

Hope and Help: Romans 8:23-27

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Last Sunday the sermon was from Romans 8:17-22, and we saw in those verses the theme of suffering and glory—Christ’s suffering and glory, our suffering and glory, and creation’s suffering and glory. Present suffering leading to future glory is the theme that characterizes the age in which we live. Ever since the fall in the garden, there has been suffering. The whole universe is broken. And it would be a very sad story, indeed, if that was the final word. But that’s not the final word. Our brokenness and the brokenness of this world is not the end of the story. For Christ allowed Himself to be broken in order to bring healing and wholeness and hope. Everything is going to be set right someday. We don’t know when exactly that’s going to happen. We don’t know the day or the hour when Jesus will return and bring that about. But we do know *that* it’s going to happen. Jesus, Himself, taught this, and we know the authenticity of His words and the truthfulness of His words. He rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and as the disciples stood there gazing into the sky, two angels said to them, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). So we expect His return. We wait for His return. We prepare for His return. And we persevere in the difficulties of this present time as we eagerly anticipate His return. We suffer now, but with the knowledge that glory is going to be revealed to us. The suffering is worth it, because the glory of heaven is going to be so great.

“Hope and Help” is the title of the sermon this morning, and those will be the two headings I’ll use for this passage. First, “hope” in verses 23-25. And then “help” in verses 26-27. I’m praying that both of these points will be tremendously encouraging to all of us today. I want us to be hope-filled people. And I want us to know the amazing help we receive from the Spirit.

This is a message that should clarify for us what it’s like to be a Christian in this present time. This passage should give us a genuine feel for what the Christian life is like in the time between Christ’s first coming and His second coming.

Hope (verses 23-25)

Have you ever been let down? Did anyone ever stand you up on a date? Or maybe your mom or dad said they were going to take you on some exciting outing or buy you something you really wanted, and then it didn't happen. Or maybe your investments took a plunge. Or your employer wronged you in some way, or disappointed you. Or doctors didn't give you the care you needed. Or a friend turned on you.

Such disappointments in life are the result of unfulfilled hopes. We hope for many things. It's part of who we are. We have desires. We have longings. We have dreams of what we would like to see happen in our lives in the future. This is also part of living in a world where the future is unknown to us, and therefore our desires for the future are uncertain. That achievement or experience or possession or promotion that you'd like to become a reality someday—there's no way you can be certain that it will actually happen. But you *hope* for it.

We hope for things on various levels of significance. We may say that we hope the Pirates win. We may say that we hope the weather is nice (we hope it's not too hot on Sunday morning, since there's no AC).

On a deeper level, we hope to have fulfilling relationships with others. We hope that our families will be strong. We hope to love and be loved. We hope that we will not be lonely. We hope to be active in meaningful work. We hope that our lives will leave a legacy.

And even more significant than these questions are the questions of eternity. Every person ought to look squarely at the question of eternity and consider what is going to happen when you die. And I think everyone would say, "I hope I'll go to a better place." For many people, that's a very vague notion. But we know from Scripture that those who are trusting in Christ *will* go to a better place. Believers can have a sure hope, a confident hope, because Jesus took our punishment and conquered death, and we will share in His inheritance forever. That is good news, and it is a glorious hope for the future.

But still, it is something we *hope* for. We can be confident that it will happen, but as of now we have not yet come into that inheritance. It's ours, but we don't have our hands on it yet. And this is where we live in the present time.

Firstfruits

What we have now is the firstfruits. This is what verse 23 says, that we have the firstfruits of the Spirit. In the Old Testament, the firstfruits were the first portions of a crop which were to be offered to the Lord, representative of the fact that it all belonged to the Lord. The New Testament uses that imagery in various ways. For instance, Christ's resurrection is said to be the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Corinthians 15:20). Christ's resurrection is a foretaste of what the resurrection will be like for all those who are trusting in Him. And His resurrection is a guarantee of our resurrection.

And then, here in Romans 8 we are told that we have the firstfruits of the Spirit, meaning that the Spirit is the firstfruits of our inheritance. He is the guarantee of what is to come for us. This reinforces what Paul had just said in verses 15-17, that *“you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ . . .”*

The inheritance is not yet in our possession. It belongs to us, because of our union with Christ. But we are not there yet. What we have is the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, assuring us of our adoption. And the fact that the Spirit is in us is a guarantee that the rest of the inheritance is coming too.

Ephesians 1:14 uses a different word, but basically a synonym, to make this point. It says that we “were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the *guarantee* [down payment, first installment] of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (see also 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5). We have the guarantee now, which is proof that we will have the inheritance later.

Already, Not Yet

We have the firstfruits now, which is proof that we will one day experience the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. Now, here's this tension again between what we already have now, and what is yet to come in the future. Because just a few verses earlier Paul said that we “have received the Spirit of adoption as sons,” and that “we are children of God.” But now he's saying that we “wait eagerly for adoption as sons.”

Why would we be waiting for something we already have? Well, this is what we have to understand about the Christian life.

And this is what gives us an insight into the nature of Christian hope. We have the down payment. We have the guarantee. We have the firstfruits. But we don't yet have the inheritance in all its fullness. That is yet to come. And that's why we groan and wait and hope.

Yes, it's true, we *are* children of God now. As verse 14 says, "all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." So if you are a believer, if you are repenting of sin and resting in Christ, then you are a child of God. But the day is still future when we will gain possession of our inheritance.

And part of that inheritance is the redemption of our bodies. This points to the fact that our eternal existence in the new heavens and new earth is going to be a physical existence. We're not going to be disembodied spirits. We're going to have resurrected bodies which will never get sick and will have the capacity to enjoy God far more than we can here in these frail bodies. So that is something to look forward to—the redemption of our bodies.

Now, let's make sure we can identify with what Paul is talking about here. Do you feel this tension between what has been promised us, and the longing for the final fulfillment of those promises? Do you feel the joy of salvation, and yet the groans of living in this fallen world?

Verse 24 says that "in this hope we were saved." Again, there's that tension. We were saved—past tense. But it's in hope—future-oriented. Not all the benefits of our salvation have come to realization as of yet. We are saved from our sin. God's condemnation no longer hangs over us. But we're waiting in hope for the ultimate deliverance from sin that is to come.

The rest of verse 24 makes a very obvious point, but which again illustrates what it's like to live as a Christian in this world. "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?"

I talked earlier about various things we hope for. But if you get what you hope for—if you get the promotion, or you get the possession or the experience you were hoping for, then it's no longer hope. Once you have it, you're no longer hoping for it. But until you have it, as you are desiring it, that's what hope is.

Engagement, Marriage

An illustration that comes to mind when I'm thinking of the already and not yet of the Christian life is the engagement period

that couples go through leading up to marriage. They have pledged themselves to be married, there's usually an engagement ring that is a kind of firstfruits or guarantee that they have promised to marry one another. And yet there is a season of time before they are actually married.

I remember well the few months of my engagement to Stacy. On a summer evening in a beautiful garden I got down on my knee and asked her to marry me. And she said yes. It was thrilling! We celebrated together with our families. Our hearts soared. But it was going to be over 5 months before we would actually be husband and wife. During those 5 months we spent a lot of time together, but we weren't living together.

By the way, that's God's design. Lots of people move in together, and then later they think about maybe getting married. But God's design is that a couple enters into the covenant of marriage, and then sex and living together follows that.

So there were those months of being so happy that we were going to get married, but also feeling so intensely that we want that day of our wedding to come quickly. Finally, the day arrived. And our hopes became reality. And now, it would be absurd for me to say, "I am desperately hoping to be married to Stacy." I *am* married to Stacy! What I once hoped for has now become a reality.

And likewise, there will be a day when we no longer hope for heaven. We will no longer hope for the redemption of our bodies. We will no longer hope for our inheritance as children of God. Because one day it will be reality.

But now, in this present time, we wait for it eagerly. We have much joy because we are united to Christ, the Spirit indwells us, the Father has adopted us. But we long to experience the fullness of all that is going to mean for us. Our fellowship with God is hindered in so many ways now, due to a fallen world, and frail bodies, and fleshly desires. So we groan in anticipation of the unhindered fellowship we will have with God in heaven.

How eager are you?

Now I want to ask you a couple of application questions here, in connection with hope. The first is to ask, "how eager are you?" As Paul describes groaning inwardly and waiting eagerly and hoping, you might be sitting there thinking, "I don't think I can really identify with those feelings." That should concern you.

This is a helpful diagnostic test for your spiritual life. If I were to ask you if you're looking forward to heaven, and you replied, "Eh, I'd rather go to Kennywood," then there's something wrong with you. As God works in our lives, and as our relationship with Him deepens, then our hope and eagerness for heaven is going to intensify.

Test yourself here. Are you groaning for your eternal inheritance, or are you pretty content with the stuff you have here? Don't be too easily pleased.

There is a balance here, which we need to notice. Verse 23 says "wait eagerly." Verse 25 says "we wait for it with patience [or perseverance, steadfastness, endurance]." So we do need to be patient. There needs to be a certain kind of contentment. We need to persevere in this time of struggles and suffering on our way to glory. But we must also be on the edge of our seats, on our tiptoes, looking to the horizon for the coming of our King!

What do you meditate on?

Related to this, I'll ask you, "What do you meditate on?" Your initial response might be, "I don't meditate on anything. That sounds new-age-ish." But we all think about things. Our minds dwell on various things. And that's what I'm asking. Are you thinking obsessively about hopes you have in this life? In the moments when your thoughts are able to wander, what are the things that rush to the forefront of your mind? What are the hopes and desires that you dwell on? *How often do you dwell on heaven?* It's so easy to be totally consumed with the schedule and the tasks and the wants of this world, without giving much of a thought to where we're going.

How we perceive the future massively impacts the way we feel and the way we act in the present. Therefore this is a very practical application point. If you lift up your eyes to gaze at the glorious reward that is coming to us, then you're going to see all of life in a new perspective. You'll have comfort in the difficult times, because you know something better is coming. And you won't become an idolater in the easy times, because you'll be reminded not to settle for lesser pleasures. You'll wait patiently, and eagerly.

You might want to consider reading a book on heaven, or listening to a sermon on heaven, or spending some time reading and praying over passages like Revelation 21-22 or 1 Corinthians 15.

If you find yourself saying, “I don’t think about heaven very much. In fact, I don’t have much of a longing for heaven,” you should do something about that. Begin to consciously turn your thoughts toward heaven, study the Scriptures to have a more detailed understanding of heaven, meditate on heaven, and you will probably find that your eagerness grows.

Help (verses 26-27)

The Holy Spirit is prominent in this chapter. We have seen some huge ways in which the Spirit helps us. In verse 4, as we walk according to the Spirit the righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled in us. In verse 11, our mortal bodies will be raised one day through the Spirit who dwells in us. In verse 13, it’s by the Spirit that we put to death the deeds of the body. In verse 16, the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.

And now, the Spirit also helps us in our weakness, specifically concerning prayer.

“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.” (Romans 8:26–27, ESV)

These two verses are mysterious and also incredibly comforting and encouraging. It is mindboggling to think of the communication between the Persons of the Trinity—the Spirit interceding on our behalf to the Father. It’s also mysterious to think of the Spirit interceding for us with groanings too deep for words. I can’t get my mind around all that.

But it is incredibly encouraging to me, because there are plenty of times when I don’t know what to pray. Do you ever feel that way? You’re faced with a situation, and you’re just not sure what to even ask for. Life is complex, and trials are hard, and sin is messy. How do we pray? Well, sometimes we just don’t know. Should we pray that God will be glorified by taking away the cancer, or that God would be glorified by that individual persevering in faith even unto death? Do we pray that the persecution of Christians would cease, or that the Gospel would spread like wildfire under the pressure of persecution? Do we pray for our trials to be lifted, or do we pray to be sanctified in the midst of the trials? Well, a lot of times it’s going to be both / and. We’re praying for the trial to be lifted, but we’re also praying that as long

as the trial lasts that God would use it for His good purposes in our lives.

But the thing is – we don't know what His plans are. We don't know the secret will of God. We know His revealed will in Scripture. We know His commands. We know right and wrong. We know that we should pursue obedience. And therefore we know plenty of things to pray for. But in terms of the events of life that are out of our control but under the sovereign control of God, we are not going to know exactly how to pray, because we don't know His secret will.

And that's why these 2 verses are so comforting. I don't need to fret over whether I'm praying for the right thing. I simply come before the Lord, very apparent of my need for Him, acknowledging that I don't even know what to pray for, and I lift up the situation to Him. And, amazingly, here's what happens. The Spirit communicates in and through those groanings to the Father. And the Father, who searches hearts, hears the Spirit. Even though we don't know what to ask for or how to put our needs into words, the Father sees our hearts and the Spirit communicates our groanings to the Father in a way that matches His will for the situation.

So when you don't know how to pray, take comfort in the fact that the Spirit is interceding for you. Make known your desires to God. Pray for help. Pray for God to be glorified in your life and in whatever situation you are praying about.

Jesus modeled this for us in Gethsemane. "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). And we think of Paul's affliction of the thorn in his flesh. He pleaded three times that it should leave him. But the Lord's response was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

We can pray for the trial to be lifted, but we must also be prepared for the trial to continue. And whichever happens, we can be confident that God is working out His good plans for us, through our prayers and through the intercession of the Spirit. All of the Spirit's prayers are in line with God's will, and therefore the answer is always "yes" to the Spirit's prayers.

And that's why the outcome of every situation, even when we don't know what to ask for, is going to work together for our good—for those who love God and are called according to His

purpose. And that's the promise of Romans 8:28 which we'll study next Sunday.