

Suffering and Glory: Romans 8:17-22

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Last Sunday we considered the great theme of adoption which Paul writes about it here in Romans 8. Those who are in Christ (repenting of sin and resting in Christ's righteousness and Christ's atoning work on the cross) have been adopted as children of the Almighty God. We also talked about assurance. God wants us to be assured of our relationship with Him, and the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us, testifies with our spirit that we are indeed children of God. The third thing we talked about last Sunday is the inheritance that is ours because we are God's children. We will inherit the world – the new heavens and new earth. We will inherit new, glorified bodies. And most wonderful of all, we will inherit God Himself. That is what we have to look forward to - delighting in the beauty of God's greatness, with a resurrected body free from the temptations and trials we struggle with now, and in a renewed world that does not present any of those temptations or trials.

But lest we think that we're going to have that inheritance now, lest we think that we're going to have heaven on this earth, in these bodies, lest we ignore a very important piece of how God lovingly cares for His children, Paul reminds us that suffering is an essential experience on the road to glory.

The first half of verse 17 is a mountain-top celebration of tremendous hope! As children of God, we have an inheritance. We are heirs! We are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ! The second half of verse 17 is the sober reality of what has to happen on the way to that inheritance. Paul's words seem somewhat abrupt, but it's such an important truth for us to come to terms with, and even rejoice in. He says, We're "heirs of God and fellow heirs of Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." Christ suffered, and is now glorified. We must also suffer, and will one day be glorified. And what this passage goes on to describe is that all of creation, likewise, is presently in a state of suffering and is yearning for glory.

So we're going to dwell on these three things this morning: *Christ's* suffering and glory, *our* suffering and glory, and *creation's* suffering and glory.

Christ's Suffering and Glory

When Jesus began sharing with His disciples that He must suffer many things, that He must be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again, it was incomprehensible to the disciples. It was so shocking, in fact, that Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked Him. Peter said, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you" (Matthew 16:22). The idea of Jesus suffering was not on the radar screen at all for the disciples. It seemed preposterous. How could it be possible for the Messiah to suffer?

But this is the shocking and sweet message of the Gospel. The eternal Son of God, sinless, spotless, undeserving of any punishment, offered Himself to be slain in our place. He was rich, but He became poor for our sake (2 Corinthians 8:9). He was enjoying the splendor of heaven, but He entered this fallen world for our sake.

As a result of His sacrificial suffering, He is now exalted on high. Philippians 2 spells out this sequence so clearly.

Christ Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:6–11, ESV)

He suffered on the cross, and He is now exalted, to the glory of God the Father. This is Christ's experience of suffering and glory. It is the path He blazed, and it's the path on which we now follow Him.

Our Suffering and Glory

Right after Peter tried to rebuke Jesus for this mention of suffering, and Jesus rebuked Peter in return, Jesus then said to His disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). We are united to our Savior. The pattern of His life becomes the pattern of our lives. Suffering, then glory.

This is what Paul is referring to in Romans 8:17. We are heirs with Christ. We are going to be glorified with Him. But

that's not the whole story. There's something else that is essential to the Christian experience, something that precedes glory, something that prepares us for glory—and that is suffering.

This is not a real fun idea, and our initial reaction may be just like Peter's. Please, say it ain't so, Jesus! You don't deserve to suffer, Jesus. And we certainly don't want to suffer ourselves. Isn't there a way to get the glory without the suffering? Isn't there a detour we can take in order to bypass the suffering, and just get directly to the glory? We're always looking for the shortcut, aren't we?

And there may be shortcuts here and there in life, but there's no shortcut to glory. There's going to be suffering, and later there will be glory. There's no way around it. There's going to be suffering in this life, in some way, shape, or form, and our glory in heaven will come later.

This is the way God set it up, and it's ultimately for His glory and also for our good. Just think about it for a moment. What if we could avoid suffering, pain, trials, heartache, disease, discomfort, in this life, and then we were brought into the splendor of God's presence. If we lived in this world with every good thing this world has to offer, and avoided all the hurtful things, what would our perspective be as we entered glory?

Well, first of all, God would not be glorified as He ought, because we would take the good things for granted. We wouldn't be longing for heaven like we should be. We wouldn't be clinging to Christ and crying out to God for help. And this is easy to fall into, for any of us who are living a relatively easy life. But suffering comes, and it reminds us that this world is not our home. Our hope must not be in the health or wealth or possessions or success or comfort, because all of this is fading. It's for God's glory and also for our good. If God left us in our ease and comfort, we would be idolaters. We would be looking to these good things as our most prized possessions, instead of looking to God and to the beauty of His greatness, which is the only beauty that can satisfy us forever. When suffering comes into our lives, it's a reminder to look away from the fading beauty of this world, and to fix our eyes on what is truly glorious. God uses the suffering of this life to point us toward heaven and to prepare us for heaven. The pain of this life cultivates in us an appetite for heaven.

Paul's point in verse 18 is that the suffering is worth it, because the glory will be so wonderful. If it's true (and it is) that there is no way to glory other than through suffering, then be assured that the journey is worthwhile. Yeah, it's going to hurt.

It's not going to be easy. But it's worth it because of what's on the other side!

As I look out on this congregation and think of the various trials many of you have endured, I think of how sweet it will be to gather together in heaven and put our arms around each other and say, "We made it!" Praise God that He revealed Himself to us so profoundly in the midst of suffering and caused us to persevere and drew us close to Himself, so that we can now be filled to overflowing with gratitude and praise. It's worth it, friends. Please see that in verse 18. May this verse be a great encouragement to you when you are facing trouble—"the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." There's glory that's going to be revealed to us, so keep going. Press on, because God has something great in store for you. He's sovereign over these trials, and He has a very good purpose for them. He's leading you to glory.

In 2 Corinthians 4:17 Paul writes, "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:17). There again is the comparison, or lack of comparison, between the afflictions of this life and the glory that is to come. Afflictions seem so weighty in the moment, and they are. They are weighty. They are tremendously significant in our lives. The point here is not to minimize how earth-shattering the death of a loved one can be, or the heartache of an unsaved family member, or the emotional agony of a broken marriage, a broken family, a financial crisis, a chronic disease, or a tragic accident. These things affect us deeply.

But when we zoom out to the perspective of eternity, when we look at the present in light of what God has in store for us, then the present trials appear as light and momentary in comparison to the *eternal* weight of glory which is our inheritance.

Later in Romans 8 we find one of the most famous and most precious promises in the Bible. Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." The "all things" of that verse, of course, includes suffering. All of your suffering in this life is working together for your good, in God's plan. The following two verses contain a golden chain. This is in verses 29-30.

"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 8:29–30, ESV)

There is a vast group of people whom God foreknew and predestined, and that entire group of people will one day be glorified. And notice what God predestined these individuals for. He predestined them to be conformed to the image of His Son. For that to happen, there has to be suffering. If we’re going to be conformed to the image of our older brother, Jesus Christ, if we are to be identified with Him, and if we are to one day share His inheritance, we must suffer, following behind Him in the path He walked (cf. 1 Peter 2:21). That path will lead to glory.

Just to clarify, it’s not that the suffering earns our glory. That’s not the connection at all. Christ, in His perfect life and His sacrificial suffering, earned this glory. It’s by grace that we are united to Him and share in His inheritance. So it’s not that we are earning anything through our suffering. But we are identifying with our Savior when we are persecuted or when we suffer in other ways, and thus we are being prepared for glory, in God’s good plan for us.

Like William Cowper writes in his hymn, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,”

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

When we look at the narrative of Jesus’ life—His suffering and His glory—we should find tremendous assurance that this is the case. Behind a frowning providence God hides a smiling face. Think of the death of Jesus on the cross. What a dark providence! And yet God’s smile is beaming through it, for the glory of His Son and for the good of all His people. Likewise, when we encounter frowning providences in our lives, be assured that God is smiling down upon you, preparing you for an eternal weight of glory that is beyond our comprehension.

Creation’s Suffering and Glory

Verse 18 makes the point that the suffering is worth it on the path to glory. Verses 19-22 bolster that point with the fact that even creation is suffering and yearning for that day when God’s children will be glorified. Verse 19 says, “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.” By creation he must be referring to all of the material universe minus

human beings. One of the reasons I say that is because verse 20 says, “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly . . .” Human beings did so willingly. Adam and Even chose to disobey, and then the consequences came. But the rest of creation—the whales and bears and trees and grass and rivers and oceans—did not will to disobey. They did not consciously act in such a way as to bring this futility which it is now subject to.

God created human beings in His image with the capacity to make moral decisions. And when they disobeyed, the consequences affected not only them, but the rest of creation as well. Paul is making a point here about the rest of creation. We feel the futility and frustration of this fallen world. What Paul is saying here is that even the non-human realm of this universe feels it too.

These verses reflect back on the curses found in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God had commanded them not to do. Then they hid themselves from the Lord and tried to cover their nakedness. When the Lord found them, He pronounced a curse on the serpent, first of all. Then He announced the consequences for the woman, and then for the man. Here’s what He said to the man.

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ *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. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.””
(Genesis 3:17–19, ESV)

This is what Paul is talking about when he says that “the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it . . .” It was God who subjected the creation to futility, as a result of the Fall. It was God who pronounced this curse on the ground, that there would be thorns and thistles. Things would no longer be like it was in Eden, in the perfection of God’s good creation. Sin had now entered the world, and the repercussions would reach to the ends of the universe.

Romans 8:20 does not explicitly say who subjected the creation to futility. It’s in the passive voice (it was subjected to futility). But the reason we know this is a reference to God is because of the last two words in verse 20—“in hope.” This cannot be referring to Adam as the one who subjected the creation to futility. Nor can it be referring to Satan as the one who subjected it

to futility. Because neither of them pursued this course “in hope” of a future redemption. God is the One who had a bigger plan in this, a glorious plan. He even announced it in the midst of the curses in Genesis 3. In His words to the serpent, the Lord said,

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”” (Genesis 3:15, ESV)

So even in the wake of the Fall, God is already declaring that a Savior will come, who will crush the head of the serpent. This is good news for those who become children of God. It is also good news for the rest of creation, which Paul points out in our verses in Romans 8. Verse 21 says that subjecting the creation to futility happened “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.”

Notice that the creation’s eager longing, and its future freedom, are bound up in the glory of the children of God. Verse 19 mentions the revealing of the sons of God. Verse 21 mentions the glory of the children of God. This is the connection between verses 17-18 and verses 19-22. The children of God are on the path of suffering leading to glory. And the creation is on that path as well, eagerly awaiting that day when we will reach glory. For on that day, the creation will also be renewed.

Recognize this: the great things God is going to do at the end of this age are cosmic in scope. What’s going to happen when Jesus returns is far bigger than we can imagine. It’s not just going to be that some people are going to be teleported to heaven. If that’s the idea you have in your head, it’s far too small. *Everything* is going to change. Everything will be renewed. Those who are trusting in Jesus will be welcomed into God’s presence. Those who are not trusting in Jesus will be cast out into eternal darkness. And those who are in Christ, who are welcomed into God’s presence, will dwell in a new heavens and new earth. Everything will be set right, like it was in Eden. In fact, it will be even better than in Eden, because we will see the full scope of God’s amazing attributes which have been revealed in the history of redemption. The extent of this renewal will reach to the uttermost parts of the universe. It will all be new. We yearn for that. And the rest of creation yearns for that as well.

Right now, things are not as they should be. We recognize this in big and small ways. When we were on vacation in MI, we were commenting that the state bird must be the mosquito. And it turns out that mosquitos really like me. The feeling is not mutual.

I'm like a mosquito feeder. And our kids are little mosquito feeders. I think mosquitos must be a result of the Fall.

I think of weeds in my yard, that always seem so much more hearty than the grass. I think of branches and trees that fell to the ground a few nights ago during the storm. These are small indications that things are not as they should be.

In bigger ways we grieve the deaths of 19 firemen in the wildfires near Pheonix, Arizona two weeks ago. In disasters like that we actually get a vivid image of hell on earth. We understand from this that the world in which we live is broken. The sinfulness of mankind has impacted all of creation. There are thorns and thistles. There is futility. There is frustration. There are tsunamis and tornadoes and earthquakes and draughts and deadly heat and deadly cold and deadly storms and deadly volcanoes.

I remember being in Pompeii, Italy years ago and walking through the remains of that ancient city which had been smothered in ash when Mount Vesuvius erupted. These are things that will not happen in the new heavens and new earth. If there are volcanoes, they won't be deadly. It will be like going to Yellowstone to see Old Faithful. We'll gather around, watch the thing erupt, and praise God for the cool things He can make happen. But there will be no death or destruction.

I don't know what all to expect in the new heavens and new earth. But it's abundantly evident in our world today that things have gone very wrong. The encouraging point for us is that we, the children of God, along with creation, are on this path of suffering leading to glory. There is an eager longing for that experience of glory. There is anticipation, yearning . . .

The last verse we're going to cover this morning, verse 22, gives us an interesting description of what this yearning is like. "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now."

As most of you know, my wife is nearing the end of a pregnancy. We are expecting a baby boy who is due in just a few weeks. And there will be birth pangs when he is born. Childbirth is not an easy thing. Even now, there is much discomfort as she carries around a growing baby in her womb. It's hard for her to sleep at night. It's hard to move around. She's tired. But it's worth it, because we are so excited to have this little baby boy with us in just a few weeks. (Of course, that's easy for me to say—I'm not the one who's pregnant, but Stacy says it's worth it, too). We like to sit around and watch him moving in Stacy's belly. He's

pretty active sometimes, and we see him sticking out a leg or arm over here, then over there—and we're eagerly longing for his birth. That's how creation is longing for glory. It's not that this pain is leading to death. It's leading to new birth. A new heaven and new earth is going to be born.

Next week, we'll continue with this theme, as verses 23-25 focus again on the hope we have, waiting for the redemption of our bodies. I encourage you to continue to meditate this week on the relationship of suffering and glory. Christ's suffering and glory, our suffering and glory, and even creation's suffering and glory. In your trials, in your pain, don't shake your fist at God. Instead, preach to yourself, "It's worth it. I'm walking in Jesus' steps. God is smiling down on me even through this frowning providence. And someday soon I'm going to be with Him, in paradise, forever."