

Romans 8:18-30: *Help in the Groans of Life*, 10/18/20

Today I want to talk about one of the most famous and familiar verses in the Bible **Romans 8:28** *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

For some of you, it may be your favorite verse- You may have this verse on a coffee mug or bedazzled on a tee-shirt. This is a verse that has been a great comfort for many Christians throughout the centuries because of its astounding truth. But this is also a verse that can feel hollow and frustrating, especially when we speak it to someone blithely in a time of immense pain. Let me just take a moment to say, that just because a verse is in the Bible doesn't mean it fits the moment. **Proverbs 21:9** *Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.* Not meant to be weaponized fellas. Don't get that tattooed on your arm. Ladies don't use this verse on your husband- **Proverbs 26:11** *As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly.* Don't tell him this is his life verse or get him a Father's Day tie with this verse on it.

Ok- on a more serious note- The reason **Romans 8:28** can be both a beloved truth and a hard pill to swallow is because of our varied experiences of suffering in life. Some of us have suffered hard times, you prayed and trusted, and God delivered you from the circumstance or maybe even gave you something better than before. And so Romans 8:28 has been this powerful reality for you. But if we are honest, some of us have been through hard times, you have prayed and trust, and things got worse. Life got harder. There is no discernable "good"...for years, decades. An incurable physical or mental illness that has stolen your vitality and made you a shell of the person you once were, wiped out all your money from treatments that haven't worked. And there are countless examples of seemingly pointless suffering. Maybe you have found yourself sitting with a friend or family member who is in the middle of that valley of suffering and you wonder how Romans 8:28 can be true...or maybe that's you. So today we want to talk about what this verse really says about suffering in the context of Romans 8. Let's start by briefly addressing 3 Myths about suffering.

Myth #1 If I live right, I can avoid suffering.

What makes every myth believable is because it has some truth in it. The wisdom books of the Bible like Proverbs tell us that in God's economy, there's a way that we can live in accordance with our intended design for us that may generally bring less suffering and more prosperity. Hard work may generally produce financial security. A positive outlook and attitude may generally bring about more joy and peace. So we should pursue those things.

But it is also true that we can eat all the right foods and exercise all we want and still get cancer. You can stand up for your faith by refusing to promote something in school that at contradicts your convictions and you by doing so you get silenced or even worse, fired.

Notice in this text that Paul assumes there is suffering. **v.18 This is suffering, v.23 We groan with all creation because of suffering.** Jesus himself told us there would be tribulation. And Paul says

in verse 17 that the very fact that we are now related to Jesus will bring upon us the uniquely Christian experience of suffering. The Bible is very honest. We don't have to put on the plastic smile or attempt to avoid its reality. And if you haven't suffered, just live long enough and you will.

Myth #2 I am suffering because God is punishing me.

The idea here is that in suffering, God is always trying to get your attention in order to correct some error; expose some sin you need to confess. Again, there is some truth. Sometimes that is what God is doing. As one pastor said- "God put Jonah in the belly of a whale to get his attention. Sometimes God puts us flat on our back so we'll finally be looking in the right direction."¹

But this certainly isn't always the case, and often is not. [Myth #2 Slide] The suffering Paul talks about here in Romans 8 doesn't isn't because of any particular sin issue in the church in Rome. In the book of the Bible that most deals with suffering, Job, God makes clear that Job was not suffering because of his sin. God calls him the most righteous man alive on earth at the time. If you aren't sure about that example, Jesus was the most righteous person ever to live and he suffered more than anyone!

Myth #3 I will always be able to find the silver lining.

"Well if all things work together for good, show me something good, God!" Sometimes we see it. In college a girl I was dating, we will call her Annie...because that was her name, she dumped me and it hurt. But the next relationship was Shannan. Upgrade! I'm sorry- Annie you are a wonderful person made in the image of God. And I'm sure you were perfect fit someone else.

But sometimes you don't see the silver lining. In this chapter, Paul indicates that much of the good that God brings out of our suffering will be manifested only in eternity. Verse 18 says our suffering isn't worth comparing to the glory to be revealed in the future. The silver lining sometimes is only discernable by faith. The problem is we say walk by faith, but most of us want the sight. God, I need to see the silver lining of this divorce. I need to see the silver lining of my chemo treatments. But sometimes God is saying trust that the silver lining will come- and it will be more than silver- it will be gold in eternity! Now what each of these myths have in common is that when we believe them, they put distance and distrust between us and God. Is there a myth you are believing about suffering that is causing dysfunction in your relationship with God? Now let's turn our attention from the myths of suffering to four truths about suffering verses 18-30.

Truth #1 The Source of our Greatest Hurt is the Fall.

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it...

¹ JD Greear Quote

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly...

The Greek word “groan” is a visceral word...only place it is used in all of Scripture but we find this word used in the context of the battlefield to describe the cries of those dying. Death pangs or as Paul describes the birth pangs. In those days giving birth was not only incredibly painful, it could be a matter of life and death for the mother. Giving birth was a far more groan-producing experience than it is now with the gift of pain management and epidurals. Although, there are still some women, God bless them, who refuse pain relief...you are far tougher than me. When Shannan was in labor with our boys, I was in pain watching the process- Doc, I’ll take the pill too! But you get the point. We groan, along with creation, because of suffering of all kinds- physical, emotional, financial, relational pains of life.

And Paul says the source of our greatest hurts is NOT our behavior or our circumstances but its roots go far deeper. Paul says that the groans go all the way back to the beginning. *²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration.* Paul of course is referencing Genesis 3, the Fall of mankind. When Adam and Eve rebelled, they broke the shalom, the peace and rhythm and harmony of a relationship with God, a relationship with each other and our relationship with creation. *not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it.* Breaking God’s shalom resulted in God’s righteous judgment- frustration. The word translated “frustration” is futility or vanity. It means that our best efforts, our greatest attempts will always fall short, not produce what we hoped, always be harder than it should be...relationships will be harder and more complicated and more disappointing. Our work will be frustrating- Genesis 3, by the sweat of your brow, thorns and thistles- we will put in lots of effort and have great hopes for our work but it often produces far less than we desired. The world is not what it ought to be nor what it was created to be. Paul says it’s as if all creation knows that that something isn’t right. The trees and the grass and the squirrels and the coral in the Great Barrier Reef, and our souls are crying out with a longing and expectation to be made new, to be restored to our true purpose.

If I ended the sermon right, there it would be pretty depressing. God has not left us to suffer alone with no help and no hope. Here in Romans 8 Paul gives us three foundational pillars of Hope that we must stand on in suffering.

Truth #2 The Source of our Greatest Help is the Spirit.

²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

Remember, the primary agent of power in Romans 8 is the Holy Spirit. We have seen how the Spirit gives us power to fight sin. The Spirit gives us assurance that we are adopted children of God. Now we see that the Spirit helps us in the times of greatest despair and pain. How does He

help? He does two things: **1- He groans with us in our pain.** Same word used to describe our groaning, the Spirit does this on our behalf. What this means is that when you are in pain, so is the Spirit. When you are in the pit, the Spirit is in the pit with you. The Spirit is not just some spiritual mist. He's a person! And He's in you and emotionally engaged with you in suffering. **2- He prays perfectly when we can't.** When human vocabulary proves insufficient, the language of the spirit does not.² The Spirit stands in the gap between our will and God's will, between our words or lack thereof and God's Word. You know sometimes an older sibling is able to translate the incoherent babbling of their toddler brother or sister? (Babbling sounds) "He said that he would like some apple juice and he can't find his blanket." But far greater, because we don't know how to pray sometimes. Life is just too hard, the pain is too raw...I just can't. The Spirit knows what we truly need, not just what we want. That is something we can rest in when we are restless.

Truth #3 God's Greatest Good is Our Christ-Likeness.

²⁸ *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* Now most of the time we stop there and assume "good" means happiness, comfort, healing, prosperity...good external outcome of some kind. But read on- ²⁹ *For (that's a purpose statement) those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.* If you are a follower of Christ do you know that every moment of your life God is working toward that end to make you more like His son. This is better than the worldly version- everything happens for a reason...also true just not as helpful. When my son had his bike stolen several years ago and you would have said "Everything happens for a reason." I would have said, "Yeah, I know the reason. They wanted my son's bike." **[God's Greatest Good Slide]** But it's more than a reason, there are thousands of reasons behind the scenes that God is doing, but one we can be sure of- our inner soul work. He's always after our hearts. That painful chapter in your marriage, that setback at work, that chronic illness--all of it can by faith be used for that end. But it isn't automatic. And there will come a time, if you submit to God in faith, when you see that all the painful chapters, all the heartaches and tears and disabilities and disadvantages and disappointments were used by God to mold you more into the image of Jesus. This is a process throughout our lives that Paul will go on to say in **verse 30** that inevitably and irrevocably leads to glory. Our predestination led to our justification. Our justification leads to our sanctification in this life and our sanctification leads to our glorification in eternity. **So, instead of only asking God to get you out of the trouble, also ask him what you should get out of the trouble.**³

Truth #4 The Source of our Greatest Hope is the Gospel.

Paul is constantly pointing to hope.

²⁰ *For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope* ²¹ *that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*

² Tim Keller, *Romans for You*

³ Thanks to JD Greear for this great statement.

²³[We] groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in this hope we were saved.

The gospel is NOT just a coping mechanism when life is hard. It's not just a code of morality to live by. And it's not just that when I die I go to heaven. Paul tells us that the gospel is the good news about what God has done through Jesus Christ- both personal salvation, but so much more- cosmic renewal. Tim Keller- "There's a glory coming we Jesus returns that will be so blindingly powerful that when it falls upon us it will envelop the whole created order and glorify it along with us."⁴

This is why Paul says in verse 18- Our suffering isn't even worth comparing to what God is going to reveal! Now that doesn't minimize our pain. If anyone knew suffering it was Paul. He wasn't writing from the beach like a Corona commercial. It doesn't minimize suffering, it maximizes glory! Let C.S. Lewis paint word picture like only he can.

"God will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling radiant immortal creature pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (of course on a smaller scale) his own boundless power and light and goodness. That is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what he said."

As I close- There are some of us here in the middle of it. In some ways we are all in the middle of it. What God is offering- Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. But it only comes in a relationship with Jesus. The opposite is true if we don't know Jesus. Even seemingly good things are working toward our ultimate destruction. Only Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live!" Only he has overcome the grave. Only he can overturn all the bad things for good!

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We are a treat for you- virtual choir.

⁴ Tim Keller, *Romans for You*