sup>1</sup> If you want to hear the entire story, Sarah and I recorded a radio program on Revive our Hearts a few years ago: <https://www.reviveourhearts.com/radio/revive-our-hearts/hard-not-always-bad/>

There are many of you who share similar experiences, and there are others whose stories would eclipse ours in terms of pain and difficulty. Some of you are still in the middle of your story. And there are others here who have yet to walk through the “valley.”

I am so grateful for the sermon in 2003 that set in motion a new series of thoughts and that served to help me as I walked through the darkest moment of my life. And I hope that one of the legacies of my ministry in your life is to serve you in the same way that the sermon on Judson served me.

Besides the book of Job, there is no other text of Scripture that has more influence on my understanding of suffering, my view of God or where I find hope, than Romans 8:26-30. I love this passage deeply, and I hope that I can help you understand it, because there is not a person in the room who doesn't need Romans 8:26-30 right now or who will need it in the future.

What I hope happens today from this text is that you are given categories in which to put your suffering and the pain that comes with it. Verses 26-30 give us two categorical assurances regarding hope in the midst of suffering, and I want to show you what that means and why it is helpful.

My goal is to show you that there is hope in suffering because of 1) the assurance of answered prayer and 2) the assurance of purpose in pain. When a believer is suffering, he needs to know that his prayers are being answered and that the pain in his life is not pointless.

### **Assurance #1: Your prayers are being answered (vv. 26-27)**

Our passage today is part of a larger discussion on the issue of suffering which began in verse 18. Two weeks ago we learned that the mantra of a believer in Jesus has to be more than “Keep Calm and Carry On.” Instead, the text called us to see what we value, where we live, what we feel, and how to respond through a biblical lens that considers the sufferings of this present time not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Rom. 8:18). Our last message left us with the charge to wait with patience (v. 25).

So when the first word of verse 26 is “likewise,” it is important to see that what follows is an extension of the previous instruction about suffering. After hearing that we are to wait with patience in the midst of suffering, Paul tells us “how.” Upon what do I anchor my hope?

The first assurance relates to the personal intervention of the Holy Spirit as it relates to our prayers. But before we get into what exactly this means, let me tell you why this assurance is important.

Among all the challenges of suffering, there are two very strong and disturbing thoughts that can assault the believer: 1) I am alone in my struggle and 2) God is not answering my prayers. I'm telling you from personal experience that the devil loves to attack believers by telling us that God has abandoned us and that the future glory is not really worth the present sufferings. The nearness of God and the efficacy of our prayers are ground-zero when it comes to the challenge of suffering. And verses 26-27 are meant to help us see what is really going on. So with that framework, now look at the text.

Notice first the emphasis on the personal intervention of the Spirit. Verse 26 says “the Spirit helps us in our weakness,” and verse 27 says “the Spirit himself intercedes for us.” This is not the first time that we have heard about the Spirit. Previously the Spirit was connected to the presence of Christ (8:9), the hope of

future resurrection (8:11), the defeat of sin (8:13), and the internal witness that we are the children of God (8:16). The Spirit was directly connected to our position in Christ. Now we have a new angle, and both phrases have intimacy and personal presence in mind as it relates to the Spirit.

Suffering brings you face to face with your weakness. It is traumatic because you are not in control and because you do not have the power to change the circumstances. And that powerlessness can make you feel very alone. Yet verse 26 promises us that the Spirit is going to help us through our weaknesses.

One of the main arenas that we see that this weakness highlighted is in prayer. One of the most frightening aspects of suffering is when you don't even know what to pray for anymore. The pain of your situation, combined with the number of prayers that you offered – many of them not answered to your liking – and the uncertainty as to what you should pray since you do not know what God is doing, can all lead you to a very dark place.

Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. You may have said, in tears or frustration, "I don't even know what to pray." And the beauty of Romans 8:26 is that the Bible acknowledges this reality. "For we do not know what to pray for as we ought." Suffering confronts us with our weaknesses at so many levels, even when it comes to what we should pray for.

What is the assurance that is offered here? We find it in the second half of verse 26: "the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." The assurance in this verse is the promise that the third person of the Trinity is bringing our petitions before the throne of God, even the prayers that are more like groanings. When we are hard pressed under the weight of suffering so that we are nearly speechless or confounded, we can be assured that the Spirit is praying in and through our groanings.<sup>2</sup>

A few things that you need to know about this sentence:

- This is the only place in the Bible where the Spirit is said to intercede for the saints.
- Since the next verse talks about the hearts of believers, the groanings should be taken as something in a believer and not as something the Spirit is doing.
- This text is not referring to tongues since this text is applied to every believer and not every believer has received the gift of tongues.
- The groaning through which the Spirit works is the painful or unexpressed groaning of a believer's longing for God's restoration which makes all things new.

The image that you need to see (and feel!) is one of a believer who is struggling with both the effects of a broken creation and the weakness of his own humanity to do anything, including prayer, to really change the circumstances.

What exactly does the Spirit do? According to verse 27, the Holy Spirit conforms our prayers to the will of God. The New Living Translation renders verses 27 this way:

*<sup>27</sup> And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will.*

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<sup>2</sup> See footnote on Romans 8:26 in the ESV Study Bible

So the process goes like this: The Father knows the deep, painful groanings of our hearts, and the Spirit takes these groanings and makes them articulated prayers that are conformed to the will of God. The Holy Spirit takes our painful groanings and translates them in accordance with God's will.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, our prayers are always being conformed to God's will, and our prayers are always being answered in accordance to God's will. The Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Even when we do not know how to pray or do not have the words to say, the Holy Spirit is personally helping our prayers to be answered in and through God's will. That is the promise.

However, now we come to a very critical question and a crossroads issue when it comes to suffering: Does the promise that the Spirit is conforming your prayer to God's will give you hope? I would suspect that some of you might say, "Not really." Because what you really want – quite understandably – is for God to answer your prayers according to your will and what you desire.

This is a normal longing of every human heart, and it is what motivates us to pray. In our need we ask God for His provision. However, suffering creates a collision between our will and God's will. Suffering surfaces a tension between what we would ask for and what the Spirit would ask for. Suffering causes us to deeply evaluate which will – God's or ours - is more important to us. If you just want what you want, you can easily make prayer a quid pro quo or make God your lackey, doing your bidding.

The first assurance here is one that some of you may not really want. And in not wanting it, you are missing the hope and assurance that comes with it. But if you come to love God's will, your prayers, your suffering and your hope suddenly change.

*All-wise God,  
Thy never-failing providence orders every event,  
sweetens every fear,  
reveals evil's presence lurking in seeming good,  
brings real good out of something evil,  
makes unsatisfactory what I set my heart upon,  
to show me what a short-sighted creature I am,  
to teach me how to live by faith upon thy blessed self.<sup>4</sup>*

## **Assurance #2: Your pain has a purpose (vv. 28-30)**

There is another assurance in this text which is equally important and which begs the same question regarding what we really want. We read in verse 26 that "we do not know what to pray for as we ought," and in verse 28 we find another "know" statement.

<sup>28</sup> *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).*

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<sup>3</sup> Schreiner, Thomas R. *Romans*. Vol. 6. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998. Print. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament.

<sup>4</sup> "Peril," *The Valley of Vision – A Collection of Puritan Prayers*, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth: 1975), 101.

This verse is one of the most important passages in Romans and in the entire Bible. As well, it is a defining text when it comes to how to think about suffering. What do we find here?

- The assurance of this text is given “for those who love God,” which means that it applies exclusively to those who are believers in Jesus Christ.
- The promise is that “all things work together for good.” Some have interpreted this to mean that everything will turn out in a way that we think or see as good. Others have used this text as the basis for a prosperity gospel – that God always blesses his children financially or physically. But this phrase cannot be separated from the next phrase. They interpret each other.
- The final phrase, “for those who are called to his purpose,” means that there is a group of people (“the called”) who are living for God’s purpose, and it is for this God-loving, purpose-following people that the promise about “all things working together for good” is made.

There is a startling and hopeful promise here. This text is saying that the children of God can always be assured that there is no pointless pain in their lives. Everything (“all things”) is working together for good. God is at work in everything in a believer’s life to accomplish His good purposes. Those who have been called by God to salvation have also been called to a divine plan, which is always being worked out in every situation. God’s good purposes are never thwarted when it comes to His children. There is never anything that happens to God’s children that God cannot or will not use for the furtherance of His good plan. Everything works out for the good of God’s plan for His beloved children.

This text is not saying that only good things happen to his children. It is saying that God is able to make them good. That is the basis for my statement: “Hard is hard; hard is not bad.” It is what Joseph said to his brothers in Genesis 50:20 – “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” It is the faith of Job as communicated in Job 1:21 – “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

It means that underneath every event and every situation and every pain is a divine plan that God is orchestrating and working out. The present tense of “those who love God” and “working together for good” means that this is continually happening. In other words, God is constantly working in the midst of a believer’s relationship with Him to accomplish things that fit within His plan.

Remember, with prayer the question was whether or not we will value God’s will over our will. Well, here is the same concept, but now it is expressed through God’s plan. Suffering is traumatic because it thwarts our plans, and the question is whether or not we are going to trust that God’s plan is better. There is great assurance in suffering, if you are convinced that there is a glorious, God-centered plan that is being worked out in all circumstances. There is hope when you love God’s plan more than your plan.

Now that raises yet another question. Why would someone love God’s plan more than their own plan? What would create this kind of perspective on suffering that would cause someone to patiently endure trouble and sorrow? The answer is the gospel. The assurance of purpose in pain would be meaningless and discomfiting unless there was another reality that eclipsed suffering and hardship.

God’s plan is for the redemption of the world, including individual, sinful human beings. The beauty of the gospel is that God provides a way for sinners to be forgiven of their sins, adopted into God’s family, declared righteous, and made into the likeness of Jesus. On a personal level, this means that when I put my

faith in Jesus, I believed in God's plan for my life, and I treasured God's will over my own. I believed what the Bible said about me, and I believed that God would forgive me in and through the work of Jesus. So, to be a follower of Jesus means that I have embraced God's purpose for my life.

Unfortunately, many people profess Christ merely because they like the sound of forgiveness, eternal life, and hope. When suffering comes, they reject God, become angry with Him, or accuse God of wrong-doing because in their minds, salvation was a way to make their life better. In many respects, these people put their faith in Christ because it fit with their plan or at least a plan that was better. But when suffering enters the equation, it tests what a person really believes and whose plan is really the best. In other words, suffering surfaces the question as to who is really in charge. Or to put it more bluntly: Who is really sovereign? You or God?

Verses 29-30 show us this idea by giving us a view of salvation from God's perspective. If you fail to see these verses from a heavenly perspective or if you fail to realize the question about sovereignty, you will miss the meaning of this text. You will see it as some fatalistic, robot-creating passage.

These verses highlight the plan or the anchor that is underneath the believer in Jesus. They serve to explain the proposition that "all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose."

There are a number of things to consider here about this text:

First, Paul puts five verbs together which serve as a golden chain of the gospel. These words are not to be separated from each other. Together they give us a total picture of salvation. The words are: foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified. This is God's view of salvation. Paul is telling us that the plan for our lives has a past and future to it that is part of God's purpose.

Second, in verse 29 there is a very important phrase that further unpacks what Paul meant when he said, "called according to his purpose" in verse 28. That phrase is "conformed to the image of his Son . . .," Whatever foreknowledge and predestination mean, the endgame is the goal of human beings looking like Jesus. So you should read verse 28 and 29 together. I have often quoted the passage this way: "We know that for those who love God, all things work together for good . . . to be conformed to the image of his Son." The promise here is that everything in the life of the believer is working out for the good creation of Christ-likeness in them. Therefore, the hope for a believer is that somehow, some way this pain fits with God's plan and is making him like Jesus.

Third, God's aim in this plan is to save not just individuals but a massive group of people. Verse 29 says "that he {Jesus} might be the firstborn among many brothers." The idea here is that Jesus is the first of a multitude of glorified people. Why is that important in suffering? Because we need to be reminded that there is a bigger plan than just our individual lives. God's mission is not just about us. There is a greater and glorious mission of which we are a part, and understanding that changes how your perspective on hardships.

You might think of it in terms of the different expectations that you have when you prepare for a trip to Cedar Point verses preparing for boot camp. Both involve lots of people, activities, scary experiences, and loud shouting. But they could not be any more different. The focus of an amusement park is on the

individual person. It is designed to maximize individual thrills. But a boot camp is focused on the mission. It is designed to maximize individual contribution to something beyond the individual person.

There is also a difference in how you view hardship when it comes to an amusement park and boot camp. At Cedar Point if you are stuck at the top of a ride, something is terribly wrong; you might even sue the park, and you might say, "I didn't sign up for this!" But in boot camp difficult scenarios and uncomfortable challenges are part of the overall experience. If you were to complain that doing push-ups is hard and that seven-mile runs are exhausting and that you don't like to get wet in the woods, someone might loudly ask, "Then why did you sign up?" Do you see the difference?

Unfortunately, there are many believers who have an amusement park mentality. They are grateful for the rides, they love the experiences, and they love being part of a large gathering of people all doing the same thing. But they didn't sign up for difficulty. And when it comes, they think something is wrong. But the real problem is their understanding of whether the Christian life is for amusement or for a mission.

Fourth, there are a string of words that we need to try to understand. I say "try" because these words are hard to fully grasp. Let's start with the easiest and work to the hardest:

**Glorified** – This is the end goal of salvation where the children of God are made perfect in all respects. The physical and the spiritual are now identical in regards to sinlessness. Position and practice are one. Those who put their faith in Jesus are made to be like Him, and everything that was broken is restored.

**Justified** – The act of God whereby He declares sinful human beings to be righteous because of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to those who have put their trust in Him. Justification marks a legal and positional change in a person's relationship with God.

**Called** - The summons of God to salvation where a sinner hears the gospel, sees his or his sin, and is drawn to receive Christ as Savior and Lord. If you are a believer and you remember when the "light-bulb went on" when it came to your understanding of the gospel and your desire to run to Christ, that is what it means to be called.

**Predestined** - This is a statement loaded with mystery and is beyond our ability to fully understand and reconcile. It means that God has a plan for everything in life, especially the conversion of sinners, and He is working everything out in accordance with that plan. Now there is a tension that exists here with our freedom and choice, and you should not hear me saying that people do not really choose to receive Jesus. But you should also know that our choice is not a coincidence or something that we made completely on our own. God was behind everything.

**Foreknew** – This word is close in proximity and meaning to predestined. Paul uses it here to reach even further back into the plan of God to show us that God was setting His love on us much earlier than we ever knew. Some people take this word to mean that God knows who will choose Him, and that He looks into time, knowing who will receive Him. That is not my view for two reasons: 1) The word has more of an intimate meaning than just to know something in the future, and it is connected to relationship and covenant love (see Rom 11:2). 2) If God's initiative is based merely on knowing who would choose Him, then it makes man's decision-making superior to God's. In other words, it makes the authority of man the ultimate value in the universe.

I believe that the ultimate value in the universe is the sovereignty of God. Now that doesn't resolve all the tensions in life. But I think that is a key to understanding God's purposes in sufferings, namely, that there are far more things in life that exist in tension, and that we are called to patiently trust that God is going to work these things out for our good.

The assurance that God gives us here is 1) Our prayers are being answered in accordance to His will and 2) Our pain is never pointless. Do you understand what this means? If you could let go of your need to see the plan, to understand the point, and to have your prayers answered in accordance with your will, there is hope here. This text invites us to trust in God. In the same way that a person places their faith in God for the forgiveness of sins based upon a sacrifice they never saw, so too suffering invites us to place our faith in God that he is good and his plans are good.

This text gives the assurance that everything – absolutely everything – somehow and someday fits with God's good plan for our lives.

I think that pain is expressed best in verse and in song. Second only to the Bible, there is a particular hymn written by William Cowper (1731-1800) that has been a great help to me over the years. If you've been at College Park very long, you have heard me quote it often. Whenever I read it, this hymn gives me a fresh reminder of the power, beauty and hope offered to us in text like these.

*God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants His footsteps in the sea  
And rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never failing skill  
He treasures up His bright designs  
And works His sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy and shall break  
In blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,  
Unfolding every hour;  
The bud may have a bitter taste,  
But sweet will be the flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err  
And scan His work in vain;  
God is His own interpreter,  
And He will make it plain.*

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