

# Hardship and confidence

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[ 0 : 00 ] The first reading is from Ecclesiastes chapter 1 verses 1 to 15. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises.

The wind blows to the south and goes round to the north. Round and round goes the wind and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full to the place where the streams flow.

There they flow again. All things are full of weariness and a man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

[ 1 : 04 ] What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done. There is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said?

See, this is new. It has been already in the ages before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after. I, the preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem, and I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. There is a slight error on the screen, but our second reading will be starting from Romans chapter 8, verse 18.

[ 2 : 14 ] Romans chapter 8, verse 18. For I consider that the 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 this 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 groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for the adoptions 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.

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.

[ 3 : 36 ] 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 for those whom he called, he also justified.

And for those whom he justified, he also glorified.

Lynn and Catherine, thanks so much for reading for us. Do please keep Romans chapter 8 open.

And let me pray as we begin.

Let's pray together. 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.

[ 4 : 48 ] Heavenly Father, we praise you for the fact that you help us to get our bearings in the world in which we live. And we pray that as we think about when life is hard over these next few weeks, please would you enable us to be attentive to your word.

We pray that your Spirit would be at work teaching us and convicting us. And we pray that you would help us not only to navigate life ourselves, but to help each other to do so. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we're starting this new series of talks today. Rather than working through a particular book of the Bible, which we usually do, we occasionally zoom in on a particular topic or a doctrinal issue.

And for these next four weeks, we're going to be thinking about hardship and when life is tough. Now, my intention over these next four weeks is not to answer every question we may have about hardship, but rather to help us to navigate hard times.

We're simply going to look at four Bible passages that I have found particularly helpful myself over these last six months or so when I've been ill. And my prayer is that those passages will be helpful for others.

[ 6 : 11 ] Who is the series for? Well, everyone. Because hardship surely will catch us out if we are not prepared for it. After all, all we have to do to experience hardship is to live long enough.

And that is true whether we're followers of Jesus Christ or whether we are simply looking in on the Christian faith. For those looking in, there's the often heard objection, how can you believe in God when there's so much suffering in the world?

That, of course, is the objection of someone who doesn't know God and doesn't understand his purposes. Well, this series of talks is, if you like, an invitation to see and grasp his goodness and his purposes and to appreciate the enormous comfort that knowing the living God brings in the midst of hardship.

Well, for those who do know Jesus, now I'm conscious that many of us at Grace Church are finding life difficult at the moment. But even if we aren't, then all of us will do at some stage in the future. And all of us, I guess, well, certainly many of us, will know others at church who are at the moment. In other words, I hope we don't only listen to sermons for our own benefit.

[ 7 : 36 ] I think it's very easy to do that. I used to do that as a younger Christian. If the sermon didn't address, you know, one of the particular situations that I was facing in life at the moment, I tended to go away disappointed.

It was a very immature, me-centered attitude to church. Because the fact is that even if God's word doesn't speak to where your life is at today, it will speak to where others' lives are at.

And it will enable you to pastor them and love them by bringing them to God's word. Well, if you have a copy of the outline, or if you see it as it comes up on the screen, our first point from Romans chapter 8 this morning, in hardship, get your bearings.

In hardship, get your bearings. If you've done something like the Duke of Edinburgh award, then you'll know what it is to have to get your bearings. You know, you're kind of dropped off somewhere.

You know the destination you're meant to get to by the end of the day. And the first thing you do is to get out your compass and get out the map. You check the lie of the land. Where are we?

[ 8 : 49 ] What's the terrain like? What are the kind of obstacles? What's the journey going to be like as we get from A to B? Well, in Romans chapter 8, verses 18 to 25, the Apostle Paul helps us to do that with our world.

And it's summarized in verse 18. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

You and I live in a world that is marked by suffering. And yet, which is heading for a new world, a new creation, that will be glorious.

A new world, verse 19, that creation itself longs for, for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

Why? Verse 20. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it.

[ 9 : 55 ] In the beginning, God made a beautiful world. He made men and women to live in relationship with him under his rule. And yet, we reject his rule.

Well, no. It's what the Bible calls sin, which means that we now live in a world under judgment, awaiting a new creation.

It's the world of Ecclesiastes, which we had read earlier and which Jam, our youth group, are looking at on Sunday evenings. In other words, think about the storyline of the Bible for a moment. At the start of the Bible, in the Garden of Eden, we see a world that was good and perfect. And the Bible ends, not in the garden, but a city.

A city that also is good and perfect. The heavenly Jerusalem. And yet, you and I live in the middle. [10:54] A world that is groaning. A world marked by sin and the consequences of sin. The creation itself groans, verse 22, longing for the new creation.

And verse 23, we also, those who have the Spirit and belong to Jesus, groan. Verse 23, 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. One of the striking things, I think here, is that one of the marks of having the Holy Spirit is not that life is happy all the time, but that we groan.

All too aware that we live in a fallen world. All too aware, verse 24, that we haven't yet received the goal of our salvation. All too aware, verse 25, that the Christian life is a life of patient, waiting for the new world to come.

So let me ask, what are your expectations of life? Whether you're a teenager with life stretching out ahead of you, or whether you're someone older who has more of your life behind you than it is ahead, what are your expectations?

[12:27] Do you expect an ordered, predictable life where you're able to achieve your plans and dreams? Do you think you'll be able to avoid illness and accidents and injury?

Do you believe you'll be able to plan your way out of stress and avoid situations where you feel overwhelmed? Do you imagine that your life will be uneventful, prosperous, healthy, and that you'll be in control?

If the answer to those questions is yes, and I guess for many of us, if we're honest, the answer is yes, it reveals that we have far too high expectations of what life in this world will hold and not nearly high enough expectations of the world to come.

Because this world is marked by groaning. A fallen, broken, bleeding, hurting world. It is the next world and not this world that is marked by glory.

It's why, of course, the Bible is such a wonderfully honest and refreshing book. It knows all about bereavement, about childlessness, about illness, about depression, about frustrating jobs, being treated unfairly, about financial difficulties, about things not going to plan or working out as we hope for our children, the hardship of dealing with frail parents.

[14:09] The Bible tells us that life is hard because we live in a fallen, groaning world. But also, that it's hard because we're followers of Jesus.

For most Christians in most parts of the world, that is obvious. I guess we struggle with it because we live in a peaceful, prosperous part of the world and we are caught out when life doesn't turn out to be what we hoped it might be.

Imagine for a moment an episode of the bake-off and two cakes appear from the oven. Which of these two cakes best describes the world in which we live.

The first cake is, well, it's never going to win the bake-off, but actually it's pretty good. You know, there are a few kind of burnt bits on the top which you can kind of scrape off, but then actually you can enjoy the rest of it.

It's a pretty decent cake. The second cake, oh dear, it's not quite a disaster and I'm certainly not going to say what the judges on the bake-off might say about it.

[15:25] And yes, there were kind of one or two little bits which you can cut out and sit down and enjoy the cup of tea. But really, there's only one answer and that's to start all over again and bake a new cake.

Which cake best describes the world in which we live? The second, we groan. Creation groans. Longing for a new creation. Now, you and I may well know that in our heads if we've been following Jesus for a while. But isn't our assumption that life is really like the first cake?

In other words, I suspect many of us, and probably myself included, functionally believe in a prosperity gospel. We see hardship as a blip, as the exception.

We assume that because life is generally good most of the time, that that is how life should be all of the time. And we get caught out when it's not.

[ 16 : 36 ] And we find ourselves doubting God's goodness or we wonder what's gone wrong. that if we're to navigate life when it's hard, we need to get our bearings.

Secondly, in hardship, we are to trust God's goodness. In hardship, trust God's goodness. Verses 28 to 30. 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 we 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. We all suffer.

Everyone on the planet suffers. And yet, verse 28 contains a very special promise for those who love God. Notice it's not a general promise for everyone, but a very special promise for those who follow Jesus.

[ 17 : 50 ] And I want us to notice two words in particular. The first word is all. All things work together for good.

Not some things. Not only those things which I feel might be for our good, but all things, including the hardships and the uncertainties and the painful things.

The other word is good. All things work together for good. Of course, God is good.

It doesn't mean that hardship and suffering are good in themselves. Rather, God's purpose for us in them is good.

In other words, you see, we mustn't think that God is passively standing by, indifferent, watching our struggles. response. No, he is actively working for our good.

[ 19 : 00 ] He is our loving heavenly father. He governs all things with wisdom, love, and care. He is far too wise to make mistakes and far too kind to bring unnecessary pain and hurt.

In C.S. Lewis' memoir on his experience of bereavement, a grief observed, he confesses to his darkest fear that he might conclude that God is, in his words, a cosmic sadist or eternal vivisector. And he writes this, Not that I'm in danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him.

The conclusion I dread is not so there's no God after all, but so this is what God is really like.

That's a very honest piece of writing. I guess some of us will know what it is to have asked that question, as I have. And yet the reality is that although God doesn't tell us everything we might like to know, he does tell us what we need to know in order to trust him, that he works everything for our good.

[ 20 : 30 ] And as C.H. Spurgeon said, if everything works together for our good, then there is nothing that is left to work for our ill. Now that is true of every event in history, even the very worst event in history, the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus.

How can that possibly be good? Jesus subject to a trumped up trial, tortured and crucified, and yet as Acts chapter 2 tells us there on the outline, this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan of foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

But God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. The very worst event in history, and yet the definite plan of God, to bear the penalty for sin and defeat death.

God's But I guess the obvious question is, but what is this good for which God is at work in all things?

Well, the answer comes in verse 29, if you have a look at it. It is to be conformed to the image and likeness of Jesus. It's that Jesus might have many brothers who share his family likeness.

[ 22 : 05 ] In fact, in verse 30, we see the glorious chain, if you like, of God's purposes. God's promises for God's promises for God, and then the promise of being glorified in the new creation.

In the meantime, God is using all the circumstances of life to conform us to the likeness of Jesus. That work will be complete in the new creation, but in this life there will never be a situation in which God is not at work in our lives to that end.

We often have a jigsaw on the go when we're on holiday. Kind of open the box, you find the corners, you get the edges, so you've got the frame of the jigsaw. You see there's a red tractor, so you kind of look through all the red pieces.

There's a green tree, so you kind of look through all the green pieces and try and get that. To be honest, it looks pretty messy and unpromising to start with, which is why it's important to have the

picture in front of you, to see the glorious picture that actually, once you finish the jigsaw, you will have.

And it is wonderful, because when it's finished, every piece fits. Even those pieces which, for hours, you just couldn't see how they could possibly fit or where they would fit in.

[ 23 : 40 ] Well, it's just the same with the way God works in our lives. Except, of course, we won't see the completed jigsaw in this life, but in the next.

I think this is the question we need to ask ourselves when life is hard. Where does our hope come from? Where does our hope come from?

You see, the danger is that we anchor our trust in God's goodness. We anchor our hope in a change of circumstances, to things getting better.

But what if things don't get better? What if our circumstances don't change? What if life gets harder and doesn't get easier?

what happens to our trust in Jesus then? Can you see, instead, we need to anchor our hope in God's promise that all things work for the good of those who love him.

[ 24 : 51 ] If you know Jesus, there will never be a situation in which God isn't at work in your life to that end. It could be a good thing to lose your job because your job is strangling the spiritual life out of you.

It could be a good thing for that relationship to come to an end because it isn't helping you walk with Jesus. It could be a good thing to have disappointing exam results or the medical diagnosis that you were dreading.

these could be the very things God in his kindness uses to humble us, to mature us, to increase our dependence upon him.

All these things, they take our eyes off this world. They help us to join with the whole of creation as it grows. They help us to look instead to the world to come.

Finally, in hardship, be honest about the problem. Because so far, what's not to like? And yet I wonder if we can spot the problem.

[ 26 : 14 ] Don't we want verse 28 to read rather differently? Perhaps something like, and we know that for those who love God, all things work together for what I think is my good.

For what I feel is the right thing. Because the reality is that we all have a plan for our lives. It may be a conscious plan of this is where I want to get to in my life, or it just may be a whole series of unconscious assumptions about how life will turn out.

exams, university, the job we might do, plans for marriage, for children, for success, for a lifestyle, plans to meet family expectations. We can have endless plans and assumptions about the way in which life is going to go.

When Tim Keller, the American pastor, was diagnosed with stage 4 pancreatic cancer 80 months ago at the age of 75, he described what a shock it was to him. He explained how his assumption had been that through his 70s he might get a few minor ailments, but it wouldn't really be until he was in his 80s that he would get anything really serious.

We all have plans, we all have assumptions just about the course which we think our life is going to take. It's no wonder, is it, the apostle Paul says in verse 26, for we do not know what to pray as we ought to.

[ 27 : 43 ] We don't know what to pray so often. It's the stuff, isn't it, of sharing prayer requests in growth groups. Pray I'll get the job, pray I'll get better, pray the kids would be happy, pray they'd do well in their exams, pray that life would be easy, pray that life would proceed according to my plans and assumptions.

We need to be honest about the problem. We have plans for our lives, we have assumptions about the way which our lives will work out that we find very hard to shake off.

And so when life is hard, this is the question we need to ask. Do I really believe that God's plan for my life is better than my plan for my life?

Do I really believe that the jigsaw that God is making with all the pieces of my life is far better than the jigsaw I could put together with the pieces of my life?

life? And not just whose plan is better, but whose plan therefore will I trust? Because if I know God's plan is better, I'm going to trust him, aren't I, when life is hard?

[ 28 : 59 ] If I think my plan is better, then at that point, I won't trust him. ponder these words, they're on the outline from the Puritan writer John Flavel.

This affliction for which thou mournest may be the greatest mercy to thee that ever befell thee in the world. Now for some of us in this building, that is very hard world.

Because we like to be in control. But hard times remind us that we are not in control. Indeed, they may be God's greatest mercy to us.

In other words, suffering fuels our longing. It takes us by the hand and says, look, there is something better. We hold that we so tightly to this world, but suffering loosens our grip on this world.

It reminds us that we better not store our treasures in this world, because they can and will be taken from us. Suffering, hardship, wean us from this life, and they set our hopes on the life to come.

[ 30 : 21 ] And that is a hope that will not disappoint. Some more words. written by a lady who has suffered far more than most.

She writes, one of the great blessings of suffering, though perhaps not the most welcome, is that we come to see this more clearly. We'd rather be comfortable in this world, but suffering mercifully doesn't allow it.

We share this world's groaning, and realize what has been clear to most people throughout history. Our hearts, as well as our heads, now know the truth.

In the light of eternity, this life is a blip and a shadow. Why don't we have a few moments for reflection, and then I shall lead us in prayer.

prayer. And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

[ 31 : 29 ] God. Heavenly Father, we praise you that you are good. We see your goodness supremely in the Lord Jesus, his death on the cross for our sins, that you so loved the world that you gave your only son.

And we pray, Heavenly Father, for all of us as we go through the hardships of life. Please would you indeed, as you promise, to use all things for our good.

And please would you orientate us away from this world and the groaning of this world to the next. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

You'll see there's a book recommendation there on the bottom of the outline. It's Invest Your Suffering by Paul Mallard and the experience of living with his wife's had a serious illness for 20 years.

I think it's the best book on actually living with suffering I've come across and I know that Adrian's got copies on the bookstore as well. I'll also be recommending other books over the next four weeks but I think that's my top recommendation for today.

[ 32 : 40 ] Michael. Thank you. Thank you.