

Living for the grand finale

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- [0 : 0 0] And with me to Romans chapter 8, and we're reading this morning from verses 18 to 30.
- For I consider that the suffering of this present time, sufferings of this present time, are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.
- For the creation waits with eager longing 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 will be set free from its bondage to corruption, and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
- For we know that the whole creation has been grown in together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.
- For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.
- [1 : 2 4] Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.
- And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.
- And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.
- And those whom he predestined, he also called. And those whom he called, he also justified. And those whom he justified, he also glorified.
- Well, we're five weeks into our series on assurance, based on Romans 7 and 8. And this morning we're turning to the reality of suffering. What place does suffering have in our lives?
- [2 : 3 2] And indeed, as we think about assurance as Christians. And here's the problem. It's all around us. It's mixed up with the good things in life.
- Inseparably mixed up, it seems. And one thing we know about it is that it makes life feel really awful. It's just hard. Like broccoli, eating broccoli or beans.
- Now, some suffering sweeps over as simply as part of being in this world, this broken world. It's out of our control in a sense.
- So there's natural disasters, there's floods, there's droughts, there's fires. There's accidents, there's illnesses. There's disease, there's wars, there's aging. And so the list goes on and on and on.
- Things that are just, in a sense, part of living in our world that aren't necessarily to do with us at all. We just get caught up in it. Other suffering, of course, is much more direct or indirect, but is a product of our actions, our thinking.

[3 : 39] Self-centered thinking. Actions and interactions with people around us that constantly strain or break relationships. A single bad life choice can change everything and impact us for years or a lifetime, in fact.

So that sort of suffering is down to ourselves or those with whom we rub shoulders on a weekly basis. So just doing life has a very real potential to rob us of any assurance of being safe and secure in Christ, which is our series title.

And in fact, it even gets more than that, because what happens is that so regularly we convince ourselves that the fact that we do suffer is evidence that God is still angry at us.

That we're not really forgiven. And that we're not free from condemnation at all. We look at suffering and we draw that conclusion. And that saps away any assurance we have of being saved.

And that easily becomes a deep-seated fear then, expressed in the question, will I make it home to heaven? Will I actually get there? Heaven seems so far away.

[5 : 09] Especially given that every new day seems to throw up new hurdles. More suffering of some or some other tough circumstance.

Any of which threatens to trip me up. Any of which makes me, sort of threatens to make me fall in a heap. Utterly defeated and hopeless.

Now, we've looked over the last few weeks at various reference points for assurance. And it's great to focus on those reference points already covered.

So, going back to chapter 8, verses 1 to 4. Knowing that Christ is condemned for my sin, so I cannot be condemned for the same sin. Instead, I get new life or standing with God.

That's a great thing to focus on. Then, knowing that the Holy Spirit creates new life in me and confirms my adoption through new attitudes and desires, verses 5 to 11. That's a great point of assurance.

[6 : 09] Not only is Christ working for me, but the Holy Spirit is working in me to give me assurance of being saved. And then also, knowing that the Holy Spirit confirms to me that I'm not only legally adopted, but a beloved child, given the full inheritance of Jesus, treated in exactly the same way as the Father treats Jesus.

And that's the Holy Spirit's job to work in us, to convince us of that. But all that notwithstanding, the tension of life, the reality, the pain and struggle of everyday living, seriously threatens to drown out all those good things and leave us fearful.

So, can I have absolute confidence in my salvation in Christ, in the everyday mess and struggle of life?

That's the question. Our fourth reference point this morning, then, is to recognize that suffering is normal.

Suffering is normal now, but glory is the grand finale for us. Those two things must be held together.

[7 : 33] Now, the reality for Christians is, to pinch a term from John Chapman's book, the reality for Christians is that we live with a foot in two worlds.

So, we should expect life to be tough, whatever that continues. Living with tension is normal. Verse 17, Bo covered this last week, introduces the whole notion of suffering.

And it becomes the link through to this next section. But we often miss the connection from verse 17 through into this section. See, the whole section that Bo dealt with last week, 12 through to 17, talks about our identification with Jesus.

We are so closely identified with him that we are in him, and he is in us through his Holy Spirit. And we are adopted. We are one with him in God's family.

We are joint heirs. So, we see the identification and embrace it in the good things, adoption, being children, inheritance, and all those things. But we also need to identify with Christ in the not-so-nice things.

[8 : 45] Verse 17, suffering. Remember, Christ's pathway to glory was suffering. Our pathway to glory in Christ is likewise suffering, but equally true, glory.

And in verses 18 to 25, then, moving into our text this morning, again, it seems really complicated, but I think Paul's just trying to give us some comparative pictures, very strong metaphors, of what it means for us to have a foot in both worlds.

So, having a foot in this world means living, for now, in a frustrating mess that we call life. Look at verse 18.

Again, a before and after picture. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed.

There is a comparison. Now, suffering, and that seems awful, but then, glory. And when you put the two of them together, the present suffering is nothing.

[10 : 08] As Christians, we're a work in progress, to use the colloquial term. Now, as Christians, we wrestle with imperfection, frustration, sin.

Sin. It's the mess we call life. But that is in sharp contrast to what it would be like when God's salvation work in us, and in his world, is complete.

Then, it will be nothing less than perfection. Freedom to enjoy Christ. Freedom to be like Christ perfectly and consistently.

verse 19 continues. Verse 19 continues. Different sort of picture. It's a picture of the world we inhabit. Verses 19 through to 22.

Let me read it again. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected them, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

[11 : 22] For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. Again, it's picture language.

What Paul's saying here is that God's salvation plan extends to everything that God has made, including the physical creation. In fact, Paul links inseparably the redemption of the physical world to the ultimate redemption of God's people.

And so, what do we do now? Well, Paul's saying, look, until that happens, the physical world we live in is in turmoil. It's broken. It's suffering the symptoms and consequences of sin.

It's subject to frustration. It's unable to fulfill the purpose for which God made it. It's in bondage to decay. That is, it's locked into this cycle of slow deterioration, a cycle of birth and life and death and decomposition.

It's in bondage to repent. It's in bondage. It's in bondage. It's in bondage. Verse 21, like anybody who's lived with limitations and pain, it has the, and it's talking about the physical creation has, so it's a picture here.

[12 : 45] The physical creation has an intense longing to be well again, to be free to be what God made it to be. There's picture language. And if you've been sick, you know that longing all too well, don't you?

And that's another sort of pain, verse 22. It introduces a different picture. It's a pain like a woman in childbirth. That terrible ripping pain, which at the same time promises to deliver something new and exciting.

Something to be longed for and embraced. Paul's point, well I think it's this.

That God's salvation process, well underway now, will only be complete when our physical world is totally renewed as well. But until then, the environment we live in is one in which sickness, decay, death, brokenness, tension, struggle and suffering is normal and unavoidable for us as Christians.

As Christians, we'll continue to get caught up in this reality. We'll suffer at times things that are beyond our control.

[14 : 13] Simply by being in this world. But look at verse 23. Paul uses the same picture of childbirth.

And again, the link between the physical world and Christians. He uses the same picture in verse 23 to describe Christians. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

We groan. We groan. We groan because of pain and suffering and frustration and failure to be what we want to be.

Failure to be what we know we are in Christ. As we struggle to live as those renewed and partially renovated by God's Spirit working within us, we've just groan over our sinful bodies, which battle against us.

And we, too, long for that time when we will be completely well. But having a foot in heaven, on the other hand, means the grand finale of God's salvation process is yet to happen.

[15 : 40] So now, suffering, then our physical world will be completely renewed. For what purpose? For the purpose it was created.

So it can testify clearly and unambiguously to God's glory and God's power and wisdom and majesty. And we, at that same time, will be in a position where we can be what we were created to be.

Completely like Jesus. New bodies. Free to enjoy Jesus. Free to reflect the glory of God in every part of our lives consistently.

Free to enjoy our inheritance in Jesus Christ. We're already saved. Renewed spiritually. And completely free of the guilt of sin.

We are already joint heirs with Christ. Verse 17. But we still live with the consequences of sin in nature and in humanity.

[16 : 53] And we're waiting for something better. We're longing for something better. We're groaning as we wait for that something better. Until then, tension, pain, disappointment, failure will be the order of the day for believers.

Some because we live in a broken world. And some brought upon ourselves because we choose to walk back into sin that we've been redeemed from and set free from.

Rather than live as we now are in Christ. And then another picture, verse 23.

We've already read that. A picture of the Holy Spirit as a down payment or first fruit on the future. The future still seems so far away.

We get overwhelmed by our failures on a day by day. Hour by hour basis even. So the future just seems too far away to hang on to.

[18 : 01] Verse 23. We have God's Holy Spirit as a down payment on the future. So what do you hang on to when you think of this suffering?

It's hard enough sometimes to get through a day. Let alone contemplate 20 or 40 or 60 or 70 years of it. Growing up on the farm, I well remember the building excitement as we moved towards harvest time.

It was great anticipation but it still didn't seem real. Yes, you'd checked the machinery and that was all working. You'd cleaned the sheds and they were all ready for the grain.

But it just didn't seem real until that day when the header went into the first paddock. And you saw the bin on the header filled for the first time. And you saw that bin unload onto the chaser bin for the first time.

And the first truck then drives into the silo and it's unloaded. Then you know harvest is underway. It's not the whole harvest. But harvest has come.

[19 : 10] And the rest will follow. Just so for us Christians. We have already experienced the Spirit's renewing and changing power.

And ever since we've lived with our focus on the grand finale. Longing for the renovation process to be complete.

Even as we struggle on a day by day, hour by hour basis. My friends, we need to guard that perspective on assurance.

Having the Spirit within does not mean we are free from the mess of life.

So many Christians get it wrong at this point and rob themselves of assurance. In fact, it's the exact opposite. Having the Spirit within puts us into this terrible struggle, this terrible tension.

[20 : 13] But it's not the end of the story. The Spirit who takes us into that tension and that struggle is the down payment of the grand finale.

Yet to come, yet to happen. And in between, the mess of life is normal for bravers. We need to understand that when we struggle in these ways, there is nothing wrong with our faith.

Nothing wrong with our relationship with Christ. It does not mean, suffering does not mean that somehow or other you're still under God's wrath or punishment. Suffering is to be expected.

See, the problem is for us that when we suffer, we sometimes go to prayer. And then we think, well, okay, if we're still suffering, that must mean I haven't prayed the right prayers. Or I haven't prayed hard enough.

Or long enough. Or I haven't done enough good things to back my prayers. And so, we sort of default easily back into religious thinking.

[21 : 15] Well, okay, if I'm going to offset this suffering and find assurance, then I have to do more things to please God. Going back to Rod's talk. I need to be reading the Bible more. I need to be praying more.

I need to be going to church more. So, we tend to go back to those things as the means of our assurance. When in suffering, the Lord wants us to just look to him and trust what he has done for us.

And continues to do in us. With the promise of the grand finale ahead of us. Tim Chester, in that book that many have been reading at the minute, Enjoying God, God says that suffering is an opportunity to enjoy God's grace.

And grow in God's grace. It's not a time to despair. And even in that time of suffering, we have further promise here as this passage develops.

We have promise of empathetic help from God's Spirit. I'm not sure what else to call that. It seems a bit strange to talk about the Spirit being empathetic.

[22 : 33] But I'm trying to get just the personalness of it and the intimacy of it. Verse 26. Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

For we do not know what to pray for as we ought. But the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit. Because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. Now, again, that seems very mystical.

But I think it's actually a very simple picture. And I'm going to present it as that. Hopefully I'm not trivializing Scripture. I think it's just this Paul saying, look, in the mess of life, at the point of our deepest groaning, inner groaning and frustration, either because what we've been swept up in just generally because we live in this world, or because of a failure on our own part, our own actions.

At that deepest point of groaning and frustration and failure, Paul's saying here, you can be sure God's Spirit sits alongside you. Helping you along.

[23 : 56] Helping you through it. Giving you assurance that all is well with your soul. Now, we all know instinctively there's nothing better, that is, nothing more helpful, nothing nicer in a messy life circumstance we're experiencing than to have a friend get alongside us and just say something very simple, but which we immediately connect with because we think, they know what I'm going through.

There's nothing nicer in life than to have that sort of input, just to have the realization that somebody else knows what it's like.

Well, I think what Paul's saying here is the Holy Spirit is that best friend. The best friend who knows, even better than you do yourself, can express in word that he knows what you're going through.

He knows the frustration at sin. He knows the suffering you're struggling with. Now, again, picking up some of the phrases in there.

I take it every believer here, certainly I've had lots of times, and I suspect you're the same. Every believer here this morning, I suspect, has had times and circumstances where we've just not known what to pray or how to pray.

[25 : 28] Perhaps you are so much in despair over your poor responses to God's grace and choosing again to walk into sin instead of walking into righteousness.

Perhaps you're so upset with these sinful failures or by observing the sinful failures of others out there that you come to pray, but you realize you just don't know where to start.

Your head's down, your eyes are closed, your spirit's willing, but you don't know where to start and the words just won't come. Have you known those times? You're not sure whether you wanted to pray or cry or both.

And perhaps in those situations, all that's come out is just a deep sigh, a sigh that expresses the heaviness of heart, your desire to go to the Father in prayer, but you just don't have the words because you can't work out what it is you need to be saying.

I think Paul's point is this, that it's at that precise moment that the Spirit himself takes our heart's desires, our deep longings, things that we can't even express verbally.

[26 : 57] It gathers them all up and presents them to the Father on our behalf. It's as if the Spirit himself feels the agony and suffering of our sinful state as we do.

And gathers up all those thoughts and longings and in a sense, sorts them into a decent prayer and presents them to the Father on our behalf.

I've said before that sometimes we just see the suffering of another person swept up as a consequence of sin and we're wordless.

I mean, how do you pray for somebody, a close family relative who's just getting taken away by cancer or who's just been involved in a horrendous car accident and it's just going to change the rest of their life?

How do you pray for them? Do you pray they'll live? Do you pray they'll be here with you? Or do you pray they'll die and go to enjoy being in heaven with the Lord? Do you pray they'll be faithful? Do you pray? What do you pray?

[28 : 05] You want the best for them, but what is the best for them? Do you pray? Do you pray? And how do you pray for somebody close to you who's walked into sin and made a terrible mess of relationships in life?

Do you pray the Lord will do whatever is needed to get their attention and bring them back? And you wonder what cost that will be. Do you pray? I mean, what do you pray? How do you pray for them? Do you pray that the Lord might use you as an instrument to confront them?

Well, that's a scary prayer to pray, isn't it? And in the end, we don't know what to pray. We simply go before the Lord, scarcely able to contain our emotions, and we just cry out for that loved one.

With groans too deep for words. My friends, I think this is truth to live by. In the midst of suffering. It's a great assurance that the Holy Spirit understands us and is sitting alongside us as we throw ourselves before the Lord in tough times in prayer.

So as we wrap up this morning, I said, be assured that your tears of frustration and longing are not in vain. Verse 27.

[29 : 32] He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit. That's the Father. Because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We don't have to be able to express everything clearly and articulate things logically.

The Spirit works with us. The Spirit works within us. It's as if He groans our groans and translates them into a communication, a correspondence that's effective before the Father.

And the net result is that our prayers will be heard. Our prayers will be answered. Our situation is remembered because the Spirit acts on our behalf and our deep thinking and desires.

And in turn, the Father grants the Spirit's request because they're formulated entirely according to the will of God. He will get our prayers right, as it were. And I believe, and I'm on shaky ground here, I think, but I believe that the Spirit will actually correct our prayers.

Be assured also that God knows you better than you know your own heart. Now this is the opposite of how most of us think. But when we're unable to express ourselves and unable to know what to pray, then we tend to despair.

[31 : 05] We think, oh, hope is lost. And if I can't pray for my friend or I can't pray for my loved one or I can't pray for my brother or sister in Christ because I don't know what to do, then how are they going to be helped? How are they going to be turned around?

How is the situation going to be dealt with? We think our failure to know what is the right thing to do or say means we're on our own.

Not so, brothers and sisters. And thank goodness for that. What assurance that God's Spirit sits alongside us and groans as we groan, expresses the longings that we want to express but can't, and sweeps them all up to the Father on our behalf.

Life will be tough, but we have God's Spirit as the down payment of better things ahead and we always have them at hand, the one who knows exactly how we're feeling, the one who works with us and in us for the very end that the Father has for us to become more like Jesus, to continue in the struggle based on God's grace, helping us become the children we want to be, the children Christ wants us to be and all of that in the midst of the mess of life.

And we need to be realistic. We need to be realistic about having a foot in two worlds but be assured of God's promise of absolute control and good.

[32 : 52] Verses 28 to 30. Let me read these verses because they sit so beautifully at the end of this passage. So remember, we've been talking about suffering and the longing, the desire to be free and be what God wants us to be.

And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good. All things.

I take it that includes our suffering. All things work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, that goes right back to, whatever you understand that, it goes right back to eternity at the start.

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of the Son in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those He predestined, He called.

Real time, we became Christians. Those He called, He justified. Put into a right relationship with God. And those He justified, He also glorified. He's going to finish the process.

[34 : 06] And here's our assurance, brothers and sisters, that in the midst of suffering, from the very moment of eternity past to the very moment of eternity future, every part of our salvation is under God's control, is God's initiative.

There's no point at which He leads us to our own devices. As a believer, you are bound for glory.

So live for that grand finale in the midst of suffering and struggle now. Confident that the Holy Spirit's role is to help you, to support you every inch of the way.

Every part of your salvation is God's work. So there's no possibility of failure. The song we sang just before the sermon, we are now in Christ, so inseparably connected to Him, that because He cannot die, we cannot die.

God's promise is that every moment of suffering is an opportunity to experience God's grace and grow in His likeness. Be assured, brothers and sisters, and throw yourselves back into the struggle this week.

[35 : 39] Let me pray. Let me pray. Lord, help us to take on board the things you mean us to have before us as points of assurance.

Lord, you've given us in this chapter already four or five points, reference points, and we realize, Lord, that sometimes one of them resonates better with us than the other, so help us, Lord, to slide across these things depending on our circumstances.

Sometimes, Lord, our oblique, we can just hang on to your promise that there's no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Other times, Lord, we are much more assured of the Spirit's work within us.

We feel it, we see it, and we respond to it. Lord, help us particularly in this matter of suffering to understand that it's part of identification with Christ, part of living with a foot in two worlds, but it's not the end story for us, and that at no point in that struggle are we on our own.

Help us, Lord, to be confident in that so we're free to live for you with confidence and boldness this coming week. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.