



A few days ago, I was sitting in a local diner waiting for a friend to arrive when a group of ladies showed up around the same time and were seated in the table behind me. They were a lively bunch, and the waitress knew them by name. I heard the waitress ask them, “Ladies, will this be one check, two checks, three checks, four checks?” One of the ladies responded, “Put it all on one check and give it to someone over there” as she pointed to the other side of the diner.

They all had a good laugh, but I was thinking of how that illustrates the privileges that we enjoy as believers in Christ. We partake in a banquet of spiritual blessings – what Isaiah referred to metaphorically as wine, milk, and the finest food – all of which has been provided by God through the atoning work of his Son Jesus Christ.

*Amazing love, how can it be
That you, my King, should die for me?*

As believers in Christ, we are forgiven because he was forsaken. We’re accepted, he was condemned. We’re alive and well, his Spirit lives within us, because Christ died and rose again. Life in the Spirit and all the blessings that come with it are ours because of the grace that God pours out on all who trust Jesus alone to save them.

Paul begins Romans 8 by declaring, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (v. 1). Not only are we not condemned by God, but we now have the capacity to please God through the power of his Spirit within us. Furthermore, we have been adopted by God! We are members of his family and are therefore heirs – “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17a). We will share in the inheritance that Jesus has gained for us, “provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:17). Just as Jesus was despised and rejected by men” (Isa. 53:3), so also will we if we follow Christ. Our pattern of life is proof of our faith, and there is a price we pay for following Jesus.

But our present suffering is nothing compared to our future glory. That’s the main point that Paul drives home in Romans 8:18-30. Please follow along in your copy of God’s Word as I read this text aloud (page 888 in the pew Bible).

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. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ 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. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ 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. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Father in heaven, we thank you for this precious Scripture. We pray that you would flood our hearts with light so that we can see the glorious future you have called us to share. Grant us also a greater awareness of the help you give us today through the present ministry of your Holy Spirit. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

I introduced this passage by stating its theme, which could be stated as follows:

***Our present suffering is nothing
compared to our future glory.***

This portion of Romans 8 begins and ends with explicit statements about our future glory as believers. This theme is meant to encourage us amid our present trials – not only persecution, but other forms of suffering as well. We mourn the loss of loved ones through death. We grieve when our children or friends disappoint us. We hurt when others take us for granted, when our diligent efforts go unnoticed. We get discouraged as we go through the process of aging. The list goes on and on.

To suffer with Christ means that we not only endure persecution, but also respond to suffering in a Christianly way. James Boice lists three ways that non-Christians respond to suffering:¹

- **Anger** – They blame or even curse God for their misfortunes. They forget that Jesus never promises us an easy life but calls us to follow him. The glory comes later.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, volume 2, “The Reign of Grace, Romans 5-8” (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992, fifth printing, 2001), pp. 855-856.

- **Avoidance** – If the path in front of them looks difficult, they steer clear of it. Or, if the path cannot be avoided, they look for ways to balance out or even deaden the pain through alcohol, pornography, and other forms of pleasure.
- **Apathy** – They become emotionally detached from and indifferent to pain.

All of these approaches are non-Christian responses to suffering. The Christian response to suffering is not anger, avoidance or apathy, but Spirit-empowered perseverance. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his study of Romans 8:17 rightly says,

If you are suffering as a Christian, and because you are a Christian, it is one of the surest proofs you can ever have of the fact that you are a child of God.²

For the rest of the chapter, Paul provides encouragement as a fuel for endurance. In verse 18 he says, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” Paul is not one to ignore the reality of suffering or to minimize its severity. But compared to our future glory, it’s nothing. In another one of his letters, Paul says, “we do not lose heart,”

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

- 2 Corinthians 4:17

In the Old Testament, the main Hebrew word for “glory” (*kabod*) stems from a root that means “weight” or “heaviness.” The term is meant to convey the immensity of God’s majesty and presence. So, Paul is saying that our present sufferings are like dust on the scales compared with the eternal glory that God is preparing for us.

Typically our thoughts are consumed with the ways we suffer, e.g., physically, mentally, emotionally, relationally, financially, and numerous other ways. That’s because these things are happening in the here and now. So, it takes deliberate effort on our part to see our sufferings in the context of our coming glory. Notice Paul says, “I consider....” He is thinking about this comparison. He is pondering it, contemplating it. And so must we. A biblical perspective promotes perseverance. Encouragement fuels endurance.

That’s why Paul, after emphasizing *the weight of glory*, elaborates on *the wait for glory*.

the *weight* of glory . . .

the *wait* for glory . . .

² D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 8:5-17, The Sons of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), p. 433. Cited in Boice, 857.

A couple of key words which Paul uses repeatedly in verses 19-25 are “wait” and “hope.” These words show that “Christians, along with the entire creation, have to wait for God’s work to be completed.”³ One commentator titled his chapter on this section (Romans 8:18-27), “Three Groans and One Glory.”

1. The Groan of Creation (vv. 19-22)

¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ 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. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

- Romans 8:19-22

In these verses, Paul personifies the created world, comparing it to a woman in labor groaning in agony as she eagerly awaits the birth of her child. In the same way, creation groans in frustration as it awaits the glorification of God’s people.

In verse 20, Paul tells us *why* this is the case. “Creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it.” Who was that? God. He did so after Adam and Eve sinned, remember? God said to Adam, “Cursed is the ground because of you ... thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you” (Gen. 3:17b-18a). On account of Adam’s sin, God subjected the created world to “futility,” meaning that creation has not fulfilled the purpose for which it was made.⁴ because of the sin of Adam. Charles Cranfield said that we can think of the whole universe as a magnificent theater created to glorify God but is unable to do so fully, so long as man – the chief actor in the drama – fails to contribute his rational part.⁵

The created world in its present condition reveals not only the glory of God (Ps. 19) but also the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18). Natural disaster, disease, decay and death indicate that everything is not as it should be. But even in expressing his wrath, God remembers mercy (Hab. 3:2). Daniel Doriani wrote, “It is better for mankind to be frustrated and sense ‘something is wrong’ than to live in heedless bliss for decades, and then plunge into the abyss.... Sorrows lead mankind to look for deliverance.”⁶

That deliverance is found in Jesus Christ. Creation will be liberated from its bondage to corruption when believers in Christ are glorified. Until it eagerly waits and groans.

³ Douglas J. Moo, “Romans,” *New Bible Commentary*, 21st century edition, edited by G. J. Wenham, J. A. Motyer, D. A. Carson and R. T. France (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1994, reprinted 2010), p. 1141.

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, second edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), p. 427.

⁵ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 1975), p. 414.

⁶ Daniel M. Doriani, *Romans*, Reformed Expository Commentary, eds. Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2021), p. 275.

2. The Groan of Christians (vv. 23-25)

Paul continues in verse 23, saying, “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.” Back in verse 15, Paul said, “You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons,” but here in verse 23 he says, “we wait eagerly for adoption as sons,” indicating that our adoption is yet future. Both statements are correct. Those who trust in Christ for salvation are already God’s sons and daughters, but we will not enjoy the full experience of this glorious privilege until we get our new bodies. Paul conveys the same point in 2 Corinthians 5:2, where he says, “Indeed, we groan in this tent, desiring to put on our heavenly dwelling” (CSB).

We groan because we live in a world that is falling apart and in bodies that are falling apart. Ray Steadman rightly said, “Life consists of a great deal of groaning.”⁷

But in addition to the decay of this world and our own bodies, there is also a *positive* reason we groan, and that’s because we “have the firstfruits of the Spirit.” The “firstfruits” represent the beginning of the harvest. Farmers and gardeners need patience because plants grow slowly. But when the first tomatoes, cucumbers, or peaches arrive, it’s a sure sign that there will be more. In the same way, the Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our future glory. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote,

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

- Ephesians 1:13-14 NIV, ESV

Paul goes on to say in Romans 8:24-25, “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.” In everyday English, the word “hope” is little more than a wish or a prayer, like, “I hope the Bills make it to the Superbowl.” Or we’re stuck in a traffic jam we say, “I hope I still make it on time,” even though we doubt we will. But the New Testament meaning of “hope” [*elpis*] is stronger. It is not a wish but an expectation. It is confidence in a future reality.

In 2012, I was finishing up my first year of ministry here while still working toward my Master of Divinity degree at Southern Seminary. For Christmas that year my wife got me a class ring that had inscribed on it my graduation year: 2014. It was her way of saying, “You’re going to make it.” A few months after Ruthie gave me this ring, I was speaking at the annual conference of the New England Center for Expository Preaching. One of the other preachers that year was Dr. Albert Mohler,

⁷ Ray C. Steadman, *From Guilt to Glory*, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1981), p. 241. Cited by R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991, first printing redesign, 2013), p. 155.

the president of Southern Seminary. I sat across from him at dinner one night, so I showed him my ring and the graduation year that Ruthie had inscribed on it. Dr. Mohler nodded approvingly and said, "You have a smart wife." He was right. When the going got tough, that ring reassured me that my graduation day was coming.

In the same way, the Holy Spirit is God's guarantee of our heavenly graduation. So when life gets hard, when disappointments come our way, when we grow weary and discouraged in our constant battle with sin, when our bodies get weak and grow old, we can press on in faith, knowing that a glorious future awaits us.

***Our present suffering is nothing
compared to our future glory.***

Not only does future glory await us, but meanwhile the Holy Spirit groans for us.

3. The Groan of the Holy Spirit (vv. 26-27)

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.

- Romans 8:26-27

I love that "likewise" at the beginning of verse 26. It's comforting to know that the Spirit of God himself joins Christians and all creation in groaning for God's glory to be revealed through the resurrection of our bodies, the restoration of the universe and the Lord's eternal reign of righteousness!

We need the Holy Spirit's help because of our human weakness. The weakness described here is in the area of prayer. "We do not know what to pray for as we ought." Paul doesn't get more specific than that, probably because our weakness in prayer is "all-encompassing."⁸ John MacArthur sums up our problem, saying,

Because of our imperfect perspectives, finite minds, human frailties, and spiritual limitations, we are not able to pray in absolute consistency with God's will. Many times we are not even aware that spiritual needs exist, much less know how best they should be met. Even the Christian who prays sincerely, faithfully, and regularly cannot possibly know God's purposes concerning all of his own needs or the needs of others for whom he prays.⁹

⁸ John MacArthur Jr., Romans 1-8. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1991), p. 466.

⁹ Ibid.

Even Paul struggled with this weakness. Remember, Paul pleaded with God three times to remove an unspecified affliction – what Paul referred to as a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7-10), a messenger from Satan to torment him. After Paul had appealed to the Lord three times, he answered saying that his grace was sufficient and that his power shows up best in weakness.

Weakness in prayer is our problem, and the Holy Spirit is the solution. When we simply don’t know what to pray, the “the Spirit himself intercedes for us.” As God’s children pray to “our Father in heaven,” we have two intercessors working on our behalf: The Son of God in heaven, and the Spirit of God in our heart.

“The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” Literally, “wordless groans.” This is the Spirit’s groan, not our groan, so Paul is not talking about the gift of tongues. In fact, the groanings of the Spirit referred to here may be metaphorical, just like the groaning of creation in verse 22. The Spirit is constantly interceding for us, even when we’re not aware of it. This intercession by the Spirit goes beyond the realm of human observation or experience. It’s a form of inter-Trinitarian communication, taking place between the Holy Spirit and God the Father through the Son. This is a fascinating concept that Paul reaffirms in 1 Corinthians 2:11, saying,

No one knows a person’s thoughts except that person’s own spirit, and no one can know God’s thoughts except God’s own Spirit.

- 1 Corinthians 2:11 NLT

Whereas our Father in heaven sometimes says “no” to our prayers, he always says “yes” to the Holy Spirit’s prayers, because he intercedes for us according to God’s will. In other words, the Holy Spirit prays the way that we would pray if we knew God’s will perfectly the way that he does! What a comfort and encouragement this is! We can see how nicely it fits with the verses that follow.

Paul continues in verse 28, saying, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” It’s been well said that “God draws straight lines with crooked sticks, overseeing all events so that they bring good to those who love him.”¹⁰ God knows our greatest good is to know him, become like his Son, and enjoy his presence forever.

This assurance is given not to everyone, but only to those who love God. If you have not received the Son of God, Jesus Christ, as your Lord and Savior, then you do not love him. Therefore, God does not work out everything for your good. That’s a sad and sobering reality. That’s why we urge you to repent and believe the gospel. Turn from your sin and self-sufficiency, and trust Jesus to save you, believing he died on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for your sin and rose from the grave, proving that he is the Son of God and the only Savior. Believe in him, and you can be sure that God will work out everything for your ultimate good!

¹⁰ Doriani, 290.

So far we've seen three groans – the groan of creation, the groan of Christians, and the groan of the Holy Spirit. They're all groaning for the redemption of our bodies, the restoration of the universe, and the righteous reign of Christ. This is the glory that's sure to come!

4. The Glory That's Sure to Come! (vv. 28-30)

God's assurance to believers in verse 28 is substantiated by his saving acts in verses 29-30: "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."

This has been referred to as the "Golden Chain of Redemption" because it shows from start to finish that salvation is the work of God. It is not that God initiates our salvation and we complete it by our obedience. Though our service to God is important and is evidence of our salvation, salvation itself is from the Lord (Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9). God starts the work and he completes it without any help from us.¹¹ We see this in the links of the "Golden Chain of Redemption" in verses 29-30.

a. God *foreknew* his people (v. 29a)

This doesn't mean that God foresees our faith in Christ and then picks us to be his people. Although it is true that God foresees our faith because God knows everything, that's not what this text says. Paul is emphasizing that God foreknows us as people. Peter emphasizes this same truth when he refers to believers as "God's elect ... who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father (1 Peter 1:2a). It is the knowing of a "predetermined intimate relationship,"¹² such as when God said to Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jer. 1:5). The same is true of every believer. God set his love on us and determined to save us.

b. God *predestined* his people (v. 29b)

"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" (v. 29b). God not only knew his people in advance, but he chose them to become like his Son – not in terms of his deity but in terms of being totally free from sin and having a glorified body like his. This transformation will occur at the Second Coming of Christ. It is sure to happen, for God has already predetermined our destiny. William MacDonald wrote,

¹¹ "The Golden Chain of Salvation," Ligonier, 30 June 2014. Retrieved on 19 February 2002 from <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/golden-chain-salvation>.

¹² MacArthur, 496.

“That ungodly sinners should one day be transformed into the image of Christ by a miracle of grace is one of the most astounding truths of divine revelation.”¹³

- William MacDonald

Indeed it is, and it goes to show once again that “salvation is of the Lord” (Psalm 3:8; Jonah 2:9). If you and I could lose our salvation, we would. That’s how sinful we are. But we are not saved by our works but by God’s. That’s why Christ will have the supreme place of honor among those whom he has saved – his brothers and sisters, all those adopted into God’s family.

c. God *called* his people (v. 30a)

“And those whom he predestined he also called” (v. 30a). There are two kinds of calls in reference to the gospel. There is the *external* call of God. It is an open, universal invitation to all persons to repent of their sin and to put their trust in Christ for salvation. We issue such a call each and every Sunday. I’ve already done so while preaching this sermon. This call goes out to everybody. Some repent and believe in Christ, many don’t.

In addition to the *external* call, there is an *effectual* call. It’s effectual in that God not only issues the invitation, but he also insures a positive response. That is, those *effectually* called by God will respond to the *external* call of the gospel by turning from their sin and trusting in Christ to save them. We know that Paul is referring to the *effectual* call of God in verse 30 because of what comes next: “those whom he called he also justified” (v. 30b).

d. God *justified* his people (v. 30b)

If “called” in verse 30 referred to the external call, then everyone who heard the gospel would be saved, whether or not they repented and put their trust in Christ. For Paul says, “those whom he called he also justified” – the whole group, not just some of them. Yet Scripture makes it clear that not all will be saved but only those who receive Jesus as Lord and Savior. So, Paul is clearly referring to the effectual call which produces faith in the heart of the person whom God has foreknown and predestined for salvation.

Justification refers to a believer’s being made right *with* God *by* God.¹⁴ Back in chapter 3, Paul declared that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:23-24). “Salvation is of the Lord!” (Ps. 3:8).

e. God *glorified* his people (v. 30c)

¹³ William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), p. 1713.

¹⁴ MacArthur, 499.

“And those whom he justified he also glorified” (v. 30c). It may seem weird for Paul to speak of the glorification of believers in the past tense, since it has yet to take place, but such language is intentional. It speaks of our eternal security as believers. Paul uses the past tense to emphasize that our glorification is as good as done. God will finish what he has started.

***Our present suffering is nothing
compared to our future glory.***

Keep in mind that this whole passage is written for our encouragement as believers. Because God guarantees our future glory, we can be comforted in our present suffering. This is not pie-in-the-sky theology, but it meets us in the midst of our trials today – right here, right now – providing the comfort and encouragement we need in our most dire moments.

Conclusion

Almost twenty-two years ago, as my mother lay on her deathbed, I read to her these words from Romans 8: “those whom he justified he also glorified” (v. 30), followed by these comments from Charles Spurgeon:

Here is a precious truth for thee, believer. Thou mayest be poor, or in suffering, or unknown, but for thine encouragement take a review of thy "calling" and the consequences that flow from it, and especially that blessed result here spoken of. As surely as thou art God's child today, so surely shall all thy trials soon be at an end, and thou shalt be rich to all the intents of bliss. Wait awhile, and that weary head shall wear the crown of glory, and that hand of labour shall grasp the palm-branch of victory. Lament not thy troubles, but rather rejoice that [before] long thou wilt be where "there shall be neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain." The chariots of fire are at thy door, and a moment will suffice to bear thee to the glorified. The everlasting song is almost on thy lip. The portals of heaven stand open for thee. Think not that thou canst fail of entering into rest. If [God] hath called thee, nothing can divide thee from his love. Distress cannot sever the bond; the fire of persecution cannot burn the link; the hammer of hell cannot break the chain. Thou art secure; that voice which called thee at first, shall call thee yet again from earth to heaven, from death's dark gloom to immortality's unuttered splendours. Rest assured, the heart of him who has justified thee beats with infinite love towards thee. Thou shalt soon be with the glorified, where thy portion is; thou art only waiting here to be made [ready] for the inheritance, and that done, the wings of angels shall waft thee far away, to the mount of peace, and joy, and blessedness, where, "Far from a world of grief and sin, with God eternally shut in," thou shalt rest for ever and ever.¹⁵

¹⁵ Charles Spurgeon, *Morning & Evening*, May 28 (morning). Retrieved on 19 February 2022 at <https://www.heartlight.org/spurgeon/0528-am.html>.