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PRESENT SUFFERING, FUTURE GLORY

Romans 8:18-25

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Romans, Lesson 49

Present Suffering, Future Glory
Romans 8:18-25

"Mom, why are there mosquitoes that give people malaria? Why are there germs that make us sick?"

"Mom, I saw on the news a bad flood that killed a lot of people. Why are there floods and earthquakes and hurricanes and tornadoes? Why are there famines where people starve to death?"

"Mom, why did my friend at school get cancer and die? Why did Grandma get sick and die?"

"Mom, why do people set off bombs to blow up other people? Why do people do bad things to hurt each other?"

Maybe your kids have asked you questions like these. Probably you've wrestled with them yourself. Some become agnostics or atheists because they cannot come up with satisfactory answers to the question of how a loving, all-powerful God can allow the terrible suffering that is in the world. Since none of us are exempt from suffering and death, it's important that we understand what the Bible teaches on this difficult topic.

Philosophers, theologians, pastors, and others have written scores of books on the subject. Some of these books are helpful, while some are heretical. Job, the oldest book on the Bible, is devoted to this problem. And in our text, Paul gives part of the biblical perspective that we need to persevere through the suffering that we surely will encounter. It's not comprehensive, but it is helpful and practical if we will struggle to understand and practice what the apostle teaches us here. He's saying,

To persevere in present sufferings with hope, keep your eyes
on the future glory that God has promised us.

Maybe right off you're thinking, "That just sounds like 'pie in the sky when you die.'" As I've often said, my response is, "Yes, you are going to die. Would you like pie with that or no pie?" The statistics are not fuzzy: We *all* are going to die (unless Jesus returns in our lifetimes). Materialists argue that when you die, that's it—

your body decomposes and your soul ceases to exist, just like an animal. Paul deals with that mistaken view in his defense of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15), where he says that if the dead are not raised, then eat and drink, because tomorrow you may die. But if Jesus was raised, then the dead will be raised. And if the dead are raised, then we should “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that [our] toil is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

In our text, Paul wants us to understand two certainties and a practical conclusion that flows from them: First, the present time is marked by sufferings because of man’s fall into sin. Second, the future will be marked by glory for believers as God fulfills all His promises to us. The practical conclusion is, if we keep our eyes on the future promised glory, then we can endure present sufferings with perseverance and hope.

1. The present time is marked by sufferings because of man’s fall into sin.

Paul mentions “the sufferings of this present time” (8:18). He was not referring to an especially difficult period in history, but to the entire present age. The whole history of creation since the fall is marked by suffering. The history of nations is marked by struggles and catastrophes—wars, natural disasters, internal conflicts, power struggles, and crimes. The history of individuals is also in large part a history of trials—the trials of growing up, figuring out what to do with your life, whom you will marry, rearing children, working through struggles in your marriage, providing for your needs, growing old and facing declining health and death.

But, why? Why do we suffer? How should we as Christians think about these difficult matters? Four observations:

- A. The whole creation suffers because of man’s fall into sin.

Romans 8:19-22: “For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.”

Paul personifies creation groaning as it anxiously awaits the culmination of salvation for God's people, because that will trigger the release from corruption to which all creation has been subject since Adam and Eve fell into sin. At that time, God's judgment on Adam included a judgment on creation (Gen. 3:17b-18a): "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you"

Not only the botanical world, but also the animal world, came under the curse. In either the millennial kingdom or in the new heavens and new earth (depending on your view of prophecy), Isaiah (11:6-9) gives us this vision:

And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy will lead them. Also the cow and the bear will graze, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah pictures in poetic language a vision of a restored creation, where there will not be any violence or death. We've watched the magnificent DVD series "Planet Earth," which has a spectacular scene in slow motion of a great white shark leaping out of the ocean, grabbing a seal in its mouth, and plunging again beneath the water to consume its meal. In another stunning scene filmed at night, a group of lions bring down an elephant for their next meal. Such movies portray this as the natural order of the world, in which the fittest survive by preying on the weaker species.

But the Bible teaches that this is not natural. Violence and death, even in the animal kingdom, are the result of the curse on man's sin. Death was not a part of the original creation, which God pronounced as good. And in the future, when believers receive the full redemption that has been promised in Christ, all of creation will be restored at least to its original state, if not to an even greater level of glory.

Two observations before we move on: *First, this text assumes that God is the creator of all that is.* It did not evolve by chance or random mutations over billions of years. Right out of the starting gate the Bible presents God as the creator (Gen. 1:1), "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." It doesn't put it up for debate or discussion. It hits you before you can duck with the fact that God miraculously created all that is by the word of His power. Psalm 33:6, 9 declares, "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host.... For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast." The psalmist sandwiches his practical application between these verses (33:8): "Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him." God alone is the rightful Lord of creation and Lord of your life. The fact of creation should make you bow in wonder and worship before Him (see, also, John 1:1-3; Heb. 1:2; 11:3).

Second, even though the creation is fallen, it still bears witness to the majesty and glory of the Creator. David marveled (Ps. 19:1), "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands." Here in Flagstaff at 7,000 feet elevation, with the city's efforts at restricting light pollution, we often can see what David must have seen in those dark Judean skies. The Milky Way stretches across the sky. The constellations beam their light from trillions of miles away. Sometimes with binoculars, I have located Andromeda galaxy, 2.5 million light years away, with one trillion stars. It makes you feel properly small and God properly big!

Last weekend, Marla and I went to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. Standing on the rim and gazing at the vastness of that great geologic wonder always takes your breath away. Every evening a large group of visitors gathers on the patio of the North Rim Lodge to watch the spectacle in the sky. The sunsets are gorgeous and we watched lightning from the thunderstorms across the canyon. But, sadly, I would guess that very few of those watching this spectacular show even gave a passing thought toward the greatness and glory of the Creator! But those of us who know Him should revel in His creation. If the *fallen* creation is this beautiful, just think how spectacular the new heavens and earth will be!

So the first observation from these verses is that all creation suffers because of man's fall into sin. It is presently enslaved to corruption and death. But, also,

B. All believers suffer because of man's fall into sin.

This needs to be stated because, as I mentioned in our last study, there is a pervasive false teaching that God wants every Christian to be healthy and wealthy. They say, "If you're sick or poor, then you need to claim your healing or your wealth by faith." Those who teach these lies are preying on people's greed and their natural longing to be in good health. But as I also said, I've never seen one of these false teachers live to be 120. They all succumb to disease and death at about the same age as the rest of us. Do not follow their teaching!

Paul himself suffered terribly. When he got saved, the Lord told Ananias the prophet whom He sent to open Paul's eyes (Acts 9:16), "for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." Paul often mentions the trials that he endured, which would have driven most of us to despair (see 2 Cor. 11:23-28).

Our Lord Himself was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief (Isa. 53:3). He came to this world of suffering to bear our sins through His own suffering and death. So why should we think that somehow we will be exempt from suffering? In the sovereign purposes of God, some suffer more and some suffer less. But none are exempt. It's a part of living in this fallen world. This leads to a third observation:

C. We need to think biblically about suffering so that we will grow through it rather than be destroyed by it.

Note Paul's opening phrase (8:18), "For I consider" The word means to reckon, think about, consider, or ponder. In other words, this paragraph is the result of Paul's careful, biblical thinking about suffering. It's important to think biblically about suffering because when it clobbers you or those you love, you will be engulfed by a wave of powerful emotions. I'm not suggesting that you should suppress or deny your emotions, but I am saying that you need to process them through the grid of biblical truth, so that you are not devastated by your trials.

Peter indicates that it is especially in a time of trials that the devil prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking to devour us. But we must resist him by being firm in our faith and by understanding the biblical perspective on trials (1 Pet. 5:8-10). In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul does not deny that believers grieve when they lose loved ones, but he does say that in light of the promise of the Lord's coming and the resurrection of our bodies, we should not grieve as those who have no hope.

The Bible gives us far more perspective on suffering than I can comment on briefly here. As you read it, ask God to instill His wisdom in your heart for how to handle suffering. But here in our text, Paul wants us to think about four things: *First, our present sufferings are relatively short compared to our eternal sharing in the glory of God. Second, the weight of our present trials is like a feather on the scale, which can't compare with the tons of gold of the glory that will be revealed to us.* He expresses the same thought in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18,

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

A *third* thing to think about to endure present, temporary suffering for future glory is that *our future glory with God is absolutely certain.* God has promised it and He cannot lie. Christ promised to return in power and glory to bring final redemption to His people and to judge His enemies. Either He was mistaken or it is our certain future. And in the rest of the chapter Paul unfolds a *fourth* reason that we need to think biblically about suffering, namely, that *God is using it to conform us to the image of Christ.* Not even torture or martyrdom can separate us from His great love (8:35-39). There is a fourth observation from our text:

D. The fact of suffering does not undermine the fact that God has a plan and that He will accomplish His plan.

Often people observe the terrible suffering in the world and doubt God's love or His power. The argument is especially emo-

tional when we consider little children suffering physical or sexual abuse or the horrible effects of war or natural disasters. We think, "It's one thing if wicked people suffer such things, but how could a God of love and power allow these precious little children to suffer such things?"

But Paul shows that such things stem directly from man's fall into sin. As we saw in chapter 5, when Adam sinned, the whole human race sinned in him. If you say, "That's not fair," you're on dangerous ground, to accuse the Sovereign God of being unfair! And you're arrogantly implying that you would have done better than Adam did, so you don't deserve to be penalized for his sin. So you'd best not accuse God of being unfair for imposing suffering on the human race because of sin.

Pastor John Piper ("Subjected to Futility in Hope," part 1, on DesiringGod.org) points out that if you think that somehow the suffering in this world is out of proportion to what is deserved, then you do not grasp the infinite holiness of God or the unspeakable outrage of sin against this holy God. God's judgment on the entire creation as seen in all of history's horrible tragedies reveals how horrific our sin is to Him. Piper adds, "But in fact the point of our miseries, our futility, our corruption, our groaning is to teach us the horror of sin. And the preciousness of redemption and hope." Thank God, He sent the Savior!

But the fact of terrible suffering does not undermine the fact that God has a plan and that He will accomplish His plan. Paul says that the creation was subjected to futility "in hope" (8:20). He also uses the analogy of birth pains (8:22). The outcome of birth pains is the hope of new life. And even so, God is moving history toward a goal that includes our future glory:

2. The future will be marked by glory for believers as God fulfills all that He has promised us.

I can't elaborate due to time constraints, but I want to include this in this message to convey Paul's flow of thought. God's final purpose both for fallen creation and for His adopted children is the glory of complete salvation. Note four things about this glory:

- A. The future glory is not totally revealed to us yet, but it includes the revealing of all that God has promised for us.

J. B. Phillips (*The New Testament in Modern English* [Geoffrey Bles], p. 324) paraphrases 8:19, "The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own." In Colossians 3:4, Paul says, "When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory." In 2 Thessalonians 2:14, he says, "It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." (See, also, Heb. 2:10; 1 John 3:2.)

"Glory" is a hard concept to get your brain around, but it includes all of God's promises to bestow on us the "unfathomable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8). Streets of gold and gates of pearl and mansions prepared for us are limited analogies that say, "You can't imagine how wonderful it will be!"

- B. The future glory includes the full renewal of creation to its original perfection and purpose.

The new heavens and earth will probably be even more glorious than the Garden of Eden was. With new, glorified bodies we will live on a new earth and enjoy God's creation as it was before sin entered this world.

- C. The future glory includes our freedom from sin and its corruption, including the full redemption of our bodies.

"Freedom of the glory of the children of God" (8:21) means at the very least, freedom from sin. We now enjoy the privileges of being God's adopted children (8:15-16), but we haven't yet come into our full inheritance, which includes the redemption of our body (8:23). Now, by God's Spirit, we are *able not* to sin; but in glory we will *not be able* to sin. Hallelujah!

- D. The future glory is guaranteed by our present possession of the Holy Spirit, the first fruits of our redemption.

The indwelling Holy Spirit gives us a taste of what it will be like to be holy, as Jesus is holy. But we're still living in these fallen bodies that are prone to temptation and sin, with all of its terrible consequences. But the Holy Spirit is the promise that God will not abandon us to our sin. He's the down payment that signals that God will complete the purchase. The practical conclusion follows:

3. Keep your eyes on the future promised glory and you will persevere in present sufferings with hope.

Paul anticipates us thinking, "But, I can't see this future glory." His reply is, "Yes, that's the very nature of hope." If you can see it all, then it's not hope. Our salvation includes hope because we don't receive it all in this life. The hope of our salvation is not uncertain, as when we say, "I hope it doesn't rain on my picnic tomorrow." Rather, it is absolutely certain because of the many promises of God, who cannot lie. But we hope for it because we have not yet received all that has been promised. So Paul concludes (8:25), "But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it." The key to persevering in suffering with hope is to keep your eyes on the promised future glory.

Conclusion

If you've ever watched your favorite team play in the Super Bowl, you were anxious as the game progressed, especially if it was close. If your team fumbled or threw an interception, you groaned because you didn't know the outcome. You hoped they would win, but your hope was uncertain. Maybe you even got depressed when they were far behind.

But if your team came from behind and won in the last seconds of the game and later you watched a replay of the game, your whole attitude was different. You didn't despair when they fumbled or fell behind, because you knew how it all would turn out. Knowing the certainty of the future glory gave you hope to persevere through the setbacks.

If we become anxious or depressed in trials and lose hope, it's because we've forgotten the absolutely certain outcome: Future glory forever with Christ! Yes, there is present suffering because we live in a fallen world. But God has promised future glory. Keeping that in view will enable you to persevere any suffering with hope.

Application Questions

1. Think about someone who has lost hope and perhaps his faith in Christ because of trials. How would you use the truth of this text to help such a person?
2. Why is the “health and wealth” teaching heresy? How does it damage people? How can you refute it biblically?
3. What are some practical ways to gain a clearer vision of the future glory promised to us so that it affects your daily walk?
4. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Romans: The Final Perseverance of the Saints* [Zondervan], p. 14) argues that believers should not be shaken or cast down by suffering. Is this realistic? Where is the balance between acknowledging despair and yet trusting in God? See 2 Cor. 1:8-10.

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