

Working Out Personal Suffering

Romans 8:18-30

Introduction

Recently, our family took a vacation to Florida. Angie and I planned it months in advance. We knew which days we were leaving, where we were stopping, the vehicle we'd drive, the road we take, and oh, the destination. Florida in the winter time! Ohio was going to be cold and gloomy, but we...we would be in Florida! It was so exciting to look forward to. But, because we had planned it so far in advance, we kept looking forward to it...it felt like it would never, ever arrive! We even told our kids and they were excited about it too! "Daddy, how many days until we get to go to Florida?" Pull up the calendar on my phone, count it out, 26! "Ugh, 26 days?! I'm tired of school, I just want to GO, NOW!" I would reply, "me too...I wish we could go now." But, we couldn't...our reservations weren't ready. And, it was time yet. We were looking forward with anticipation to something great...but it wasn't here yet. We weren't in Florida yet. There was a tension we felt for what we knew was coming...but hadn't arrived yet. That's the kind of like our passage tonight. Tension from hope.

Context

Last week, Pastor Jason took us through the previous set of verses in chapter 8. We saw two of the main themes: first, we have a bodily deadness and spiritual aliveness. This build on the last few chapters where Paul shows us how we are dead to the flesh. Paul is showing us that the sin that remains has no power over us. Sin cannot force us to submit to it's power, because of what Christ has done. Because of our faith in Christ, we are freed from it's power, and now live in the newness of life in the spirit. Our fleshly body is 'dead', and we are 'alive' in the spirit. What a wonderful truth! We do not have to sin! We now live in the power of the spirit that we have inherited through Christ.

This leads us to the second theme in the previous verses, that we are heirs with Christ. Paul is showing us that Christ's work has brought him into a glorified, free from the effects of sin. However, he first had to suffer greatly to redeem us and to bring us into the fold as God's children...so the father would adopt us as his own. We now live in the wonderful blessing of being God's children, as a part of his family. We have inherited an immeasurable amount of grace and spiritual blessing (Ephesians 2).

However, we are still living in this present world, in this physical body of imperfection, waiting for that future where we are glorified. You may have heard the concept of "already but not yet", which means our future has already been secured. It will happen for sure. But, we have not yet experienced it's fullness. So, we exist in a tension between where we know we will be, and where we currently are. Yes, Jesus has redeemed us. Yes, we are free from the power of sin. Yes, we are adopted as God's children. Yes, Jesus has conquered death. Yes, Jesus has give us new life. But, we exist in this physical body marred by sin. We serve and minister with believers who are in the new life, yet still imperfect. We are surrounded by unbelievers and cultures that continue to spiral towards more and more wickedness and evil. We still live in the midst of creation that degrades every day towards chaos and destruction because of the curse of sin. So, we feel a tension. We can be sure of where we are headed, but it is still ahead of us. We long for the future, yet live in the present sufferings of this world. And, that's what our text is about tonight.

Our Passage

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.

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. 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. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 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. 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 8:18–30 (ESV)

In a world of suffering...

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.
— Romans 8:18 (ESV)

Do you see and feel the tension in verse 18? Present suffering and anguish but future glory that will surely be revealed. We live in the present reality of this world that is the opposite of glory. It's broken, and painful. It's degrading more and more. Scientists observe an effect call the "Law of Entropy". Basically, it means that things continually move towards more chaos, not order. Anything left to itself becomes more disorderly. It's the effects of the curse, visible in science. This is the world we live in. Our world is degrading and is headed for ultimate destruction. As believers we know there's a future when God remakes everything new, and we will experience a world of sinless perfection in his presence forever! But...here we are as passengers on this rock, in this failing culture, with these people, in this body.

And, to make it worse...Paul says it's not even worth comparing the two realities! The suffering we experience in this world is NOTHING compared the to the future glory that we will experience. How wonderful! But...also...how depressing. We must suffer. We must live here in this world, to be born into adoption as sons, and experience the glory to come. We live in tension between the now, and the not yet. And Paul expounds on this in the next three verses.

Creation's anticipation

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.
— Romans 8:19 (ESV)

All of creation itself looks into the future and can't wait for glory that's to come. Creation wants and desires, and longs for that future state of perfect glory. Because it's also suffering, marred by sin, under

the curse. Somehow creation knows that the revealing of the sons of God will mean the remaking and full resolution of the curse. We will be made fully new with glorified bodies, and all of creation will be made new without the effects of sin. Creation itself is desperately and passionately desiring and wanting that future state. It's coming and creation know it.

God's Hope

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.

— Romans 8:20-21 (ESV)

Paul provides a snippet of the backstory about creation. Creation is not in its original state. It's been subject to futility, or a brokenness. Creation is not in the perfect state it was created in. Paul reminds us that it wasn't creation's choice to enter this state, but rather a result of God's choice to lay a curse upon it in response to God's creation of humanity's that rebelled in Genesis 3:17-18.

*...cursed is 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;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.*

— Genesis 3:17c-18 (ESV)

These verses show us that, because of Adam's choice in the garden to disobey God's commands, the whole of creation has been put under a curse by God as part of the overall brokenness of sin entering the world. But, God didn't bring the curse on this world for all of eternity. Creation is looking forward with anticipation that it will be freed from the curse along with the children of God.

Now this word hope isn't like the hope we think of today. It's not the kind of wishing upon a star for something to happen, or some sort of spiritualize willing the future into existence. Hope is more about anticipation. It's about knowing what will happen, and looking forward to it. The concept of hope is rooted in an old Hebrew word that describes when you stretch a rope tightly. There's tension on that rope, and the concept of hope is recognizing that tension and anticipating the release of that tension.¹ That's the idea of hope that Paul speaks of. It's more about anticipating and waiting for the future, not wishing it might possibly come to pass. So, when you see the word hope you can read to yourself "anticipating" or "looking forward to".

So when Paul says that God subjected the earth to a brokenness in hope that it would be freed from that brokenness, there was NO question whether or not that freedom would come. God put the world under a curse knowing the freedom will happen in the future.

Our anticipation

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.

— Romans 8:22-23 (ESV)

¹ Hope (Yahkal) Advent Word Study Video, BibleProject, Tim Mackie

So, creation is looking forward to the future freedom from the curse of sin, but it's still in this present time, under the curse. Ugh! Creation groans! It's in pain! It hurts! This world is full of suffering, even creation feels that suffering.

Paul build on creations groaning, and highlights our groaning. We also have this tension of living in this world, but knowing that for believers there's a new world to come. We have the first-fruits of this new world, this new state, this glorified state to come. What a blessing! But what suffering and agony we go through under the effects of the curse. Still subject to the the effects of sin on creation. This is just a reminder though, that we've already explored in previous chapters how we are no longer under the rule of sin. We who believe and have faith that Jesus is only way, and trust in his work alone...we are free from sin. Yet, we also saw that sin still remains in us (in our flesh) and we wrestle against it.

So, while we have the Spirit, and are on our way to a new, glorified state. We anticipate our full and complete adoption as God's sons which will completely redeem our bodies. We know the world will be made new! But, we still struggle against sin. And we still feel the effects of sin on this world under a curse. So, we must hope, anticipate, and wait...

Our Hope

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.

— Romans 8:24–25 (ESV)

However, the waiting is part of the process. Waiting and anticipation are part of hope. Our salvation involved this kind of future expectation. When we were saved by grace alone through faith alone in the gospel of our King Jesus the Messiah, there is no Biblical promise of instant sinless life. There is no Biblical promise of instant removal out of this broken world. So, this is exactly what we should expect as believers who remain alive...we look forward with anticipation.

In our salvation we saw a future destruction headed for us, and we begged of God to forgive our sins on the merit and work of Jesus. In that saving work of Jesus, we now look forward to a different future, a future filled with glory. We hope in it. And that's exactly what hope is. Hope looks forward to what will come. Hope cannot look back into the past, or at the present. Hope can only see forward. Hope only has the future in view.

So, Paul reminds us that this tension we feel is actually the fabric of hope. We as limited human beings are stuck in the now, in the present time. But, hope draws our attention forward into a time that hasn't happened yet.

That tension remains for us as well. We often desire to skip ahead towards a wonderful and glorious future, but for most of us that is not what God has chosen for us. So we must wait...patiently. Because, while our future is full of wonder beyond our understanding, our current existence is wrought with the effects of sin. Both as we struggle against our flesh, and as we experience the curse on earth.

...headed towards a future of glory.

And all of this exposes in us a weakness, a frailty, an inadequacy....

Our weakness

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

— Romans 8:26a (ESV)

I want to try and address the “likewise”. There are a few ways we could interpret and understand Paul here, but I believe that he is looking at the broader tension that has been building in these verses. This likewise seems to sum up our looking forward with anticipation, but stuck here in our present sufferings. Though God is powerful and has redeemed us and somewhere in the future completely remade all of creation, we are unable to get there on our own. We have a great inability to arrive at this future under our own power.

This is why God has given us the gift of the spirit in us (Romans 5:5). Because we are weak, frail, and deficient on our own. The idea of weakness here is almost like a sickness. As if we are still infected with something that makes us weak and incomplete. And if you remember our time in Romans chapter 7 with Pastor Russ, there should be a connection you make. We still exist in this world, redeemed, freed from the power of sin, but still struggling against a flesh that has sin still embedded in it. It’s an odd and awkward existence for us...but that’s exactly why God has given us the spirit. Because we need help.

Our Help

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. 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.

— Romans 8:26b–27 (ESV)

Paul zooms in for a moment to provide an example of our weakness or our inability. We don’t even know how to pray! How many times have you been confronted with a situation, go to cry out to God...and are at a loss for words? The more I grow and the more I pursue Christ...the more I understand my sheer inability to pray well. Do I pray for relief and deliverance? Because that’s what I want! But, if I pray for deliverance, maybe I won’t grow and I’ll have to go through a similar trial again. So do I pray for endurance and grace? What if I need to fail in my endurance to learn? Oh how I don’t know how to pray Lord! Sometimes a groan is all I can muster, knowing that I have the Spirit who communicates with God on my behalf. The spirit can communicate at a level we are unable to, and it’s a wonderful encouragement. Our inability to pray well is made up for by the Spirit’s work on our behalf.

The most wonderful part is that this is the will of God! To give us the spirit, so as we pray, the Spirit goes between us and God. The spirit works for us, for all saints! Isn’t it wonderful to know that prayer’s power doesn’t rely on perfect words or phrases? But, rather on the work of the Spirit doing the work between us and God, like a direct connect that perfectly translates what we express to God.

Our Confidence

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 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. 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 8:28–30 (ESV)

As we reach the end of our passage, Paul zooms back out. He just showed us an example of our weakness, and now he shows us the bigger picture to bolster our confidence in what is to come. He reassures us of our place in Christ, and how it relates to our place in this world.

Many of us have heard this verse numerous times. But, let's attempt to look at it with fresh eyes, realizing it's place in the passage we've been exploring. We are looking forward to a glorious future, yet we are stuck in the present sufferings of this world. We are weak and need the Spirit's help even to pray. And yet...all of this is being used by God for our good, for those of us who love and bow our knee to him. Our suffering, our weakness, this tension, all of it...for us. Because we have been called to his good purposes. Do you remember what Paul has already told us about suffering in Romans 5:1-5? Suffering produces hope!

We get a small glimpse here of God's good purpose for us. We are being transformed, and conformed into people who bear the image of his Son...Jesus! Jesus was the first person to experience that perfected, glorified state. He was the "firstborn" of those who believe. And, we can look forward to that full and complete glorification to come. It's a real, sure thing. Because, as Paul shows us there's a progression that leads to glorification. From calling, to glorification. God knew us before the foundation of the world, he set a destiny for us to be adopted as his sons, he called us, he justified, and lastly he has glorified...in the future.

Reflect and Respond

Well, as we think about this section of Romans shapes our lives, we are left in a state of waiting, a state of tension. As children of God who are being transformed into Christ's image, we know we will experience glorification. We know we will be with God in a future where we (along with Creation) are remade without the effects of the Genesis 3:17 curse and without the existence of sin. As we look at this truth, there's a few things I want to highlight as we wrap up our time in this passage.

Suffering is Normal

First, this world is full of suffering. The curse has made life hard. Sin has infected and impacted every aspect of our world. We're stuck in this fleshly body, freed from its power over us, but we must wrestle against sin. We work hard to provide for our physical needs by having jobs that are stressful and difficult. By the sweat of our brow we eat, and we are constantly pricked by thorns. We deal with the tragedy of disease and death. We experience persecution and hate for our faith. We suffer! This suffering feels unnatural, it feels like it's wrong. And, at some level it is, because creation didn't start with this kind of suffering, and those of us who are redeemed know of a suffering free future. But, Paul reminds us that the sufferings we experience now, though they are severe and painful...aren't even worth comparing to the glory that's coming our way. Hallelujah! What a savior we have!

But these sufferings have a purpose, they are God's working in our lives. They are not by accident. They are producing in us a new kind of person that looks more like Christ, full of eager expectation of what's to come. That that leads us to our second point.

The Tension is Real

Second, many of us feel a restlessness. A frustration or discontent with the immediate world and its sufferings. We often want to skip past this present life and jump straight to heaven with Jesus! We want to get to what we know is coming...a glorified, sinless existence, but we feel stuck here. Scripture calls

out this tension as something we should expect. In fact, this tension and yearning is experienced by all of creation, not just believers. Because, this is part of hope, because hope looks forward.

Keep your eyes forward on Christ, while we wait patiently as Paul reminds us. This is part of what the grace of God looks like right now in our lives, looking forward to the glory that's on it's way. Because, it's only in God's timing and the Spirit's help that we'll arrive.

Hope Keeps us Going

Last, our hope keeps us looking forward. As we experience suffering, we *know* what will come, not wishing it *might* come true, but looking forward with eager expectation and excitement. We may not know the when the day or hours is, but we look to what's ahead. That's what hope is. Our hope is looking forward to Jesus, our glorification, the world remade, no more sin, no more tears, no more suffering! Because of what Jesus has done. Yes, we are redeemed now and free from sin now, but the work of Christ hasn't fully been experienced by us yet...there's so much more to come. And that should keep us going. That should inspire us and make the work Christ even more grand! Stay the course. Keep going. Don't lose hope, don't lose focus on the future that's on it's way.

Praise God that we know that He is with us now, and oh what a day we can look forward to when we will be with him in glory. Let's look forward with confidence, relying on the Spirit's help, serving our glorious King. Amen?