

Present Suffering, Future Glory

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's reading is from the letter of Paul to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 16 through 28, as printed in the liturgy or on page 916 of the Blue Church Bibles.

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Romans. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now, if we are children, then we are heirs.

Heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. If, indeed, we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

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

[1 : 22] We know that the whole creation has been groaning, as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

For in this hope, we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

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. 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.

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. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Well, thank you for that scripture reading, Michael.

Good morning, everyone. My name is Andrew, and I'm one of the pastors here. And I'm looking forward to opening up this word from God with you this morning. Will you join me in prayer? Lord God, I want to give you praise.

[2 : 34] Because you know that this week when I was working on this sermon, it just felt like duty. But by your Spirit and through the prayers of your people, you turned it into a delight.

And I pray that those who hear your word this morning would taste how delightful your word is. How good the good news of the gospel is in Christ.

So would you do that amongst us, amongst your people. For your glory we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. All right, so we've been taking our time. We've been going through chapter 8 of Paul's letter to the church in Rome.

And last week we left off in verses 17 and 18 with some really good news. Michael just read it. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs.

Heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. It's great news. It's great news. It's great news. It's great news. It's great news. But then just as soon as we read this good news, that we are God's children, co-heirs with Christ, Paul continues, if indeed we share in his sufferings.

[3 : 36] in order that we may also share in his glory. And all of a sudden, it's like, wait, what? God's children will still suffer? What kind of an all-powerful and loving father would allow his children to

suffer?

What kind of a good parent would write suffering into the stories of his children? As a pastor of care here, I know many of the sufferings that are in this room, in our church family, and I know that this is not just an abstract, theoretical question for many of us, but a deeply personal one.

And why would God let anyone, and especially his children, suffer? And maybe this is why some of you don't believe in God, or some of you have trouble believing in God. It's why my own best friend has walked away from God, because he can't believe in the coexistence of God and suffering.

Now, I don't want to mislead you. Today's sermon is not going to directly engage with the problem of God and suffering. You're going to have to wait a month or so for Jonathan to tackle that one. I just raised the questions here.

He's going to tackle that one in our Explore God series in just a few weeks. I think it's sermon number three, so you can mark your calendars for that. December 8th, I mean, October 8th, why does God allow pain and suffering?

[4 : 50] But for today, I'm simply going to assume that God and suffering somehow coexist. And the question I believe Paul addresses in our text today is, in the face of suffering, what good is being a child of God?

In the face of suffering, what good is being a child of God? Like, how does being a child of God make a difference for those of us who suffer? And what resources are uniquely available to God's children in the midst of their suffering?

Now, according to Paul, being a child of God makes all the difference in the world. But in case you beg to differ, I want to ask you to consider what better resources do you have to face pain and suffering in your life?

Because, you know, we can bash Christianity for not giving us satisfying answers to the problem of pain and suffering, but no matter who we are and no matter how many religious traditions we might reject or critique, at the end of the day, we're still all left with the same problem and the same absence of answers.

I mean, sure, maybe some take the mindfulness route, right, and try to trick themselves into believing that their suffering is not that bad or just an illusion. Or others take the materialist, atheist route like Richard Dawkins, who claims that suffering is neither good nor evil nor meaningful, but just a bare, neutral fact of reality.

[6 : 08] But for the rest of us, right, the majority of us who are probably unconvinced that suffering is a mere illusion or a meaningless fact of reality, we know that we need the resources to live meaningfully through our pain and through our suffering.

And the problem for most of us, though, is that this modern Western culture that we swim in offers us little to no resources or explanations for our suffering. Like everywhere around us, we're told that the meaning of life is to pursue pleasure through consumption or to pursue personal freedom so that we can consume whatever we want.

But this has left us incredibly soft and ill-equipped and vulnerable in our attempts to handle the harshness of this broken world. You know, there's this renowned surgeon.

His name is Paul Brand. He worked with lepers, people who suffered from leprosy in India for many years. But then he moved and he started to practice in the United States. And what he writes is this. He writes, And the reason he suggests is that if consumerism, the pursuit of pleasure and freedom through consumption is the very meaning, the ultimate meaning of our lives, that then suffering can ever only be an interruption in our lives, an unfortunate, meaningless, useless chapter in our poorly self-written stories, right?

[7 : 42] A wasted page in our storybooks, just purposeless chance misfortune. But you know what? The good news of God's word to us today is that God is a better story writer and God has a better plot for his children, one that can even make meaning out of suffering, subvert suffering, redeem suffering for our good and for the glory of God.

Notice in verse 17, the narrative arc there, Now if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

See, if we are children of God, if the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead has united us with God's crucified and risen Son, we have an incredible resource with which we can face suffering.

And so God's word to us today is this, that though God's children will never avoid suffering, we always groan with hope and we never groan alone.

Though God's children will never avoid suffering, we always groan with hope and we never groan alone. And those are our three points, that no, sorry, God's children never avoid suffering, but they always groan with hope and never alone.

[8 : 53] So point number one, even God's children never avoid suffering. Even God's children groan. Here in verses 17 and 18, you can look at it with me. Paul strips his readers of any notion that God's children enjoy the special privilege of a life without suffering.

And Paul would even say that the greatest possible privilege isn't the absence of suffering, but the presence of God. Fellowship with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And maybe to some of us, this is incredibly disappointing, right?

Especially for those of us who are on the fence about whether or not we want to follow Jesus and have him in our lives. But if we pay attention to what Paul's saying here in verses 17 and 18, he has something incredibly profound to say about our present sufferings.

And listen, when he says in verse 18, excuse me, that these present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed, he's not trying to be all saccharine or like some kind of, you know, pie-in-the-sky, optimistic preacher just telling us that there's a silver lining in all our sufferings.

No, Paul doesn't downplay our groaning. He doesn't downplay our suffering. But he does want to put it in proper perspective, in proper context. See, when Paul not only admits, but he foretells that even God's children suffer, he's making a provocative suggestion.

[10 : 10] And that suggestion is that the chief and the man is not to not suffer. And maybe that's a word for us this morning, right? Us Americans, us Westerners, are we living our lives guided by the ultimate principle of avoiding suffering?

Or are we living our lives guided by the ultimate person who may very well call us to suffer just like he did for the good of others and for the glory of God? Are we working our jobs guided by the principle of doing as little work as we can for as much money as we can, just trying to minimize our inputs, maximize our outputs?

Or are we selflessly and sacrificially going to our jobs with the goal of bearing fruitful witness to the kingdom of God and the lordship of Jesus Christ? Are we raising our kids guided by the principle of seeing them suffer as little as possible?

Or by the principle of seeing them grow into the fullness and maturity of Jesus Christ as his disciples? Paul is making a counter-cultural statement here that the chief end of our existence is not to not suffer, but actually it may very well involve suffering.

And this is even more counter-cultural, right? Contrary to modern Western secular thought, which only understands suffering as an interruption and an obstacle to us living our best and fullest lives.

[11 : 29] Paul is saying that there is such a thing as a full and meaningful, satisfying, and significant life that the worst suffering cannot take away from us. He's saying that suffering is not the ultimate enemy or it's not the ultimate enemy of the fullest, most meaningful lives we could possibly live, but perhaps even a necessary part of the glory stories God's writing for us.

And maybe you're thinking like, man, that's a lofty claim. And you doubt the basis of such a claim and to that, Paul would point you to the Son of God, Jesus Christ, innocent and blameless in the entirety of his life, the most beloved of God's children, and yet the one who faced the most literally excruciating suffering of all time.

Just read the prophet Isaiah, chapter 53, he bore the curse of our sin, he bore our griefs, he carried our sorrows, he was stricken, smitten, and afflicted by God, his own father, as he bore our sins in his body, pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, wounded, chastised, and oppressed, cut off from the land of the living.

No one suffered more than the Son of God, and yet, no one lived a more meaningful, significant, and satisfying life than the suffering servant Son of God.

Listen again to the words of the prophet Isaiah at the end of chapter 53. It was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, but though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand after he has suffered.

[13 : 04] He will see the light of life and be satisfied. By his knowledge, my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will give him a portion among the great,

and he will divide the spoils with the strong because he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the sufferers, numbered with the transgressors.

You see, in Christ, we find that the most painful life in history was at the same time the most profound life in history. At the cross, we find that suffering doesn't get in the way of a full life. Rather, it is the way to a full and meaningful life that honors God and serves others in need and satisfies our own souls. So I'm not saying that we should therefore go and try to suffer just for the heck of it, okay?

But what I am saying is that when God's children look to their ultimate older brother, the Son of God who became flesh and dwelt among us in this broken world, what we find is that while suffering is never an end in itself, it can very well be the beginning of something glorious.

And all God's children are invited into this fellowship, into the fellowship of this glorious story, invited to share and unite themselves with the story of the risen Christ, co-heirs with Christ.

[14:22] Notice in verse 17 how Paul doesn't just say that God's children will suffer, but it says that co-heirs with Christ will share, will share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory.

This is what it means to be united with Christ. It means to experience what He experienced. It means to walk in His way after the pattern of His life in this broken world. And that means that we will indeed share in His sufferings in order that one day we will also share in His glory.

A glory, as it says in verse 18, that will far outshine any of our sufferings. If the eternal Son of God, Christ Church, if the eternal Son of God did not consider Himself too great to suffer, neither should any other child of God.

And this is the pattern of all God's children living in this broken, sin-stained world. The pattern of Jesus' life. The Son of God, a journey from suffering to glory. And there is no greater story ever told than the story of the glory of Jesus.

And the good news today is that we're all invited into this story. So if you're here today and you're frustrated in your suffering and you're frustrated with God because you feel like He should give you, His child, a life that is free from such suffering, the Spirit of God crying, Abba, Father, within your hearts this morning wants to point you to Jesus and to the reality that even God's most beloved child did not avoid suffering.

[15:50] Unless we be tempted to fume at God for placing this seemingly unnecessary, pointless page of pain into the storybooks of our lives, God invites us to see our pain not as an interruption, but as an invitation, a generous invitation to fellowship with Him and to know Him, to know His beloved Son.

Yes, in suffering, but also and more importantly, in His glory. So while our modern, Western, secular culture may claim that suffering is the enemy of the self-made, meaning we're all striving to manufacture for our lives, God offers us a transcendent meaning through union with Christ that no suffering could ever take away.

And that's point number one, that God's children do still suffer, but that's neither the worst possible news nor an obstacle to God's good news for us in Christ.

Now, for all God's children, suffering is an opportunity to experience deep union, communion, and fellowship with the living God, the Son of God, and the full and meaningful life that He very much wants for us.

That's beyond all comparison, glorious. Now, point number two, God's children always groan with hope. All right, now in verse 23, Paul talks about how God's children, they suffer, and they groan in their present sufferings.

[17:17] But Paul also wants us to remember Christ's whole trajectory from suffering to glory that we never groan without hope. And he even sees creation testifying to this hope in eager expectation.

Verse 19, For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

Meaning all of creation is waiting for God's people to be the way that they were always meant to be. Free from sin, free from suffering, restored as image bearers of God, and ready to rightly rule over His creation. Like quite the opposite of what happened at the fall. Look at verse 20.

For the creation was subjected to frustration not by its own choice but by the will of the one who subjected it. And see, this is Paul bringing us back to Genesis chapter 3 and the fall of humanity and all creation.

He's saying that the world was subjected to pain and suffering and futility because the people of God, the people God made to rule over creation, we went our own destructive ways apart from God and thus creation, this creation that we were all called to manage, it went south too.

[18 : 23] So broken by sin is creation that even inanimate, like subhuman creation, everything is just out of whack now. Natural disasters, painful, deadly illnesses, scarcity, thistles and thorns, meager and uncertain harvests, that's all because of our sin.

That's all because sin has crept in and broken this world. But, notice the last two words of verse 20. For creation was subjected to frustration, it says, the last two words, in hope.

See, God still had a plan, God still had an intention and a goal for his creation even while subjecting it to thorns and thistles and scarcity and sweat and toil. He subjected it to frustration in hope.

In hope, verse 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. See, that was always the goal.

Liberation from decay, freedom and glory. This is what all of creation has been groaning for ever since our falling out with God. Verse 22, we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to this present time.

[19 : 36] And this is an important metaphor to describe creation's groaning, this idea of the pains of childbirth. I have no experience in that, but I'm told it's very awful. And I believe, I believe those who tell me.

All right? And by the way, shout out to Chengin and An. Maybe you're tuning in on their baby. I don't know if you remember Chengin a couple weeks ago. She shared her story of faith. She just had a baby this week. So praise God for that.

But I imagine it was not easy, right? I wasn't there, but I imagine it wasn't easy. And here we have Chengin experiencing firsthand, right? The pains of childbirth, right?

And the mothers here, you know this pain, right? And that's a massive understatement, but I'm just going to stop there. But what's key also to this metaphor is that pain is not for nothing, right?

Pain is not for nothing. And the groaning is a yearning, not just a yearning for the pain to be over, but for the pain to accomplish its better purpose. And what is the purpose? New life. Fruitfulness.

[20 : 37] Something, someone who will make every good mother say, I was glad to suffer for this. This was totally worth it. And my life is better for having suffered through this experience than if I had not.

You know, my wife Chelsea, she's not here today. My nephew's actually getting baptized out in Castro Valley. That's why my family's not here today. But that's why I can talk about her. You know, she had two, we have two daughters, and both those pregnancies were super hard.

People ask us, are you going to go for a third? We say, if we could be guaranteed that it won't be as hard, we would, but we don't have that guarantee, so we're done. We're done. And again, her pregnancy was just super hard.

She was barfing like buckets upon buckets, multiple hospital visits, ER visits, and honestly, she wanted to die. She would say that every day, and we would cry together every day.

She wanted to die. And it came to a point, right, where her pregnancy was so hard that both times, for Kami and for Leah, our medical provider and even some close family suggested that we terminate our daughters, that we just have an abortion to just end my wife's suffering.

[21 : 54] So I'm incredibly sympathetic to those who contemplate that option because it truly was the worst suffering that my wife has ever experienced and myself, too.

But you know what? On this side of the suffering, as we watch our girls laugh and play and sing and show kindness, right, and recite the Bible verses that Miss Catherine gives us every week, as we teach them to pray the Lord's Prayer, Chelsea will tell you that she is glad.

She's glad she didn't end her suffering prematurely when she could have. Chelsea waited eagerly for her future hope. And this is what children of God are called to do.

Especially as those who've witnessed the first fruits, right, of the ultimate hope to come, Jesus is risen. Jesus' resurrection points to our future resurrection, new creation, life.

Verse 23, not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, a risen Christ, grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies, the full and final reception of our inheritance in Christ, imperishable, incorruptible, eternal life, with no suffering, with God, in His new creation, forever.

[23 : 30] Verse 24, for in this hope, this new creation, resurrection hope, that isn't simply like wishful optimism, but a sure hope that's only yet to be revealed. In this kind of real and future hope, Paul says, we were saved, but hope that is seen is no hope at all.

Who hopes for what they already have? Verse 25, but if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently, and I might add, expectantly, even in our groaning.

And I wonder if that's a word for you today, that yes, your life may be full of groaning, but in Christ, it can be even fuller with hope, because the suffering servant is risen, and his suffering was only a chapter on the way to the final page of forever glory.

And now point number three, God's children never groan alone. So in verse 23, Paul talked about the groaning of God's children, right? But there are two other subjects in this passage who groan along with us, right?

Verse 22, we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to this present time. Here we see Paul personifying creation, the universe, as something that groans and suffers just like us and alongside us.

[24 : 49] So like when you have an oil spill that destroys tons of marine life, creation groans. When COVID, when the death count rapidly rose and rose, creation groaned.

Creation groaned over the smoke rising in Lahaina, over the 25,000 people, 10,000 of whom are children who die every day due to hunger-related causes.

Creation groans, and I think we all can hear it if we're paying attention. Now maybe you're wondering, though, like, so what? Why does it matter that creation groans with us?

Well, maybe I can provide an alternative scenario. Okay, you know, the famous atheist, Richard Dawkins, he wrote this, in a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt and other people are going to get lucky.

And you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

[25 : 57] So see, in Dawkins' mind, the universe isn't created by a personal God and therefore it doesn't groan over suffering. The harsh world just is. Suffering just is.

It's all impersonal and indifferent as the universe just hums along its natural path. But for Paul, and I think for all of us, if we really think about it, when Paul personifies creation as something that groans, he's indicating that contrary to a strictly materialistic view of the world, things are not the way they were meant to be.

And suffering is neither normal nor natural nor neutral but something wrong and worth groaning about. Paul doesn't say creation hums along or that the cogs of creation just continue to turn with natural seasons and rhythms of suffering just because that's the way it is.

No. He says creation groans because creation gets it. It gets it. And creation knows and testifies that this isn't it, that we were all meant, every square inch of reality was meant to experience something far, far better than what we currently experience in this broken world.

See, Christians aren't wishful, thinking, self-deluded optimists. We simultaneously have the greatest reason to groan even as we have the greatest reason to hope.

[27 : 19] And we can hold both of these things, groaning and hoping, together because of the other person here who groans alongside of us in verse 26.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses. See, we are weak, Paul says, and we're miserable and we are so unaware of what we even need that Paul says in verse 26, we do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. 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. And what this is saying is that for every child of God, the Spirit of God intercedes for us.

Praise to the Father on our behalf. Like fragrance rising up into the heavens, the Spirit expresses our deepest groanings to the Father and the Father hears our groanings and he is faithful to listen and to answer.

So like, even when we pray totally inappropriate, off-base prayers that are not at all in accordance with the will of God, like, God, help me lose my virginity. Or, God, let me win the lottery.

[28 : 32] Or, God, make me powerful and influential in my workplace, in my industry. The Spirit of God discerns the thing beneath the thing. The deeper groanings beneath these prayers for his

children are primal groanings for intimacy, are primal groanings for basic necessities and security, are primal groanings to be fruitful in our vocations.

These pure groans that actually are in accordance with God's will, these are lifted up to the Father by the Holy Spirit and the Father delights to receive and grant these requests from these Spirit-descerned groans.

You know, Tim Keller, he used to often say this about prayer that even though God often doesn't answer our prayers in exactly the way we want, for all God's children, he does give us everything we would have asked for if we knew everything that he did.

And see, when the Spirit groans with and for us, the Spirit intercedes and asks the Father for the things we really should have asked for. That's the work of the Holy Spirit.

And when this happens, that's how we get this wonderful promise in verse 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.

[29 : 59] And this is the gospel. Not that we must work all things for our own good through self-love, but that we have a God who both groans with us and who is working for our good.

And it doesn't say he's working for the good of those who avoid suffering at all costs. No, it says that in all things, he works for the good of those who love him and who have been called according to his purpose.

So again, how are we living our lives? How are we going to live our lives? Are we living primarily to avoid suffering or are we living to love God by walking in his calling and his purposes even when suffering might be involved?

Do we love the one who first loved us? Has it sunk in how deep and how far and how wide and how long is his love for his children? You know, at the beginning of the sermon, we approached the problem of God and suffering and I told you I wasn't going to try to provide an answer to why God has allowed such suffering.

But what I do want to share, what I am absolutely convinced of is what the answer cannot be. And the answer cannot be that God doesn't love us or that he's unwilling to come near to us and experience our groaning and our suffering himself.

[31 : 16] You see, it's not only the creation that groans with us, it's not only the comforter who groans with us, the Holy Spirit, but the wonderful mystery of our faith is that Christ groans with us, that Christ groans for us.

the one who took Psalm 22 upon his lips while hanging on a cross in our place. He cried, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And do you know how the rest of that verse 1 of chapter 22 in the Psalms goes? Why are you so far from saving me from the words of my groaning? we have a groaning Savior.

And see, on the cross, Jesus was dying and he was groaning and he was crying out, but no one came near to his groans. Even his Father in heaven did not save him from that cross.

And the good news of the gospel is that because Jesus came near to our groaning and had his own groanings ignored upon a cross, none of our groanings will therefore ever go unheard or unanswered.

[32 : 25] Christ groaned and died upon a cross so that God could end our groaning and our suffering without ending us. And this is the gospel. For although the children of God will never avoid suffering, they will always have hope and they never groan alone apart from the Spirit of God and the Son of God.

His name is Jesus. Will you pray with me? Lord God, we can't say that we like suffering. We thank you that you're bigger than that. You're a better storyteller, you're a better story writer and you offer us a better hope.

God, help us to be a church that embodies authenticity, that truly groans together, but that also hopes together and therefore rejoices in the good news of Jesus, our suffering servant who groaned in our place so we can be guaranteed that you hear us, you hear our groans, you are listening as we await the final chapter in our stories, the story of glory because of the work of Christ and the work of your Spirit.

Thank you, God. Thank you. Give us faith to believe this wonderful news in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.