

**THE BELIEVER'S GREAT LONGING**  
**ROMANS 8:22-25**

Life is difficult. But you don't need me to tell you that to know that it is true, do you?

And suffering has always been the way of living in this world — especially for believers. One historian says this about the early church:

Every Christian knew that sooner or later he might have to testify to his faith at the cost of his life....When persecution did break out, martyrdom could be attended by the utmost possible publicity. The Roman public was hard and cruel... [quoted in Piper, *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ*, 25-6.]

We can hear that and nod in agreement, but the reality is that it is hard to suffer well. It is hard to be in physical pain without complaining. It is hard to see injustice, sin, and crime against others and not be angry. It is hard to be repeatedly sinned against by a family member without becoming bitter. It is hard trying to experience repeated financial setbacks without becoming cynical. It is hard to fight against sin — even as a believer. It is hard to see repeated occurrences of your sin against the people you love without despairing — will you ever change and be free from the struggles and sins that entangle you?

If I were to say, "The suffering person wants...", how would you finish that sentence? When we suffer, most of us simply want out of the suffering. We want it to end. We *yearn* for it to go away. When we suffer, our longing is not to suffer. We don't really care how, we just want it gone.

In Romans 8, Paul is reminding the Roman readers of two great truths: 1) the power of the Spirit to lead them in their spiritual life; 2) the power of the Spirit to keep them saved — to assure them of their salvation. And in the middle of what has been called the greatest chapter in the Bible, Paul notes the suffering that is in this world, and the groaning responses of the creation, the believer, and the Spirit to that suffering (vv. 22, 23, 26). This morning, we will specifically see how the believer should respond and think when he suffers. Yes, he groans in his suffering, but that groaning is really a longing for something. His groaning is a desire. He wants something. What does the believer desire when he suffers?

As he considers the sufferings of the believer, the apostle hopefully says in vv. 22-25 —

**THE BELIEVER'S SUFFERING IS SUPERSEDED BY HIS HOPE.**

The believer's suffering in this life is overwhelmed and surpassed by his confident expectation of the next life — when he will experience the completion of his salvation.

According to this passage, how should we think about our life of suffering? What new ways of thinking do we need to develop?

- 1. We Have SUFFERING (vv. 22)**
- 2. We Have the SPIRIT (v. 23a)**
- 3. We Have a LONGING (v. 23b)**
- 4. We Have ADOPTION (v. 23c)**
- 5. We Have HOPE (v. 24)**
- 6. We Have PERSEVERANCE (v. 25)**

## 1. We Have SUFFERING (vv. 22)

- In verses 19-21 we saw the suffering that is in the created world and how that world longs for our redemption so that it will be released from its suffering along with us (vv. 19b, 21).
  - ✓ This is the suffering that was inaugurated in Genesis 3:17-19 and continues to this day.
  - ✓ And as Paul transitions to the groaning of believers, he summarizes creation's groaning.
  - ✓ Paul says that ***the whole creation groans***. There is not one aspect of creation that is unaffected by sin and the judgment on the world because of sin. Every aspect of man is impacted by sin (though we are not as bad as we could be); and every part of creation is similarly touched (though not as badly as it could be). No part of creation has stayed in its pre-Genesis 3 state and condition.
  - ✓ Creation is groaning because it ***suffers the pains of childbirth***.
    - Like a woman in labor, the pain is significant, intense, and real. This is no pseudo-suffering. The pain that comes through fallen creation is real — broken bones and cancer and colds and hurricanes and ice storms and car breakdowns all produce genuine pain and suffering. Suffering is real. And the pain of suffering is also real.
    - But it is also the pain of childbirth — it is intense and real, but it is *not* permanent. There is joy on the other side of the child's birth such that the pain of that moment is forgotten.
    - Calvin also notes that these are "birth pangs," not "death pangs." This is suffering that also anticipates that something better is coming. God will produce something better on the other side of the suffering.
    - Paul also reinforces that all creation experiences this suffering when he says it is done ***together*** — it is another way for him to emphasize that nothing is exempted from suffering.
  - ✓ Notice finally from verse that it is ***until now***. The suffering of the world was true the instant God spoke the words of Genesis 3; they were true through all the patriarchs and prophets in the OT, in the time of Christ, until the time of Paul's writing, and today. There is a relentlessness to suffering. It is persistent and ongoing. And no part of creation and no one who lives in that creation has escaped it or will escape it. The suffering was then. And it is *now*.
- Let me offer three ways to think about suffering in light of this verse:
  - ✓ ***Suffering is real***. Be sympathetic to others in their plights. You may not know the exact pain, but you know it is pain. Be compassionate to that suffering (Mt. 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mk. 1:41; Col. 3:12).
  - ✓ ***Don't seek a refuge away from suffering***. It's not a sin to seek a remedy for your suffering (get stitches on a cut and take an aspirin for a headache). But don't attempt to create a refuge where you can escape suffering entirely. Between Genesis 3 and Revelation 21, that place does not exist. Everywhere you go you will see and experience suffering. To seek a suffering-free experience in this world is to set your heart on something unattainable and unsatisfactory. "The world's anguish is a continuing phenomenon." [Morris]

- ✓ **Be hopeful in your suffering.** Suffering is real and expected, but it is not permanent. This life is not permanent and the suffering in this life is not permanent. Just as a woman giving birth can endure that pain by looking past the moment to what lies ahead, so the believer endures his suffering by looking ahead to what is coming. Suffering is not the final word. The renovation of this world and the final redemption of mankind *is* the final word.

## 2. We Have the **SPIRIT** (v. 23a)

- Despite living in a world of suffering the believer has a variety of gifts that serve as comfort and hope for him. The first of those gifts is the Holy Spirit Himself.
  - ✓ The believer **has the first fruits of the Spirit.** The term “first fruit” is agricultural — it refers to the first harvest of a crop. In the OT, the follower of God would give that first portion to the Lord as an act of worship, and as an act of trust that the Lord would provide more for the believer’s provision (Ex. 22:29; 23:19; Num. 18:12; Dt. 18:4; Neh. 10:37).
  - ✓ But notice that here, the **first fruits** are not the gifts of the worshipper to God, but the gift of God to the worshipper. This is God’s care for His people — even His people in their suffering (they are not forgotten or overlooked by Him).
  - ✓ When God gives **first fruits**, it is to say, “there is more to come...” The believer has the appetizer, but the main meal is still coming.
- Now notice what the believer has received — **the Spirit.**
  - ✓ This is akin to what Paul says in Eph. 1:13-14 (4:30; **2 Cor. 1:21-22**) — the Spirit is the pledge (down payment) of our salvation — that we possess the Spirit guarantees that we will receive the rest of our salvation.
  - ✓ The Spirit has come and has enabled us to mortify the flesh and affirm our sonship (**8:13-14**)
  - ✓ The Spirit has come and has transformed our minds (**Rom. 12:1-2**).
  - ✓ The Spirit has come and He has gifted us to serve God (**Rom. 12:3ff**).
  - ✓ If the Spirit has come to be in us and has done that in us, will our salvation be left incomplete? No! That we have the Spirit — even while we live in a suffering world — is affirmation that we *will* receive everything else that has been promised with our salvation.

“If the first fruits are enough to free us from our sins and give us righteousness and sanctification... consider how wonderful the whole inheritance must be.” [Chrysostom]

- ✓ This verse is a reminder not to despair over our suffering but to recognize what we already have from God in the midst of our suffering. This tells us that the presence of the Spirit is a greater comfort to us than the temporal removal of our suffering.

### 3. We Have a LONGING (v. 23b)

- Even while we have the Spirit within us, we still have a longing. The verse says, ***even we ourselves groan within ourselves.***
  - ✓ The pronouns are emphatic — ***we ourselves*** (twice)...***within ourselves***. The groaning that the creation is doing is also done by us. Creation is not suffering alone (and we aren't either). We know what this suffering is and we know what it means to long for and desire something different.
  - ✓ The groaning is private and not public (internal, not external — ***within ourselves***) — it is not “complaining.” It is an inward “sigh” that expresses a desire for something different.
  - ✓ The groaning is *because of* the presence of the ***Spirit*** — because we have the Spirit, we want the rest of our salvation too. We have experienced what the Spirit can do in transforming us and we want the rest of what He will yet do to change us.
  - ✓ So we groan for two reasons:
    - We groan because of what we are still experiencing in this fallen world; we groan inwardly because of what we are inwardly. We want to be rid of our sin. “I’m sick of this sin...”
    - We also groan because we want something better — we want our glorification (**2 Cor. 5:2, 4**). John Stott has captured the sense well:

“This is our Christian dilemma. Caught in the tension between what God has inaugurated (by giving us his Spirit) and what he will consummate (in our final adoption and redemption), we groan with discomfort and longing. The indwelling Spirit gives us joy, and the coming glory gives us hope (e.g. 5:2), but the interim suspense gives us pain.” [The Message of Romans, 242.]

- What are your longings and desires? And *why* do you want what you want? (Why we want what we want may be more important than what we want.). This explanation of our groaning is a reminder that we should have a three-fold motive for our longings and desires.
  - ✓ We should long for redemption because of our holy discontentment with our sin. We are more dissatisfied with our own sin than we are with the burdens of living in a fallen world. We are more grieved over what our sin does to others than what the sins of others do to us. We want redemption so that we can be freed from sin more than we want to have a trouble-free life.
  - ✓ We should long for redemption because it is the fulfillment of our creation and our salvation. We were made to glorify God and our redemption will give us the ability to do that fully. We should want redemption so we can fulfill that calling.
  - ✓ Our suffering may be one of God’s instruments to make us discontent with this world and to give us a passionate desire for our redeemed life with Him:

“Is not some of the pain and sorrow in this life used in God’s providential hand to make us homesick for heaven, to detach us from this world, to prepare us for heaven, to draw our attention to himself, and away from the world of merely physical things?” [Carson, in *Be Still My Soul.*]

#### 4. We Have ADOPTION (v. 23c)

- I've just said that our groaning looks both backward and forward — backward to the devastation of our sin and forward to the fulfillment of our salvation. The forward look is what Paul emphasizes next:
  - ✓ We are **waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons**. We are already adopted. The paperwork has been signed. We are legally the sons of God (v. 14). We can rightly (and not blasphemously) call God our Father and "Daddy" (v. 15). The Spirit *is* testifying through our mortification of sin to our sonship to God (v. 16). We are legitimate heirs of God (v. 17).
  - ✓ But we have not yet received all the benefits of that sonship. And the believer craves the complete experience of his sonship. Specifically, we want our **redemption**, but not just the redemption of our inner man — we want the redemption of **our bodies**. We are already in the process of being redeemed inwardly; here the desire is also for the body to be redeemed. To want our bodies to be redeemed is significant because our bodies are the location of the manifestation of our fleshly deeds. Our bodies are not inherently evil (they are under the curse, but the body itself is amoral); but our bodies are where our fleshly desires are done (7:5; 8:10).
- What will that redemption of our bodies look like? It will be something like Christ's resurrected body (Rom. 6:5; Phil. 3:21):
  - ✓ Our faces and bodies will be recognizable for what they are today; and they may even still possess some scars from this life (Jn. 20:20)
  - ✓ We will have an ability to eat (Lk. 24:30; Jn. 21:12-13)
  - ✓ We will have an ability to touch and feel (Jn. 20:17, 27)
  - ✓ We will not have the same limitations of this earthly body — pass through doors/walls and be able to appear/leave instantaneously (Jn. 20:19, 26)
  - ✓ Because we will live eternally, our bodies will be ageless (some have suggested all women will be 23 and all men 29!). There will be no decaying of the body in any way.

"In the pleasant experiences of this life we sigh, 'Oh, I wish this would last forever,' but it never does. When we enter into our inheritance we will say, 'Oh, I wish this would last forever,' and it will. So living for the Lord, and even paying a price to follow him — we have nothing to lose and everything to inherit!...If we sense the greatness of the glory to come, we cannot be typical modern people — grasping, self-preserving, timid. This gospel confidence makes us more than conquerors through the One who loved us enough to buy all of this for us at his own expense and pour it all into our laps as a gift of grace." [Ortlund, *Supernatural Living for Natural People*,]

- So we have our adoption as sons — and we want everything else that comes with that adoption. And we can be confident that change is coming, as Paul says next —

## 5. We Have HOPE (v. 24)

- Notice that at the first word of v. 24 is **for** — this is the reason that we long for redeemed bodies — *because* we have been saved **in hope**.
  - ✓ He does not say that we are saved *by* hope (we are saved *by* grace and through faith). But with the along with the faith that we demonstrate, we also have hope in God.
  - ✓ **Hope** is an important NT word. It is used 53x in the NT, 36x by Paul, and 13x in Romans.
  - ✓ The basic meaning is to look forward to something with a confident expectation of fulfillment. Biblical hope is not someone pessimistically wanting something that cannot realistically happen ("I hope I win the lottery..."); biblical hope is an anchor. It is rooted and certain. (Heb. 6:19-20).
- This verse also explains what hope is *not*: it is not something that is seen. We don't use the word "hope" for something that we possess (or **see**). If we have it, we don't long for its arrival. On December 26, we don't hope for Christmas Day. We already have it. We don't hope for the package from Amazon if it's already sitting on our front porch. If we have it, we don't hope for it.
- But if we don't have it yet, we do hope for it. And that's Paul's point — because we have not received the fulness of our salvation yet, we long for it to come. But again, that hope is different from the world's hope — it is a certainty that God will fulfill and bring about what He has promised. It's just a matter of time until He does.
  - ✓ This is encouraging for us; we have not yet arrived at maturity. But we will.
  - ✓ This is the antidote to the lament, "things will never get better." They not only will get better, they will become "best." As one theologian has said, "The Christian hope is not hope in the human spirit, in human goodness, in human endurance, in human achievement; the Christian hope is in the power of God." [Barclay; quoted in *CT*, 10/25/99.]
  - ✓ Our hope is not wishes and dreams but confidence and security. It is still in the future, but that doesn't mean it is uncertain. There is nothing more certain than our future because of the One who promised it (God the Father), the One who secured it (Jesus Christ), and the One who guarantees it (the Holy Spirit). Nothing can take away that hope (I might sinfully live hopelessly, but that doesn't change the reality of my hope). No catastrophe, evil, enemy, or death can take away our hope. We know our hope is alive because the Savior who gave it is alive. Nothing can take away His life; so nothing can take away our life. That's our confident hope.

"By its very nature, hope makes us confident that what God has promised will indeed come to pass. At conversion the idea of an uncertain future has ended once for all, and we absolutely know what our final end will be." [Grant Osborne]

"What Paul means is that we are not to expect everything to be given to us in this life, but we are to have hope as well." [Chrysostom]

## 6. We Have PERSEVERANCE (v. 25)

- If we are biblically hopeful, ***with perseverance we eagerly wait for it.***
  - ✓ Perseverance is often translated “patience,” but the word is more active than “patience.” It denotes standing up and moving forward when under a heavy load. It is not a passive and contented waiting, but an active moving forward towards something.
  - ✓ This phrase echoes what Paul wrote in 5:3-4. Suffering produces perseverance in Christ.
- This verse is a reminder that the believer’s life is one of warfare and battle, not ease.
  - ✓ Our tendency is to think that life should be easy and simple. And when suffering and difficulty and trial comes, our temptation is to throw our hands up in despair. That is just when we need to put our hands to the plow and work all the harder. Suffering is meant to loosen our hold on this world and tighten our grip on the anticipated transformation of Glory.
  - ✓ We live in a sin-cursed world. Creation is suffering the effects of our sin. We suffer in the world and from sin (ours and others) — and that should make us lean towards the hope of redemption and away from the comforts of this present world.
  - ✓ My friends, understand what Paul is encouraging and exhorting: we will maintain hope and perseverance by looking forward to redemption and we will become hopeless when we look at the circumstances of this world and our trials. We must become far-sighted, and not be near-sighted.
  - ✓ A story told about John Chrysostom demonstrates this principle:

“When John Chrysostom, the church father, was brought before the empress Eudoxia, she threatened him with banishment if he insisted upon his Christian independence as a preacher. ‘You cannot banish me, for this world is my Father’s house.’ ‘But I will kill you,’ said the empress. ‘No, you cannot, for my life is hid with Christ in God,’ said John. ‘I will take away your treasures.’ ‘No, you cannot, for my treasure is in heaven and my heart is there.’ ‘But I will drive you away from your friends and you will have no one left.’ ‘No, you cannot, for I have a friend in heaven from whom you cannot separate me. I defy you, for there is nothing you can do to harm me.’” [Told by Orlund in *Supernatural Living for Natural People*.]

- When that is your hope, you will persevere. We do have suffering in this world. But there is provision, through the Spirit of God for our suffering so that we *can* endure and persevere with Christ.

**CONCLUSION:** At the beginning of my message I noted the prevalence of suffering in the church throughout its history. Yet the same historian also refers to the blessings that came through the suffering:

Every Christian knew that sooner or later he might have to testify to his faith at the cost of his life....When persecution did break out, martyrdom could be attended by the utmost possible publicity. The Roman public was hard and cruel, but it was not altogether without compassion; and there is no doubt that the attitude of the martyrs, and particularly of the young women who suffered along with the men, made a deep impression....In the earlier records what we find is calm, dignified, decorous behaviour; cool courage in the face of torment courtesy towards enemies, and a joyful acceptance of suffering as the way appointed by the Lord to lead to his heavenly kingdom. There are a number of well-authenticated cases of conversion of pagans in the very moment of witnessing the condemnation and death of Christians; there must have been far more who received impressions that in the course of time would be turned into a living faith. [quoted in Piper, *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ*, 25-6.]

- ✓ The believer's life will be one of suffering and even persecution.
- ✓ But the believer's life is also one of great hope — a confidence in the certainty of the completion of our salvation.
- ✓ We have tasted something of our salvation; let that first satisfying morsel give you delight and persevering patience to wait for the feast to come in eternity.

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