

ALL THINGS

Romans 8

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Last week we saw that we're no longer slaves to sin because we have died to sin when Christ died for our sin. Now we are set free because we are now slaves of righteousness. We learned in Romans 6:23 that the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Today we look at chapter 8. To be sure, there are a hundred sermons in this chapter, but I only have the opportunity to preach one. Verse 1 begins: "Therefore there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Under the old epoch when sin, death, and the law reigned unrestrained, a curse fell on everyone who did not obey all the things written in the book of the law. In the new epoch of the Spirit, Christ has borne our condemnation, redeeming believers from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Galatians 3:13). We are not condemned, because Christ was condemned for us.

How would it change your life this morning if you saw yourself as forgiven? How freeing would it be for you to tell Satan, "Quit reminding me of yesterday's sin because I'm looking forward to tomorrow's glory"? How would it change you if you really believed that God loved you enough to send Jesus to die on the cross for you and that you could really walk away forgiven? That's what Romans 8:1 says: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Chapter 8 is a chapter about the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comes to the fore and is mentioned 21 times in chapter 8 alone. It's only mentioned five times in all of chapters 1-7, and only eight times in chapters 9-16. This is the Holy Spirit chapter, chapter 8.

In the early verses, we're reminded that we are no longer prisoners to the flesh because now we're in the sphere of the Spirit. The Spirit of God (v. 9) dwells in you. In fact, he says if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to God.

We are indwelt by the Spirit. What Spirit? Look at verse 11: "But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you...." The very Spirit that called Jesus from the grave is the Spirit that indwells in you and transforms you to walk in the freedom of the Spirit.

And then we encounter the crux of the argument of chapter 8. Look at verses 17-18, "If indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

We're free from sin. We're forgiven from condemnation. But we are also set forth to suffer. For if we suffer with him, then and only then (v. 17) can be glorified with Him.

Paul is trying to address the persistent problem. If God is all-powerful, and God is all-good, how can we still have innocent suffering in this world? How can His own children suffer?

Philosophers have debated for eons about this problem. If God is all-good, maybe He's not all-powerful. Maybe that's why we have innocent suffering. Or maybe God is all-powerful, but He's not really all-good, and, therefore, we suffer.

But if you believe that God is both all-powerful and all-good, how do we explain the suffering of God's innocent people?

The reality is most Christians have unresolved disappointments with God.

When you experience suffering, you become part of the largest fraternity on earth. Sometimes we think we're the only ones, but more Christians have been killed for their faith in the 20th century than in the previous 19 combined. God's people suffer beyond explanation.

David Foster Wallace, a famed author, wrote in his last work, *The Pale King*:

The next suitable person you're in light conversation with, you stop suddenly in the middle of the conversation and look at the person closely and say, "What's wrong?" You say it in a concerned way. He'll say, "What do you mean?" You say, "Something's wrong. I can tell. What is it?" And he'll look stunned and say, "How did you know?" He doesn't realize something's always wrong, with everybody. Often more than one thing. He doesn't know everybody's always going around all the time with something wrong and believing they're exerting great willpower and control to keep other people, for whom they think nothing's ever wrong, from seeing it.

What David Forster Wallace is saying is that we all live in a broken world. In fact, it is with sadness that I tell you that David Foster Wallace, who wrote those words, committed suicide before he finished his last book. It was pieced together by editors from scraps of paper and notes left on his computer.

What we really want in life is a hard and fast equation. If we do the right things, then we'll have the right results. And people who do the wrong things will get their just deserts. But we live in a terrifying world where that is seldom the case. Of course, I could give you countless examples, but I don't think I have to do much convincing. You know that much suffering is endured by the innocent.

You tell me what eight-year-old Martin Richard was doing wrong – just a bystander at the Boston Marathon. This little eight-year-old was simply standing close to the finish line, waiting for friends to finish the race. Brave men don't hide secret bombs among innocent people. That's a coward's act.

Not only was little Martin murdered by the senseless violence in Boston, but his mother, Denise, was gravely injured, and his sister Jane, seven, lost a leg.

Now those who think that all suffering is a result of one's own, individual sin, explain that equation to me. Oh, there was sin all right. But it wasn't the eight-year-old boy nor his seven-year-old sister who sinned. They were simply waiting for close friends to run a race.

The question in the minds of Paul's readers is: "If we are really safe from God's wrath (Romans 5:9), why do we still face so much suffering?" Paul's answer is clear in Romans 8:28-30. God has set in motion an irrevocable chain of events that will lead to the believers' glorification. God has predestined, called, justified, and glorified them. That chain cannot be broken.

So despite your present suffering, your future glorification is certain. Paul says in verse 18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

That word for suffering can mean so many things for Paul. It can be sickness, grief over the death of loved ones, the heaviness that setbacks inflict on our spirit – the things that just naturally happen to those who are part of the created order that is subject to futility (8:20 – "For the creation was subjected to futility...."). But God is promising after the present suffering of this life to transform our bodies (remember, the same Spirit of the resurrection that was with Christ is with you) into radiant splendor. The promise is sure and absolutely unaltered by our sufferings on earth.

Paul tells us that even creation groans because of the futility of the moment. Look at verse 22, "For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." But (v. 25), we hope and we wait for the other side of suffering, which is glory.

I noticed something with more intensity this time as I read through Romans 8. Most often we begin in verse 28. "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." Those can sound like awfully trite words when tragedy has just visited your house. Others speak of God's grand plan, saying "you just need to be patient and the answer will be clear." Trite words yield little comfort.

But I want us to grasp the meaning of Paul's message about our suffering.

I. He hears even though we don't speak (v. 26).

We ought to begin in verse 26, not verse 28. "In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

Sometimes when tragedies strike, quite honestly, we don't even know what to say. In reality, we often say too much. We don't know what to say to each other. We don't know what to say to God. We are numb in the midst of senseless and unmerited pain.

Paul has already told us that the cosmos is in pain, groaning for a new creation where there is no sin or suffering (8:22).

In our broken world, we don't have the right words; we're struggling to even whisper a prayer to God because we're neither sure of Him nor of His willingness to respond and help – that's when the Spirit of God works most. It is a prayer beyond prayer, says Paul. Diving down into the cold, dark depths beyond our human comprehension, God responds even to prayers that are nothing more than groans – painful groans. Tossing and turning at night on the hot bed when you can't sleep – those are prayers, too. (See N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, p. 154-156)

The reality is every church and every Christian must shoulder the task of this kind of groaning prayer. It's a redeeming dialogue between God the Father and the Spirit within us, who groans on our behalf.

II. God searches our hearts (v. 27)

Look at verse 27

And He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

This is an interesting description of God: "He who searches the hearts." God, the searcher of hearts.

This is the image of someone lighting a torch and going down into a dark room, full of all sorts of things, looking for something in particular. Peeking around in the dark and searching. What is He wanting to find, the God who goes to the room of our heart? And what happens when He finds it?

No doubt God, in searching the dark spaces of our hearts, comes across all sorts of things which we had just as soon had remained hidden. But what He wants to find, above all else, is the sound of the Spirit's groaning. God, who is at one with the Spirit, is continually in communication with the Spirit who dwells in the hearts of His people. God understands what the Spirit is saying on our behalf, even though we do not. God hears the groanings of His Spirit. The searcher of our hearts looks for the presence of His own Spirit, which is a mark that we are, indeed, called to be His.

III. God causes all things to work for good (v. 28).

This is the part that you hear, so often out of context. You have to be careful how you use it. If you're the one suffering, these aren't very comforting words coming from someone else.

Those who are God's people should not be surprised at the broken equation of suffering. Were not children slaughtered when Herod was threatened by the infant Christ? Babies too young to have ever sinned, sliced by the sword of Herod. Or Stephen stoned by jealous Jews. Or the Israelites treated as slaves with the crack of Pharaoh's whip upon their back. And if you want to push the equation, Jesus – the only sinless person to ever live – goes through the most suffering of all.

“But don’t worry,” our friends tell us. “It will all work out for good.”

The “good” refers in context to believers’ final redemption, so they can be glorified in Christ. Our present suffering does not negate our future glory. That’s the good.

In verse 29, this foreknowledge of God means that God has a blueprint for what he is going to accomplish in us. It’s a predetermined plan, and it’s a mystery hidden for long ages past (16:25; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:7; Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:26; Titus 1:2-3). But now, God’s purposes are revealed in Christ.

To be sure, our salvation does not hinge on our choosing God, but God’s choice of us. “Predestination” here refers to God’s knowing something in advance and affirms that God always has a plan to get believers to the finish line, working all things together for good. It means that our glorious destiny is firmly set in God’s purposes, and that no power on earth or heaven can dislodge it.

I have never understood the preoccupation with predestination. It is a mystery. If the Apostle Paul himself doesn’t attempt to penetrate the mystery with any full teaching, then why should we. God calls, but we must respond – both are true in scripture.

What Paul is saying is simply this: The world is groaning. We are groaning. And the Spirit is groaning with us, and God will bring it out for the good.

To be sure, sometimes our suffering makes us better people. We’ve all seen that. The lady sits self-centered among her own glories. Then suffering enters her life, and the makeup won’t cover it up. And now, the one who had the shallow heart – her river runs as deep as the Nile. Suffering changed her. God worked it out for the good.

So, to be sure, sometimes we see how our suffering saves us, and sometimes we never see it on this side.

And Paul certainly wants us to see (Romans 8:17-18) that the present sufferings, whether it’s death, divorce, or disease, are nothing to be compared to the glory to be revealed that will last not for just a lifetime, but for all eternity. We will, once again, be reunited in the plan of God with those that we love who died ahead of us. And nothing, nothing can interrupt that relationship ever again. At that moment, all of our questions will be answered before we think them, and all of God’s reasons for permitting our suffering will be clarified. Our present faithfulness will be redeemed with future rewards in glory (Revelation 2:10).

Another way of saying that God causes all things to work out for good is to say that God redeems all that God permits. God didn’t break our world, and God doesn’t cause our suffering. But if He allows it, He will eventually redeem it. The fact that we can see no redemption in our pain doesn’t make it any less real. C. S. Lewis once said the man who denies the sunrise doesn’t harm the sun. God is free to use our pain for His good purposes, whether we see His love at work or not. He doesn’t need our permission – after all, He is God.

Jim Denison says God never wastes hurt. He can be trusted to redeem all He permits. Paul is not saying that all things are good. Sin is not good. Suffering is not always good. But even in the bad things, God works for the good of those who are in love with Him (*Wrestling With God*, p. 107).

Paul, the one who is saying that God redeems what God allows, himself experiences a great deal of suffering. Paul is not a preacher of health, wealth, and prosperity for whom all goes with ease, who simply says to those who experience suffering unknown to him, “Now, now, it will all be good. Make no big deal of it.”

Dare you ever read what happened to the Apostle Paul in his preaching of Jesus? Here is a man who knows suffering and a man who would ultimately become a martyr, be murdered for his faith. Don’t you remember Paul has a thorn in his flesh, and he prays that God would take it away. God says, “No, no, I’m not going to take it away because when you’re weak, Paul, then I show My strength.”

Listen to Paul’s litany of suffering from 2 Corinthians 11: “I’ve been in labors. I’ve been in **prison** numerous times. I’ve been **beaten** so many times I can’t count. I’ve often been in the shadow of the danger of death.” By the way, he does die – those are real shadows cast over Paul. “Five times I received from the Jews **thirty-nine lashes**.” In the gospel account Jesus receives thirty-nine lashes one time. Paul endured the whip of thirty-nine lashes five times. “**Beaten with rods** three times. **Stoned.**” In fact, when Paul was **stoned**, his injuries were so severe they thought he was dead. “**Been in three shipwrecks.** Floated around in the ocean all night long.” He’s been **robbed**. He’s got the **Jews mad at him**. The **Gentiles mad at him**. People in the city are mad at him. People in the wilderness are mad at him. The **false teachers** are attacking him. He says, “I’ve gone through many nights **without any sleep**. I’ve been **hungry**. I know what it means to **thirst**. I’ve gone without food. I’ve been **cold and exposed**. And then I have all the **stress** of all the churches on my back. Who doesn’t sin that I don’t have to get involved with the consequences?”

Paul is no shallow Christian who always had good things. Paul has the worst of things. And Paul says, “Though I don’t understand it – why I had to be beaten, why I had to float in the ocean, why I’ve been hungry and thirsty and cold, and why I have all this stress every night that keeps me awake – God, somehow, is going to redeem it in His glory.

IV. His love cannot be taken away from those whom He calls (vs. 35-39).

Now this is one of my favorite passages. Listen to how he closes out.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?” (Romans 8:35). Paul had been around a lot of those things. “No, in all things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death” – there it is folks, death itself cannot separate you from God’s love, for those who are His live forever – “nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any the created things, will be able to separate us from the love of God” – and how do we find that love? – “which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35-39).

Not only has Paul suffered, who writes these words, but he's writing about the One who suffered more. God does not stand at a distance and look down at our suffering and say, "It's no big deal; I'll work it out for good in the end." God comes down, and God puts on skin, and God is crucified – the most horrible, painful death that anyone could experience. God is not far away. God is here. He suffers with us. His love is not even separated by death. He is in that suffering. And He loves us through death.

God walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). He weeps as we weep (John 11:35). The Father, through Jesus, walks with His children through the worst passages of life.

So maybe we can reread this passage this way: Sometimes there is going to be tragedy in your life to such an extent that you won't even know what to pray. There are no words that comfort. There are no words to bring peace or joy. And at that very moment when pain itself has forced you to silence, the Spirit of God within you will groan and the Spirit of God will talk for you. God will search your heart, find His Spirit groaning, and have communion with you at your lowest moment. You don't even need to pray words – you just pray groans with the help of the Spirit. And in the midst of your deepest pain, know that God is at work even though we don't understand. If God is on our side, nobody can stand against us. And there is nothing that will ever separate you permanently from the love of God. Tribulation will not. Persecution will not. Starving to death won't keep you from the love of God. Going naked will not keep you from the love of God. A sword can't stop the love of God. Height or depth can't stop the love of God. Principalities and powers of all the demons in the cosmos can't stop the love of God. Death itself cannot stop the glorious reign of God which will last forever, for we will always be in the love of God which comes to us through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Maybe you're at the groaning stage today. Maybe you're still at the suffering stage and looking forward to the glory stage. Frederick Douglass illustrated in his autobiography this groaning under the burden of suffering. He describes the slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves. The woods would "reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness." Frederick Douglass writes:

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs.... They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension.... they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. (Narrative, p. 13-14)

But Paul assures us this morning that God hears our prayers uttered in distress, even when we don't know what to say, even when our spirit just groans in pain. No matter your present suffering, it shall not stop your future glory – glory shared with the Christ.

Let us pray.

