

TODAY'S SUFFERINGS, TOMORROW'S JOYS
ROMANS 8:17-18

This coming week we will celebrate Thanksgiving. But those who are suffering often find it difficult to be thankful in the midst of their suffering. There may be turkey, dressing, and pecan pie on the table, but there is resentment, anger, hostility, and ingratitude in the hearts of many of us who suffer.

Consider the different story of Fanny Crosby. When she was six weeks old a doctor treated her common illness with a mustard plaster on her face that burned her eyes and left her permanently blind. In her autobiography, one of the greatest hymn writers of the faith said, "It seemed intended by the blessed Providence of God that I should be blind all my life, and I thank Him for the dispensation....If I could meet [my doctor] now, I would say 'Thank you, thank you' — over and over again — for making me blind." How could she say that? Because, she said, "I could not have written thousands of hymns if I had been hindered by the distractions of seeing all the interesting and beautiful objects that would have been presented to my notice."

In fact, even her first poem, written when she was 8-years-old, reflects that conviction:

Oh, what a happy child I am,
Although I cannot see!
I am resolved that in this world
Contented I will be.
How many blessings I enjoy
That other people don't!
So weep or sigh because I'm blind,
I cannot, nor I won't!

You and I are likely similar to most American Christians; we don't suffer well. As John Piper has noted, we expect things to work and we expect help when we need it and relief when we want it. We expect respect and courtesy. We never expect to be told that there is nothing that can be done. [*Lessons from a Hospital Bed*, 44.] We want answers. We want solutions. We don't expect, want, or like problems. And we especially don't expect, want, or like suffering and persecution.

But we live in a world where problems, troubles, suffering, and persecution are normal. Even for believers. In fact, we might even say that problems, troubles, suffering, and persecution are particularly experienced by believers. It seems that we have more of these difficulties than the rest of the world (and that doesn't make us particularly happy, either).

So how will we respond when we suffer? What should we think about our suffering?

It is those kinds of questions that Paul addresses in the middle of Romans 8. In his introductory statements to this section in vv. 17-18, we will see his theme is —

ALWAYS EVALUATE YOUR PRESENT SUFFERING IN LIGHT OF YOUR COMING GLORIFICATION.

Paul will not minimize suffering and he will not attempt to remove suffering. But he will tell us that we need to think in new ways about our suffering. And he will give us two particular thoughts to consider.

Context:

- ✓ God's children are INHERITORS (v. 17a)
- ✓ God's children are SUFFERERS (v. 17b)

How should we think about suffering?

1. Consider Your Sufferings (v. 18a)

- ✓ You must THINK about your sufferings
- ✓ Your sufferings are VARIOUS
- ✓ Your sufferings are NOW

2. Consider Your Glorification (v. 18b)

- ✓ You must THINK about Glory (it's incomparable)
- ✓ Your glory is ALL-TRANSFORMING
- ✓ Your glory is CERTAIN

CONTEXT:

• **God's children are INHERITORS (v. 17a)**

- ✓ This chapter focuses on the work of the Spirit of God to assure believers of their salvation. One of the most basic acts of the Spirit in the believer is to enable them to mortify the flesh (v. 13). And for those who mortify the flesh by the Spirit are ***being led by the Spirit*** (v. 14a). And if the Spirit leads them in that way, they are also ***sons of God*** (v. 14b). They have been moved from darkness to light, from death to life, and from Satan to Christ. But even more amazingly, they have been adopted into the family of God and given all the rights and privileges of sonship.
- ✓ Included in the rights of sonship is that they are made heirs of God. Notice in v. 17 he says three times that they are heirs, increasing each time the significance of what that means:
 - They are ***heirs also***. To be an heir means one receives an inheritance. But notice that this inheritance is received as soon as the child is adopted. It is *immediately* his (not after the father dies, as is normal with inheritance). The concept of inheritance is important in the OT and the inheritance was generally the family land. But in the NT, it refers more to the spiritual blessings the believer has reserved in Heaven through Christ (Eph. 1:3; **1 Pt. 1:3-5**).
 - They are also ***heirs of God***. This means God is the One who gives the inheritance. The emphasis is not just that the believer gets a gift, but it is *God* who gives the inheritance. God, who was their enemy, who was opposed to them, who would have only given them His wrath, now *that* God is the one who gives them their inheritance. It is almost as if Paul is saying, "Have you considered who has adopted you and given you this inheritance? It is God Himself. And it contains all the riches that come from God." But it is even more than that; it also (and more directly) means that the inheritance itself is God. Because we are His children, we get *God* (cf. **Ps. 73:25; Lam. 3:24; Rev. 21:3**). This was the promise to the Levites (**Dt. 18:1-2**), and our inheritance is similar!
 - They are ***fellow heirs with Christ***. Now Christ is already receiving His inheritance, but this is a promise that we will join in His inheritance.
 - ... You might read this statement to say, "we are heirs alongside Christ. He is the firstborn and He gets the main inheritance, and then all the rest of us divide up what leftovers remain from that inheritance." But that is *not* the sense of what Paul means.
 - ... He means, "that every child of God receives a full and equal inheritance of being aligned to the Firstborn Son, Jesus." MacArthur helpfully says, "...*every* adopted child of God will receive the *full* inheritance with the Son. Everything that Christ receives by divine right, we will receive by divine grace." [*Romans 1-8*, 445.] Because there is infinite grace and infinite riches, God has ability to give an infinite inheritance to all His sons. This is **Jn. 17:24**.
 - ... We are not beggars at the table. We are fully adopted by the Father and granted a full inheritance at the time of adoption. This is the principle of the parable of **Mt. 20:1-16**.

- ✓ But along with this inheritance, God's adopted sons also get something else...
- God's children are **SUFFERERS** (v. 17b)
 - ✓ When Paul says, ***if indeed we also suffer***, it is actually much stronger than that — “Seeing that,” or “Since we suffer with Him.” Paul is pointing to the certainty of suffering. It is a reality.
 - ✓ This suffering is not a reference to our identification with Christ so that when He suffered on the cross, we were suffering with Him. He means an actual suffering that is experienced by the believer because he is a follower of Christ. The world hates Christ, so the world hates Christ’s followers (Jn. 15:18-20). This is **Rom. 8:35**; Mt. 5:11; Acts 14:22; **2 Tim. 1:8, 12; 2:3; 3:1, 10-13; 4:6, 16-18; 1 Pt. 2:19-20; 3:16-17; 4:12-13; 5:9**. And it’s **John 16:33**, of which Bonhoeffer said,

“Jesus promised his disciples three things — that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble.” [in Ajith Fernando, *Call to Joy & Pain*, 96.]

- ✓ There is no easy pathway in this life for believers. It is a life of suffering, if we will follow Christ. We need to stop wondering what’s gone wrong when we suffer and rejoice that because we are doing something right, we are suffering. Is that a biblical perspective? Yes. See **Acts 5:41**.
- ✓ When we suffer with Christ, there is also a great benefit — ***we may also be glorified with Him***. This does not mean, “if you suffer, you earn the right to go to Heaven,” as if suffering is a meritorious thing to do for eternal life. He means that if you suffer because you are identified with Christ, then it gives evidence of your sonship, and that sonship is the inheritance that produces glorification with Christ.
- ✓ Or we might say it the opposite way, “if you are not suffering with Christ, then it indicates you are not part of Him and you have not been justified and thus you will not receive eternal life.”
- ✓ Suffering is part of the Christian life. You cannot remove suffering from faith in Christ. Christ suffered — “was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” (Lk. 24:26). And if we are with Him, we will also suffer with Him, and then enjoy the fruit and culmination of faith — glorification with Him. One theologian says it this way —

“We do not want suffering; we want success. We identify not with those who are low and hurt, but with those who are high and healthy. We don’t like lepers or losers very well; we prefer climbers and comers. For Christians, the temptation to be conformed to this world is desperately sweet and strong. Yet, says the apostle Paul, we are children of God if we suffer with Christ.” [Plantinga]

- Summary: If we mortify sin by the power and authority of the Spirit of God (v. 13) it demonstrates that we have been justified and are God’s children. If we are His children, He treats us like His eternal Son, giving us an inheritance with Christ, fully sharing in the inheritance of Christ. Then He graces us (I choose that word intentionally) with the privilege of suffering with Christ. But that just sounds wrong.

- Sons shouldn't suffer. Enemies should suffer. Rebels should suffer. Slaves should suffer. But sons shouldn't suffer. But the promise is made that sons do and will suffer.

"When it is your duty to suffer for Christ, look upon it also to be your privilege, and be glad of the opportunity, rejoicing that you have anything to part with for the sake of Christ." [Thomas Vincent, *The True Christian's Love...*, 94.]

And that leads us to Paul's next thought and his instruction for us: *How should we think about suffering?*

1. Consider Your Sufferings (v. 18a)

- You must THINK about your sufferings
 - ✓ When Paul says, ***I consider***, he is not offering a personal opinion — "Here is my idea..." The word ***consider*** is an accounting term, "to account," or "to reckon." The word implies a reasoning process; he calculated the cost of suffering in this world and he has come to a settled conclusion. On the basis of his careful consideration of the facts, he is fully and completely convinced.
 - ✓ And of what is he firmly convinced? That there is no way to compare the glory of what is to come to the suffering he has on this earth. However great his suffering is on earth, it cannot reach the smallest distance toward the heights of His glory. No matter the weight of his burden, it will not register on the scale when compared to the glory to come.
 - ✓ Paul does something interesting in this verse: he says ***I consider the sufferings...*** and then he says those sufferings ***are not worthy to be compared***. In other words, as you think about your sufferings, don't think of them in the same way you think of Heaven.
 - ✓ There is a right way to think about suffering and there is a wrong way; don't think wrongly about your suffering. Yes, you are suffering, but as you think about the suffering, don't succumb to the temptation to make too much of your suffering. Don't overestimate your suffering. And aren't we all prone to do that? "I'm sorry about your surgery; but I had surgery once..." "The labor with my baby was longer than yours..." "My children are so much more rebellious..." "My boss is the worst..." "Have I ever told you how mean my neighbor is...?"
 - ✓ Paul is echoing **2 Cor. 4:16-18**. He is not saying suffering is light and short. But we *must* have the appropriate counterbalance to suffering when we are weighing it. And the counterbalance is eternity with God and Christ. The counterbalance is glorification. The counter is righteousness.
 - ✓ We can do this: athletes do this when they workout twice a day and restrict their diets; couples do this when they eat at home instead of a restaurant to save for a down payment on a home; students do this when they stay up late to prepare a paper to finish class work to graduate...
 - ✓ Think about your suffering. But only in comparison with what you will get at the end.

- **Your sufferings are VARIOUS**

- ✓ What is to be considered is the believer's **suffering**. It seems initially that the kind of suffering he means is the suffering and persecution the believer experiences because of his identification with Christ (v. 17). That is certainly included.
- ✓ But the word **suffering** is broad. It refers to things that are "misfortunes." And we know that Paul means something more than just the suffering we get by being with Jesus because of **vv. 19-22**. There he is clearly talking about many kinds of things that go wrong in the world.
- ✓ Paul would have us to think about illness, loss, hunger, unemployment, financial burdens, broken relationships, consequences of sin, and death and grief.
- ✓ That's what we have in this life. We jokingly say, "the only two certainties in this life are death and taxes." But it's true, isn't it? Death, loss, brokenness, weakness, hurt, sorrow — they are all part of suffering and life. When we brought home Elizabeth from the hospital after she was born, I remember getting her dressed one morning looking at her unblemished skin and thinking, "one day these knees will be bloodied by a fall...her ears will hear insults...her eyes will cry in pain and sorrow..." It was inconceivable in that moment. Twenty-five years later it's a reality, not a theory.
- ✓ There is much suffering in this world:
 - There is suffering from the fallenness of the world itself (**vv. 20-21**) — there is cancer, there are car accidents, there are blizzards and hurricanes. The physical world is imperfect.
 - There is suffering from sin — I sin against others and others sin against me. Relationships are broken and sometimes are not repaired (**Rom. 12:14-21**).
 - There is the suffering that comes from being a follower of Christ (v. 17). Everyone in the world experiences the first two; only believers experience this one. Jesus promised this (Jn. 15:18ff).
 - Not everyone experiences the same sufferings. But everyone suffers. Everyone knows heartache. Everyone knows pain. Since Genesis 3, no one is immune from trouble.
- ✓ We spend our lives trying to escape suffering, when God says it is woven into the fabric of life. Instead of attempting to avoid it, we must learn to think rightly about it.

- **Your sufferings are NOW**

- ✓ Notice also that the suffering Paul is thinking about is of **this present time**. He doesn't mean, "they are here for the time being." He doesn't mean that he has them and others do not. He means that these sufferings are "of this age," in contrast to "the age to come."
- ✓ He means, as we've already noted, that to be in this world means there will be suffering. It is the nature of this world to experience trouble.
- ✓ As someone said, there are three kinds of people: those who were suffering yesterday, those who having troubles today, and those whose phone will ring tonight.
- ✓ How do you know if someone has suffered or will suffer? Are they alive? They will suffer.
- ✓ Some of us have created mental refuges where suffering does not exist and then we are devastated when it arrives. You must think rightly about suffering. It *is* a reality.

2. Consider Your Glorification (v. 18b)

- You must THINK about Glory (it's incomparable)
 - ✓ There is a **glory**. The word **glory** can refer to the outshining of the radiance of God — the reality of who He is; or it can refer to the place where God's glory resides — in Heaven. It's almost impossible to separate the two, but Paul particularly seems to be pointing to the place where we will go to experience the completeness of our salvation.
 - ✓ And as we think about Heaven (and we must think about it!), we must realize that what is coming for us in Heaven far outweighs anything we suffer here on earth.
 - ✓ We must learn to give Heaven and our future the weight it deserves. We are far too earthly-minded. We think far too much about what we will suffer here and what we will receive here and far too little about what we will receive in Heaven as our complete joy.
 - ✓ We could talk about the many ways that Heaven surpasses earth:
 - We could talk about the beauty of Heaven (Rev. 21).
 - We could talk about restored relationships (and new ones) in Heaven.
 - We could talk about sinlessness and complete freedom from the flesh (8:30; Rev. 22:1ff).
 - We could talk about the absence of human frailty and illness (Rev. 22:1ff).
 - We could talk about the immensity of seeing Jesus (1 Jn. 3:2; Rev. 1:17).
 - But what Paul would have us focus on here is the *duration* of Heaven — whatever we experience here and for however long we experience it cannot compare to Heaven. Heaven is incomparable. Why? Because it is infinite in blessings and time. The joy we have is infinite (full and complete) and the joy we have is unending. We just have no good way to express it. Peter says a thousand years is like a day and one day like a thousand years (2 Pt. 3:8). If the average life expectancy of someone born today is ~78 years, that person can expect about 28,500 days on earth. Or about 28,500,000 years. And after that, eternity is just beginning.
 - So what is one month of suffering? Or one year? Or 30 years. Or 80 years? After 28 million years in Heaven, the suffering we endured on earth will be just the smallest speck of time.
 - One writer said, "Who would complain if God allowed one hour of suffering in an entire lifetime of comfort? Yet we bitterly complain about a lifetime that includes suffering when that lifetime is a mere hour of eternity." [Yancey, in *Be Still, My Soul*, 29.]
 - ✓ Tim Keller also offers one more way to think about our suffering and how it doesn't compare to Heaven: "If heaven is a compensation for all the stuff we wanted that we never had, that is one thing. But if the new heaven and the new earth is our hope — and it is — it will make everything horrible we've experienced nothing but a nightmare. And as a nightmare, it will infinitely, correspondingly increase our future joy and glory in a way it wouldn't have been increased if we'd never suffered." [in *Be Still, My Soul*, 21.]
 - ✓ We must think how Heaven and Christ will be a particular joy *because* we have suffered. And if there is no suffering now, then Heaven will be a lesser joy then. We know full joy because we suffer.

- Your glory is **ALL-TRANSFORMING**

- ✓ The glory that is coming is going to be **revealed**. That is, glory will be known, disclosed, brought to light. It is the final revelation of God's work of redemption to us.
- ✓ This sounds so much like what John says in **1 John 3:1-2**. Christ will reveal Himself and we will see Him. This is **Revelation 22:3-4**. All the resurrecting power of God to draw Jesus Christ from the grave and sinners from death and Hell will be on display for all the members of Heaven to see. The prophets wrote about this salvation but didn't understand it, but then it will be revealed (**1 Pt. 1:11-12**).
- ✓ Notice that Paul says this will be revealed **to us**. We will look around Heaven and we will see God's glory on display like it's never been seen. And what we will see is saved and redeemed people. We will see God's glory revealed not just *to us*, but God's glory *in us*. The culminating work of salvation is the work of God *in us*. He will transform us from the inside out. As one commentator said, "...this glory will, as it were, come to us, enter us, and then, having filled us and enveloped us, will be revealed in us. We ourselves will be part of that glory: the redeemed will see it in each other. The angels will behold it in us, and will be filled with thanksgiving and praise to God." [Hendriksen]
- ✓ There is nothing of you that will remain untransformed; it will all be changed the instant you enter eternity. Every fleshly temptation, every inclination to sin, every sinful thought, every sinful deed, every frailty of your body will instantaneously, completely, and eternally be removed.
- ✓ When we are having trouble, this is what we must be thinking; God is transforming us now, but then — oh how much more completely and satisfyingly will we be changed.

- Your glory is **CERTAIN**

- ✓ Lastly, notice that Paul says there is a glory that will be revealed to us — ***is to be revealed***. He means us to understand that it is a certainty. It *is* coming. It won't be missed. It *will* arrive. All the things that seem to be wrong in life and all the hardships we endure? They will be rectified and they will end and eternity with Christ in Glory will begin.
- ✓ And Paul also means us to understand that this change is coming...*quickly*. It is close in time. This should keep us from despair — when it seems that 30-year illnesses are eternal, this helps us remember, they aren't, but our glorification is.
- ✓ Your weights are weighty — but not when they are compared with what is coming soon.
- ✓ Friend, persevere in doing good; the wait for Heaven is short, the burden you carry is light when it will be exchanged for the blessings of Heaven. The severest trial will be a triviality when weighed against the gifts of Heaven. Do not give in to sin. Do not give in to despair. Do not give in to hopelessness. Look past your trial to the King who is coming who will make you right and will heal all your wounds and give you infinite and everlasting life.

BENEDICTION: **Romans 8:37-39**