

But what about suffering?
A Sermon for July 30, 2017
Romans 8:26-39
Lansdowne UMC

We've arrived in the last section of Romans 8. We're at the climax of chapter 8-- the climax of the climax of the letter. These are some of the most beautifully composed truths in the whole New Testament. Paul, the writer of the letter, is bringing everything that we've talked about over the past 6 weeks together. The big concepts that we've been talking about in this series-- justification, sanctification, assurance, the witness of the Spirit-- they all have very, very practical benefits for the believer.

You can almost imagine someone raising their hand in the middle of Paul's lecture on theology and saying-- yes, yes, that's all very well and good. But we're dying out here. We're suffering! What do you have to say about that?

Can I just say that life is hard? Now, I understand that compared to lots of other people, I don't have much of a right to say that. Thankfully I haven't experienced very much suffering in my life firsthand. And I've got good work, family, food, clothing, a place to live, transportation. I'm young, educated, and I don't have to think twice about my gender, the color of my skin, or my accent being held against me. I tend to sleep at least 6 ½ hours a night. There are only a few nights a week when I don't get to tuck my kids in bed.

I don't share that to brag. I don't feel like I really earned any of that myself. But I share all that because, here's the reality: I still find life

hard sometimes. I'm not complaining, it's just reality. Life is hard. I just want to authorize you to say it too. Actually, would you just humor me for a second? Turn to a person near you, shake their hand and say, "life is hard."

So many of us have experienced or are are experiencing real suffering in our lives. So what I want to talk about today is what our faith in Christ does *with* our suffering. We know that faith doesn't get rid of suffering. In fact, Paul seems pretty clear that there comes a point where belief in Christ will probably bring on some suffering. Jesus teaches us to count the cost before setting out on the journey. But just because our faith doesn't rid our lives of suffering doesn't mean our faith is silent about it.

Faith in Christ **puts suffering in context**. Last week, we read part of a passage that really fits better with the passage from today, and so I didn't talk much about it last week. But back in verse 18, Paul says this:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

Paul isn't saying that suffering is nothing. But what he is saying is that God's future is so much greater than any suffering. Coming from me, these would be empty words. But this is Paul we're talking about. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11, he describes all of the suffering he's been through. Because some so-called super-apostles were bragging about their qualifications for ministry, Paul gets ironic and starts bragging about his. And so what he brags about is how much he's suffered for the gospel. This is what he says:

I'm speaking like a crazy person. What I've done goes well beyond what they've done. I've worked much harder. I've been imprisoned much more often. I've been beaten more times than I can count. I've faced death many times. I received the "forty lashes minus one" from the Jews five times. I was beaten with rods three times. I was stoned once. I was shipwrecked three times. I spent a day and a night on the open sea. I've been on many journeys. I faced dangers from rivers, robbers, my people, and Gentiles. I faced dangers in the city, in the desert, on the sea, and from false brothers and sisters. I faced these dangers with hard work and heavy labor, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, and in the cold without enough clothes.

Can there be any doubt that Paul knows suffering? And yet he says in Romans 8:18, "the sufferings of this present time aren't worth comparing" with the privileges of being among God's chosen people. Why is that? I think it's because Paul sees his own sufferings as the pattern of Jesus being lived out in his life.

Jesus suffered and died before being raised and glorified. Paul trusts that the same pattern would hold true for him. Just to be clear, suffering in no way makes us merit glory, but for those whose lives are taking on the shape of Jesus' life, suffering comes before glory.

Paul's got this great image for this that starts in the reading from last week and carries into the reading from this week. In verses 22 and 23 he says "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly..."

Paul is comparing the suffering that we experience now with labor pains-- he's using the image of childbirth. Here I am again talking about something that I haven't experienced! But childbirth is the perfect image that combines both suffering *and* hope. We suffer now as a woman does in child bearing. But we hope that soon the labor will be over and a beautiful new creation will be brought to birth.

Jesus himself says it this way and John chapter 15: When a woman gives birth, she has pain because her time has come. But when the child is born, she no longer remembers her distress because of her joy that a child has been born into the world. In the same way, you have sorrow now; but I will see you again, and you will be overjoyed

Certainly one of the most difficult things imaginable would be to go through the pains of child bearing without having the hope that there was a wonderful end to it.

So this is what faith does: it puts suffering in its proper context. Right now God is bringing a new creation to birth. What do I mean by new creation? Well, I hope you know that God's plan is bigger than us going to heaven when we die. In the last two chapters in the Bible, Revelation 21 and 22, there is a new heaven and a new earth. God's people will be raised and be given new bodies, resurrection bodies like Jesus. And in that new heaven and a new earth, it says God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore."

The witness of the Bible is that Jesus' resurrection and God's transformation of individuals who put their faith in Jesus are both pointers to the reality that God's new creation has already begun.

This is the goal toward which creation is groaning as if in labor pains. This is why Paul says that we ourselves groan as we await for the redemption of our bodies.

And so Paul picks up the image in today's reading: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with [groans] too deep for words."

Pauls' like, "I've gotta be honest with y'all. You don't know how to pray." Have you ever noticed that the Bible gets away with saying things to you that no person could get away with saying to you?

My Dominican friends can be blunt like this. They'll act they're complimenting you-- maybe they are: "oh you're getting very fat!" What do you say to that? "Why thank you.... It's from all the food at church!"

But here's the point. Have you ever had a time of pain or suffering in your life where it feels like the part of you that prays was broken? Sometimes it's really, really hard to pray. One way to get around that is to use the Psalms. They're not all happy clappy. Some of them are lament psalms. Psalm 42: "My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'" As a friend of mine, Michael Gorman, recently said, "The Psalms are the Spirit's gift to the Church so that we can have *any* words when we do not know how to pray, and better words when we think we do."

But there is another reality to claim. That is the reality that Bible seems unfamiliar with casual prayer.¹

- In Exodus 2, it says “The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.”
- In 1 Samuel 1, Hannah pleads for a child with a fervor that gets her accused of being drunk. She says, “No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD.”
- In Isaiah 62, the prophet resolves to “give God no rest” as he prays for Jerusalem.
- The Psalmist says “listen to my cry, for I am desperate need” (142:6).
- The book of Hebrews says that Jesus offered up “petitions with loud cries and tears”

Sometimes we don’t know how to pray. Sometimes the suffering is just too great. But we do know how to cry, or at least to cry out. Scripture gives us the model that we can direct those cries toward God in prayer. As Psalm 126 says, “those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy.”

And something amazing can happen when those yearnings of our heart “break the sound barrier” and are vocalized. Paul says “the Spirit intercedes with groans too deep for words.” We don’t know what to pray for. We just know that there is brokenness and hurting. We just know that there are people in desperate need. We just know that we need God

¹ This insight and these examples are from David Thomas, “To Sow for a Great Awakening.”

to act. And so we allow the Spirit to intercede for us through our groanings and our tears.

At least one more problem remains, however. That question that at some point or another most likely enters the mind of those suffering: Is this suffering God's punishment on me? Has God turned away from me? Does God just not like me?

Paul knows this fear. But amid all of the suffering in his life, he comes to the conclusion that this fear is groundless. God is *for* us. And if God is for us, then who is against us? God gave his Son for you. God is *for* you. Christ Jesus died for you and Paul says that he now intercedes for you. If there is anyone who desires to condemn you Jesus stands before his Father and pleads your case. God is for you, not against you.

But maybe there is something that could separate us from God's love. We love to be the exception, don't we? "Well that's fine for you, but I know I'm the exception. You don't know what I'm going through." Well look out, because Paul's response to that is to go through 17 possible exceptions. They will all be judged to be lacking in merit. Let's look at them more closely.

Hardship, distress, and persecution. These are the troubles that come upon us by our own mistakes, by bad luck, and by the will of other people who wish to harm us. Seems pretty comprehensive. That's just the first three.

Next is famine and Nakedness-- Lacking food and lacking clothing, some of our more basic needs. Next comes peril and sword-- danger

from bad circumstances and danger from violence. Next is life and death-- between the two of those, you'd think you'd pretty much have all possible circumstances covered. Next is angels and rulers-- that's those who comprise and command the forces of heaven and earth. Things present and things to come-- that's everything we've ever experienced and everything we might experience. Again, seems pretty comprehensive. But just in case you feel like Paul has managed to leave the tiniest thing out, he ends with "or anything else in all creation."

All of these things point to realities of suffering that Paul himself experienced. And even more, these are all things that Jesus experienced. Through all of this, Paul is able to say, "God never stopped loving me for a second. Nothing can separate you from God's love."

Do you feel separated from God's love? What's your excuse? God didn't spare his own Son, but gave him up for you. Our faith doesn't really try to explain suffering, but our faith does allow us to put it in perspective. Our faith means that we take our suffering into the presence of God in cries of earnest prayer, asking the Spirit to intercede for us when we don't have the words or even the knowledge of what to pray for.

So may you eagerly anticipate the new creation that God is bringing to birth in the midst of our sufferings. May the desperate yearnings of your heart be turned into the tears and groanings of non-casual prayer. And may you know that nothing can separate you from God's love. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.