

Renewal

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[0 : 00] And the title of the message this evening, I don't normally come up with titles, but every now and then I surprise myself. The title is Renewal. Renewal. So Romans chapter 8 and we're going to begin reading it, verse 18. Romans 8, verse 18. Now hear God's word.

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 decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole of creation has been groaning together in pains of childbirth until now.

And not only the creation, but we ourselves have the first fruits of the Spirit grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we are saved, now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hope for what he sees? But if we hope for that which 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. 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 the 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. What shall we say then to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all. How will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died. More than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who is indeed interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, for your sake we are being killed all day long. We are regarded as sheep to the slaughter. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen. Well, we'll stand and sing, and I will, if you have your Bibles, please open them again to Romans 8. For those of you who know about the good God, or the series of the good God in a new evangelistic endeavor, we'll understand that we're asking the question, not what can God do, but rather, or what has God done, but rather, what can God undo?

And the point is, is that when you read the Scripture asking the question, what are the things that God undoes in a person's life, or in creation, everything, you'll actually find a lot. And the whole of Romans 8 is really about the future getting better because of what God undoes in the present, each present, as he heads towards that future. Well, here in Romans 8, I want to begin with a story. It's a story that you know. It's been sort of written by a few different people, and then rewritten by a few different people, and, but it's the story of the princess and the frog.

[5 : 11] I do like, I, you know, absolutely love children's stories, and children's colouring in books, you know, just, not because I like the colouring in, I just like the stories that they're trying to tell, and, you know, you just, some things just please simple minds, I guess. But the princess and the frog is one that strikes me, you know, I think that I could actually make Cinderella a whole lot better than what it is, but I don't think Disney's going to let me get away with it. But the princess and the frog,

whichever story you remember, and of course there are a few different ones, written by about three different people, they're all variations on each other with different characters and that, you at least perhaps know or remember the basic plot line that the frog is a prince under a curse, or a king under the curse, you know, he's someone very important under a curse. And so this frog remains, or rather this prince remains as a frog as long as he remains under the curse. And so the prince is not a frog, let's remember that, the prince is not a frog, he is a prince, but he is a frog under the curse.

Okay, and he will remain under the curse until this princess, this girl, this future princess kisses the frog. And when she kisses the frog, the prince that he once was, he can become again. Does that sound familiar? You know, the princess and the frog? Now, which would you rather do? Would you rather kiss a frog?

Well, some of you women are sitting here, well, actually, actually, that's not too far from the truth. Well, be a little bit more gracious to your husbands just for a moment and just take the question fairly seriously. Which would you rather do? Kiss a frog or actually go out and find a real prince? Which would you rather do? You see, when it comes to things being ruined or things being spoiled, the temptation is to go out and get a new one. When things are sort of spoiled from their former glory and they're sort of tarnished from what they were and are no longer, the temptation is to go out and find a new one. The trouble is, is that some people have actually believed that this is what God does in the world. That creation's gone wrong, that people have gone wrong, and so God just disposes of those former things and he goes out and gets a new one. He creates a new one. When actually the story of the gospel doesn't end that way, it actually ends with God kissing the frog. God kisses the cursed world.

You who are under a curse and releases you and releases this world from the curse that it's under. In fact, to put a picture of what God is really like, this is my version of Cinderella, and it's much better, even if I do say so myself. Cinderella, as you know, wants to go to the ball, but she has nothing to wear, and of course she's nothing more than sort of a maid or a slave, really, under, you know, two sisters, and she's scrubbing the floor and she's got nothing. And of course it just so happens that it turns out that she gets this, you know, almost magical input, and she has this dress, but she has to be back by midnight, and she goes back to the way that she was. And some of us have actually come to believe that Christianity, or at least getting into heaven, it's a bit like having, well, I must get dressed up, I must be ready, because I can't go there looking like this.

[9 : 25] I can't go there in the state that I am. And we search around and we think, well, there's no way I can be better than what I am, so I guess I'm just going to have to settle for the fact I'm not going to get there. Well, that's the original. My version of what would happen in order for it to really portray God is that Cinderella stays right where she is, in her filthy rags, mopping the floor, and no one paying attention to her. And the prince comes into the kitchen and calls out to Cinderella and calls her to be his wife. That would be the Christian version. That would be, and that is what God has done. And this world just flips it all upside down, and we think that that's beautiful. No, the story of Cinderella is not really a beautiful story as much as the gospel is.

Well, here we have a God who kisses a cursed world. We read here in Romans 8 that not only is the world under a curse, but we're under a curse, but we're under a curse. Everything is ruined. Everything is spoiled. But God doesn't throw it out. He doesn't throw it away. He doesn't dispose of the things that are awful. He doesn't say, well, that was a mess. Let me just start over and have something brand new.

God kisses the frog. However ugly it may be, however disgusting it might be to actually do it, however undesirable it might be, he kisses the frog. The frog is not a frog, though. It's a world, and the kiss is the cross. And God at the cross with Christ releases this world and releases us from the horrible things that we have to live with and the horrible world that we have to live in, even though it contains much beauty and much splendor. Yet nevertheless, God says even this world, even when we can look at the sky and go, wow, and look at the sea and be amazed, God says even in that it's groaning under a curse. It says here that creation itself wants to escape the curse. It's longing for God to come back, for all the believers, and for them to be caught up to

God, because then the creation itself can be released from the curse that it's under. But until then, unfortunately, we live under the sort of remaining impact of the curse, even though we as believers have been set free, we still live in a world in which we have to, day to day, deal with the reality that these are things that won't be forever. And so God's mission is not a great escape.

God's mission is not about getting you to escape this awful world and getting you into his heaven. God's mission is actually about making you wonderful and about making this world wonderful, so that in the new heavens and new earth, you can live in a wonderful place. That's the story of the gospel of Christianity. That is where it's heading. And so here's the first point this evening, and we begin in verse 18, and the first point is this, that the future is better than the present.

[13:16] Paul says, for I consider that the sufferings of this present time or this present age are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. In other words, the future is way better than the present, but the future includes much of this world, and that's what we tend to forget.

We almost can't help but live a Christian life where we're trying to escape constantly away from the world that we live in and all the troubles that we have and the life that we have, as though, just get me as far away from it as possible. And yet what Romans 8 actually says is that everything else in the world that's under the curse is trying to do the same thing as well. The world doesn't like the state that it's in. Other believers don't like the state that it's in, and so the future includes the bettering of not just us, but of everything else that we have in this world.

We live in a sinful world, and what that means is we live in a spoiled and ruined world. We live in a world where God didn't design it that way. It was ruined that way by men and women and boys and girls, but that's not the way God wants it to be. And so we look at the world and we wonder where God is, and yet the world is not the way God ever intended it to be.

And so it is difficult to live in this world. It's even more difficult to live in this world when you belong to God, and you know that that's not the way it's meant to be.

But the other thing is, is even though this future is way better than what we have now, we haven't got it yet. We wait for it. We hope for it. Everything is going to work together according to God's plan and purpose. Everything's working together for the good, but everything is working together for the good, meaning, okay, if everything's still working together for the good, what does that mean? What does it say? It means that we're not there yet. It's still, to want of a better phrase, a work in progress. Everything is working together for that better good, but we're still in the process of it getting there. And so in one sense, God has already come down to the world and come down to the cross and has kissed the ugliness and released us from the curse. But unfortunately, the process of escaping from the rags is a long process. It doesn't just happen in an instant. In God's eyes, we cannot be any more perfect than what we are right now. But because we still live with the same bodies we had before we were saved, and because we still live in the same world that we did before we were saved, we still live, unfortunately, with most of the same things that we did before we were saved. But now, we have a hope that suffering and death cannot destroy. Now, we have a hope that it doesn't matter how awful this world is. Okay, they cannot spoil the future. It cannot spoil the future hope that every single one of us has. So what is God actually doing? What does all this mean? Well, it means that God is in the process of not just doing something, but he's in the process of undoing quite a lot.

[16:49] So God makes things better by making the ruin things better, not by throwing them away and starting again. He undoes. So when he takes a broken life, he takes a life that's far from God.

The testimony is always, this is what I was, but this is what I am now. That's the way God works. Not one of us here has a testimony which says, well, the first me was awful, so God just got rid of it, and he started over. No, he took me as I am and renewed me. God is not a God who throws stuff away and starts again. We throw stuff away and start again. We are the one who is unwilling to kiss the frog. We're the one that goes out and looks for the prince or the princess, whatever it may be. And so you may have thought that being a Christian is actually about escaping this life and going to heaven. Not entirely. Being a Christian is realizing that God doesn't throw anything away. It's not an escape plan. It's about God making everything better, everything the way that it is meant to be. And so you may have even thought that Christians ought to be, or they are at least perfect now, but that can't be true either, because everything is working together for the good, which means that while we may be perfecting God's eyes in the heavenly realm, in the here and now, unfortunately, we have to live with our own imperfections, and worse still, we have to live with the imperfections of others. I mean, I can cope with my own imperfections because they're just perfect imperfections. I just can't cope with your imperfections. And that's what it's like, isn't it? None of us are perfect, but the temptation is to believe that surely when God saved you, everything must have gone, everything must be perfect now. Well, that's just not the way that it happens. We're heading there. We're not quite there yet.

[19 : 18] So the church isn't a group of people who are perfect in the here and now. Rather, the church is God's workshop, where people are brought in of different shapes and sizes, beliefs, colors, creeds, and we're all brought in through Jesus Christ, and he goes to work on us. The images is clay in a potter's hand that God's hand, that God is molding us and shaping us, a hammer and chisel perhaps sometimes, or perhaps other times just those hands that just shape you in to how you're meant to be. But the church is not a place where perfection has been attained. It's the workshop where the ruined is removed, and everything that spoils us is just taken away. When I was a roofer, there's a type of slate called a Delibole slate. Now, a brand new Delibole slate is £4.75 a slate, or it was at least when I was on the tools. Now, you can imagine that some of the slate roofs that I did were in the region of as low as 6,000, and I think the biggest slate roof that I ever did was 18,500 slates. Now, you imagine that, £4.75 times 18,500 slate, that's a lot of money. And so, because Delibole slates are so precious, on all the old farm buildings, they use, when the roof leaked, they used to blackjack the slates, and they put this horrible tar on. Instead of finding out where the leak really was, they just covered the whole roof in this black tar. It just looked awful, your roof bows, it's no good. You have to have a new trusses put on then. I won't get into technical stuff, but get the hammer out.

And then this guy figured out how to strip all the tar off the slates. He didn't buy new ones, he just took all the old ones, and spent a very long time how he could redeem the slate. How he could get all that horrible black gunge and thick muck off. He used to just collect all these slates, and he would never tell anybody how he did it, but he definitely had tanks in which they were dipped in, and they stayed in there for a long time.

He would never ever say what the mix was. But when you'd go to pick them up, you couldn't tell the difference. And God, in his church, that's what he does. We all come in, and we have the stuff that's just not good for us, and was never meant to fit us, or look good on us, stripped off. But it takes a long time. We're perfect in the eyes of God already, because God sees us as perfect as it's already completed. But in the here and now, with people that we have to live in a 24-hour day, we understand things take its time.

And so the old is gone, and the new has come, but it doesn't happen all at once. It tells us here that we enjoy the first fruits of the Spirit, not all of them.

[22 : 39] We've got some good things, but we've got even better things to come. The sons of God, verse 20, sorry, yeah, verse 19, for creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

For the creation was subject to fertility, not willingly, but because of him who's subject to it in hope, that creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay, and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

For we know that the whole of creation has been groaning together in pains of childbirth until now. And not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for the adoption of sons, the redemption of our bodies.

We're all waiting for this. We're all in God's workshop where we've got the beginnings of the great things to come, but we've not got it all yet.

So here's the second thing to realize, or really the first thing to realize, restated. The present life is all about the imperfections being removed.

[23 : 55] The present life is about the imperfections being removed, the sin, the death, the corruption. Because the future life is all about being perfect in the presence of God.

The future is better than the present. Now, how does Paul explain this? Well, he explains it with a second point, and that's adoption, verse 23. We are all waiting to be adopted into the family home, the redemption of our bodies, he says.

And not only the creation, but we ourselves are the first fruit, groan inwardly. We wait eagerly for the adoptions as sons, the redemption of our bodies. Well, let me try and illustrate this with a very simple illustration, which I think you can get immediately.

Imagine for a moment you've been adopted. Now, if you're a Christian, you've already been adopted by God. But imagine for a moment you've been adopted down here on earth, you know, by another family.

And it's gone through all the legal process. All the papers have been signed. All the checks have been checked. Everything that needs to happen has happened.

[25 : 06] It's all signed off. But one thing, and that is, while you are legally adopted, you have not yet moved into the adopted home.

You're on your way, but you're not there yet. And that's what Paul is saying about believers. That you are lovingly and legally adopted by God.

The adoption process was the cross of Christ, where he loved you and legally brought you and brought you to himself. But you have not yet moved into the adopted home.

And that's the picture that Paul gives us. That's how better the future is. And so you need to realize that that is the real and genuine Christian experience.

It's great. But we don't get to enjoy it all yet. We don't get to enjoy the new home yet. We can hope for it. We can wonder what it's going to be like. But we've got the certainty that we are legally adopted.

[26 : 18] We are lovingly adopted. But we've not yet moved into the home. We're on our way, but we're not there yet. That's the real Christian experience.

We're still in transition. But we're definitely going there. So what happens in the meantime, thirdly? Well, as it says in verse 28, for those who love God, God works everything together for the good.

For those who are called according to his purpose. And what is that purpose? Renewal. His purpose is renewal. Takes away the old and makes what is new, what is when it's not under a curse, just reveals that.

And everything works together for this end, to this good, that we would be conformed to the image of God's Son, Jesus Christ. And so we get back to this picture of being like Jesus and not being like Jesus.

Now, we are more or less like Jesus. We may be more like Jesus in our prayer life than we are in serving Jesus. We may, however, be more like Jesus in serving than we are in our prayer life.

[27 : 33] We may be more like Jesus in loving others than we are in perhaps saying the strong things that we need to say to others. Well, whatever the case may be, we're all growing into the likeness of Christ, but we've all grown a little bit more in different areas.

And what that means is, is none of us sat here can actually be a real representation of Jesus fully. Because we're still a work in progress.

Don't come to me. Go to Jesus. If you want to see what Jesus is really like, as it says in Hebrews, here's the word. Read him for yourself.

And so we sit here this evening, recognizing that, yes, we're not perfect, but we're not like we were before. We're not like we were before.

I do think differently. I do have hopes that I didn't have before. I have guilts, and I repent of those guilts, and God is good all the time.

[28 : 40] So what happens in the meantime? Well, in the meantime, you and I have to live with the imperfections in ourselves. You and I have to live in this world with its imperfections.

And so the world is a difficult place to live in with difficult people. Now, this is different for different people. Imagine a fisherman. You ask a fisherman or a farmer why this world is a difficult place. He'll give you reasons you never even thought of. You ask somebody who's living in a war-torn city why this world is a difficult place to live in, and he'll tell you or she'll tell you reasons you never even thought of.

If you ask someone in this city who's living below the breadline and doesn't have the finances or the social or anything else, he will tell you why this world is a difficult place to live in for reasons that you've probably never experienced.

And so for different people in different ages and stages in life, everyone will admit and understand this is a difficult place to live. But in the meantime, you need something to hold on to.

[29 : 48] And that is either this world is going to stay that way or that God has actually done something about it. And God has kissed the frog.

He's kissed this war-torn, cursed, rejected world by others. Why? Because God wants it back. God wants his creation back. And God wants you back. And God wants others back. And why does he want it all back?

Because it's his. And he's coming to get it. And he's secured it in the death of his son on the cross. So God is not a God who's in the business of throwing stuff away and finding something new. God is not in the business of things becoming spoiled and ruined and damaged and sent away with that.

[30 : 56] No, he kisses the curse. He kisses the world under the curse. He kisses you under the curse. And the kiss is at the cross where God loves us and legally receives us.

The cross is the place where God doesn't walk away from an ugly world. It's actually the very place where ugliness is seen at its worst.

And yet God says, I've done it because I've loved you. Why? Because he wants you back. He wants the world back. Why? Because it's his.

It's his. So in conclusion, the work of God is that we are being released from the curse that we're under. The message of the gospel is not about how we can escape this world, but it's really about how God is changing this world and us in it.

The future is definitely better than the present, and God is rescuing us every day in the present. So this evening, if you've been sat here thinking or had a hope that you were going to escape this world and have a brand new one, well, guess what?

[32 : 18] In many ways you are, but in another way you're not. Because the brand new one is this one brand new. He doesn't throw it away.

He renews it, releases it from the curse. God is a God who doesn't walk away, and that should encourage you.

Now, we're not perfect beings, and the world is not perfect either. But in an imperfect world with imperfect things, we have this confidence that everything, that everything is being worked together for the good, for those who love God, and for those who are called according to his purpose.

Amen.