

When life is hard

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[0 : 00] Okay, so it's Romans 8, and we're starting at the beginning. 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 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 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 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 we hope for what we do not see.

We wait for 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.

[1 : 16] 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. To experience suffering in this world, you only have to live long enough.

So said C.S. Lewis, the Christian author. I put it on the front of a handout. We all experience hard times at some point. And if you're not going through a particularly hard time right now, then you will in the future.

And in the meantime, you will want to help those around you. The aim tonight is to help us think through how to make sense of suffering.

[2 : 26] To look at what God says in the Bible about hard times and their purpose. So on your handout, there are going to be two sections. The first is God's plan.

And the second is God's purpose. Now, I'm aware that we're just going to be scratching the surface of such a huge topic tonight. But I hope that the evening will help us to think and later to pray these things through so that God can change us and equip us to live for him.

We're going to have some teaching from the front. Looking at God's plan, first of all, and his purpose. And then quite a bit of breaking out into groups. And at the end, some time for prayer.

Now, it's just worth saying, perhaps, that in our comfortable Western world, hard times will look very different than for our brothers and sisters around the world who face all sorts of opposition and suffering just for being a Christian.

Nevertheless, our suffering is real and we all face it. Now, you may be thinking to yourself, how can I make sense of suffering?

[3 : 37] I mean, a sovereign God and a God of love. How do those things possibly hold together? How can there be suffering if God is all loving and all powerful?

Well, let's take a look at some Bible passages together. So, do get hold of a Bible and maybe share if you haven't been able to get one for yourself.

I'm hoping almost all of you will have a handout. And we're going to break out into groups. But on the handout, under part one, which is God's plan, you'll see, if you turn on the inside page, there are three passages there.

And we've only got five minutes to do this. But we're going to have a look at a couple of verses. They're one, two, and three. And in your small groups, if you could discuss them. And then we'll feed back for a few minutes when you've had five minutes to discuss it. Genesis 1, in the context of the chapter, what was God's plan?

[4 : 39] In chapter 1, there's this God's plan that makes the world. And all the way through chapter 1, he says things are good as he makes them. And then finally, in verse 21, he looks back on everything that he's made and sees that it's very good.

So, God is very happy with the things that he has made. Excellent. So, could you read out verse 31 for us, please? Yeah. And God saw everything that he had made as a whole. It was very good. And there was evening and there was morning and sick things. So, it was very good. Revelation 21. Could someone tell us what was God's plan for the future? It was for us to be living back with him again.

Be with him, dwelling with him. Thank you. Could someone read verse 4 for us? He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore.

For the former things have passed away. Fantastic. So, everything was very good in the beginning. And at the end, everything will be very good.

[5 : 42] He will wipe every tear from their eyes. In the meantime, when we live now, someone from this side of the room. So, it's the third question. What's the problem now? So, this was Genesis 3.

We're not there yet. We're not there yet. We're in the center of the world and everything's cursed. Everything is cursed. So, would someone over there read for us verse 17b, I thought, might be a good place to start.

Curse to the ground because of you, in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Lovely. And could you then add verse 19 for us? By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground. For out of it you were taken, for you are dust and dust you shall return.

Thank you very much, Rebecca. So, it's cursed. The ground is cursed. And we will die. Right. So, that is the dust. So, I don't know if Vicky's managed to get a few of those things down.

But I think it's just nice to have it up on the flip chart so that we can think about it. So, creation was very good. One day everything will be put right. But in the meantime, we're living with sin and curse.

[6 : 49] We have death and a man's sin. So, God made the world very good and one day he will put everything right. But at the moment, the whole of creation and us are groaning while we wait for the new creation, which we sometimes call heaven.

So, we're going to turn now, as we talk tonight, to this in-between time. And in a moment, we're just going to look at Romans 8.

But first, before we finish this section one, I thought it would be nice to think about God's actual attitude to suffering, his own attitude to suffering.

So, I just put a little space there on the handout. You can take a few notes if you wish. So, we see God's attitude to suffering when we look at the person of Jesus.

Jesus, we're told in the Bible, is the image of the invisible God. And as we've been studying Luke in our growth groups, for example, or hearing it preached on Sunday mornings, we're seeing more and more of the character of the Lord Jesus.

[8 : 02] Jesus shows us exactly what God is like. He has compassion. We're shown that many times. He weeps because of death.

He chooses to come to earth to suffer in this life and then to die for the sins of everyone who trusts in him. He's separated from his heavenly father as he dies on a cross.

And all these things Jesus suffered because of his great love for us, for you and for me. Jesus has been there, done that, himself, when it comes to suffering.

So, God knows our pain. But so what, you might be thinking? What's the purpose of suffering? And that brings us on to section two.

And section two I've called God's Purpose. So we've touched on his plan at the beginning and the end of time. We've touched on God's attitude to suffering.

[9 : 03] He's been there, done that. And now let's think from Romans 8 about God's purpose. So turn back to the passage that Ruth read for us earlier in Romans 8 if you would.

Now, we've just had four excellent Sunday morning sermons on Romans 8. So if you've missed them, I would really urge you to listen online.

They're very, very, very good indeed. But now as we think about Romans 8 as a whole, I think there are two major things which can cause Christians to doubt.

First of all, God's sovereignty and his goodness. And they are sin and suffering. So in Romans 8, verses 1 to 17, the sort of first chunk of Romans 8, it tells us it's our sin which causes us to doubt. And the second section, the bit that we had read out, 18 to 30, I think tells us that it's our suffering that can cause us to doubt. But it's our suffering, actually, which readies us for the new creation, for heaven.

[10:16] I don't know if you noticed in verse 1 of chapter 8, when it was preached on Sunday not too long ago, the first verse.

Come down and have a look with me at verse 1 of chapter 8. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. God has raised Jesus from the dead.

But as we've already seen, since Genesis 3, suffering and death has entered the world. And so we have this period, this in-between time, when God's sons and daughters, who are already adopted and saved, must wait patiently in the here and now.

And I don't know if you spotted it in verse 25 as it was read. Verse 25, we wait for it with patience.

Now as we heard two Sundays ago, verse 18 tells us, have a look, for I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

We are to turn our groaning into longing. And during this waiting period, this in-between period, creation itself, we're told, verse 22, has been groaning and is still groaning.

[11:44] The creation longs to be restored to God. And we are groaning too. I don't know if you spotted that in verse 23. We long to be restored to God.

We are groaning as we suffer. And we don't know how to pray. Thankfully, Paul tells us that God has a plan.

He sends his Holy Spirit, God himself, to help us to pray. And that's verses 26 and 27. God's Spirit helps us long to be restored to him.

And here we come to the heart of what we want to focus on this evening from Romans 8. Verse 28 to start with. I'm going to read verse 28 for us.

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

[12:47] Let's look together at the next verse.

Verse 29, our second key verse from Romans tonight. Let me read. 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.

So this verse tells us that God foreknew us. If we are his people, he predestined or planned for us to be conformed, that's changed, to the image of his son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Wow, isn't that a stunning sentence? Just pause and take that in for a moment. We are Jesus' sisters if we are in him.

And God is continually changing us into his likeness. He is conforming us to the image of his son. God has a purpose for us through hard times.

[14:21] He is moulding us into the people he wants us to be. Now, there are different ways in which we all suffer. And this list isn't exhaustive, of course.

There's just a few things I'm going to list out now. But illness is something we all face. Physical illness. Mental illness. Either for ourselves or for our loved ones.

Death is something we all face. Either for those close to us at the moment or our own deaths. And dealing with older children.

We'll come on to that. But older children can seem to turn away from the Lord. And how to deal with them in a loving and godly way is tricky. There's suffering in our friendship groups, perhaps.

Or in our extended families. For telling others about Jesus. There are lots and lots of other trials. Including singleness if we don't want it. Childlessness if we don't want it.

[15:26] Unemployment. The list goes on and on. You can fill in the blanks. But being 54, nearly 55. I've been around a bit more than some of you here.

And although I've been very, very blessed in many ways. I've experienced hardships too. Some quite recently. And I'm going to mention a recent hardship now.

In the hope that it might help all of us to work through. Where the rubber hits the road in our own lives. And when it does. Who to turn to.

So we're going to start with death from that list. Now I'm aware that many people in the room have experienced death in their very close family. But I just wanted to tell you about the recent loss of my father.

My dad, Richard, was a larger than life character. He'd chosen to live life my way. As the Frank Sinatra song goes. He'd had a very colourful life.

[16:28] But he died in September. He'd had Parkinson's for a very long time. And eventually had to go into a home when my mum just couldn't care for him any longer.

It was heartbreaking to see a man of such physical and mental vigour gradually deteriorate. Until in the end he couldn't even recognise his wife of over 50 years.

Through those years of dad's decline. I think the Lord was teaching me certainly to trust him in all things.

To trust him with my dad's spiritual life. To learn more how to pray. To teach me that it's him, God, who saves.

Not me. I can't save anyone. But because I know God's character. I can trust that he will be just. So God's been using the loss of my dad.

[17:31] To do the work of verse 29. The work that that talks about. Conforming me and also my whole family. In fact, one of our boys recently talked about what grandpa's death had taught him.

When he was feeling down recently. And we do need to be teaching our children if we have them. Or church family children. If we're teaching them in Sunday club or in extended families.

About the purpose of suffering. So coming back to our passage. And verse 30. We haven't looked at that yet. But let's look at verse 30.

I'm going to paraphrase. But do have a look down. Those whom God predestined or chose. He also called to himself.

And those whom he called he also justified. Which means he looks on me just as if I hadn't sinned.

[18:31] Justified. And those who he justified. He also glorified. We are glorified already. If we're in Christ.

What a magnificent truth that is. God has a purpose in suffering. It's as if we're pronounced to be a royal heir. In the best royal family the universe has ever seen.

We're already in God's family. Our status is completely secure. Nothing can take that away. As a PS to this section.

It's helpful to distinguish I think. Between normal suffering. And specific suffering for being a Christian. We all experience a degree of suffering on this earth.

But Christians also experience hardship. If they're following Jesus wholeheartedly. And seeking to make him known. And I'm sure many here will have experienced.

[19:28] Perhaps the cooling of friendships. After we've tried to share the good news of Jesus with friends. But can I also say. That if you're here tonight. And you would not call yourself a Christian.

You are really welcome. And I really hope. That by looking at what God says in the Bible about suffering. It will help us all. To think about this subject more deeply.

Okay. That's enough from me. We're going to break out again. In the same groups that you were in. If you take up your sheet. Your sheet. You'll see there. Group breakout number two.

And so focusing on Romans 8. 28 to 30. And particularly verse 29. To be conformed to the image of his son. Can you think of times of suffering.

Which God has used to conform you more. To the image of his son. We're going to look at now. At one more passage. To help us see. God's purpose.

[20:27] In suffering. So Patasha is going to come up and read for us. And while she's coming up. Would you turn. To Hebrews 12. Please. And verse 5. And have you forgotten.

The exhortation that addresses you as sons. My son. Do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord. Nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves.

And chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

If you are left without discipline. In which all have participated. Then you are illegitimate children. And not sons. Besides this. We have had earthly fathers.

Who disciplined us. And we respected them. Shall we not much more. Be subject to the father of spirits and live. For they disciplined us for a short time. As it seemed best to them.

[21 : 23] That he disciplines us for our good. That we may share his holiness. For the moment. All discipline seems painful. Rather than pleasant. But later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

To those who have been trained by it. Now I don't know if we are all familiar with the letter to the Hebrews. But it is written during a time of great trial. For the very early church.

And earlier on in the letter. They have been reminded that Jesus is the supreme son of God. That he is the saving high priest. And the writer now wants to encourage them.

To have faith. And endure to the end. I hope you noticed as we read it. That Christians here are being disciplined by God. Not as a punishment for specific sin necessarily.

The quote there in verse 6. Is from the Old Testament. It's actually from Proverbs 3. Have a look down. Verse 6. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves.

[22 : 26] And chastises every son whom he receives. So imagine the most amazing earthly father you can. And now imagine the Lord God himself.

Disciplining the children he loves. He cares for them. So he disciplines them. But can you see halfway through verse 10.

So just have a look down at verse 10. But he disciplines us for our good. That we may share his holiness. And on in verse 11.

For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant. But later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. For those who have been trained by it. God himself.

Our heavenly father. Wants to train us. He wants us to yield good fruit. That we may share in his holiness. So suffering is purposeful.

[23 : 30] The Lord wants to train us to be more like him. Now one outcome of this training. Here and now. Would be to lead us to pray. And by way of example.

Let me move on to a second area. That I found hard. Recently. And still do. It's an ongoing thing. Dealing with older children. On spiritual matters.

Now many of you will know. That my husband Andrew and I. Have three very big boys. They're a blessing from the Lord. And a joy in very many ways.

But I worry. When they seem to not be living. As God wants believers. To live. Unrepentantly. And deliberately.

Obviously. That is a heartbreaking situation. For believing parents. And the hymn. Comes to mind. Quite often. About weeping through the night.

[24 : 32] I don't know if you know that one. By his spirit. The Lord has been teaching. Andrew and I. To pray. He's been teaching us.

Humility. To trust him. He knows. He knows what's best for us. And for our children. He's shown us. That he's in charge. And that we can't fix things. The way we want to. Our job. Is to wait. Patiently. And to go on trusting him.

And praying. Now I don't know. If you all know. The story of Horatio Spafford. You may well do. He was a hymn writer. About a hundred years ago.

Who lost his family. At sea. In the aftermath. Of that terrible circumstance. He wrote the hymn. All is well.

[25 : 28] With my soul. He understood. Even in the midst. Of great tragedy. That the Lord. Is sovereign. And that the Lord.

Is good. And he turned his suffering. Into praise. He knew. That God. Disciplines. The one he loves. And was able.

To accept that. Even in the midst. Of his suffering. Last time. We're going to break out. In our. In our groups. We're going to. It's at the bottom. Of the second page. Group.

Breakout. Number three. And we're going to be. Focusing. From Hebrews. On verse 11. Can you think. Of a time. Of suffering. When the Lord.

Has in his loving kindness. Used the experience. To discipline you. Well I hope you enjoyed.

Chatting about a different. Set of verses. In Hebrews 12.

[26 : 22] We won't. Have time for feedback. Now. But do carry on. Mulling over that. At home. And I think. In all these hard situations. The Bible. Tells us. These two truths.

Repeatedly. That God is sovereign. And that he cares. He has a purpose. In suffering. To discipline us.

So let's summarize. Where we've got to. This evening. In section one. That was the bit. That we looked at. In the flip chart. We had God's plan.

He didn't create the world. As we now experience it. That was back in. Back in Genesis. He didn't create the world. As we now experience it. It was perfect.

And one day. He will put everything right. He will put every injustice right. He will wipe every tear. From his people's eyes. God has the power to do it.

[27 : 18] And he has promised to do it. He's in control. And he cares. And then in section two. We looked at how. God's plans have a purpose. How Romans 8.29.

He conforms us to the image of his son. And Romans 12. He disciplines the sons he loves. That discipline seems painful for the moment. Particularly verse 11.

But it later yields fruit. So at this point. What could our reactions be? Anger perhaps?

Paralysis maybe? Loss of assurance? Loss of confidence in sharing the gospel? Well no. Rather what's the biblical godly reaction?

In dealing with our circumstances now. We are to look at God's word. And there we are urged to bring our cares to our loving heavenly father.

[28 : 20] To confess our sin regularly. God is in control of all things. And so we must learn to trust him. That he is sending us difficulties in this life.

As well as blessings. He is sending hard times. As well as good. As he purifies his people. To ready them for the new creation. For heaven.

And then there is the church family too. We can talk to others in our growth group. Or in our prayer triplet. Or after church. And as we share prayer requests.

We can pray for the Lord to be changing us. In difficult circumstances. Not just that those difficult circumstances. Will be taken away perhaps.

We suffer now. But it's for a purpose. God wants to conform us to the image of his son. And he disciplines those he loves. So he sends hard times now.

[29 : 14] But it's for our good. And his glory. So God's plan. God's purpose. He is sovereign and good. One day he will bring all suffering to an end.

But not yet. He's gracious and merciful in delaying that day. So that more people will hear the good news of Jesus. And repent and believe.

In the meantime. He does have a purpose. So it's suffering now. Glory later.