



# THE GLORY AND THE GROAN

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE AND GLORY

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Romans 8:18-27

18th Message

Gary Vanderet

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One of my favorite Peanuts cartoon strips has Schroeder, garbed in an outsized catcher's mask and chest protector, striding out to the mound. He hands Charlie Brown the baseball, and laments, "The bases are loaded again, and there's still nobody out." "So what do you think?" Charlie Brown asks. Schroeder ponders the question for a moment, and replies, "We live in difficult times."

Indeed we do. Someone has said, "If it's not one thing it's another, and some days it's both." Painful, mortifying and costly circumstances seem to hit us continually. We tell ourselves that things will get better, that life will become easier as we get along in years, but that's a fool's dream. Sometimes the harder tests come farther down the road.

In our last study in the book of Romans we pondered the wonderful truth proclaimed by the apostle Paul in the opening verse of chapter 8: "there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." We studied the marvelous, liberating ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This is the new arrangement for living, predicted by the prophet Jeremiah centuries earlier, that there was coming a day when God would write his laws in people's hearts, not on tables of stone. God would live with them, they would be his people, and he would be their God. They would be able to draw upon his wisdom, energy and power for all the demands that life threw at them. God would settle the question of their guilt once and for all by forgiving their sins; and they could rest upon that constant washing, cleansing and forgiveness all through their lives. That is the glory of the New Covenant.

But, as we saw in chapter 7, our salvation is not complete. We are physically frail, mortal creatures. Together with the physical creation, we share in the frustration of bondage to decay and pain. That is why we experience a mysterious blending of suffering and glory throughout our Christian life. We could say that suffering and glory intermingled, accurately sum up the ages, the age we are living in and the age to come, the present and the future. As Christians, then, we live in two worlds—the world of the "already" and the world of the "not yet." What we experience here on earth is not all there is; there is much more yet to come. God has prepared something incomparably beautiful for those who love and trust him: something that lies beyond time, an experience so beautiful, vast and breathtaking that only eternity is big enough to contain it.

Suffering and glory, therefore, are the themes of our passage from Romans 8 this morning. First, the suffering and glory of God's creation (verses 19-22); and second, the suffering and glory of God's children (verses 23-27). If you are presently experiencing hurt and heartache, then I pray these words will comfort you and give you hope and a determination not to give up.

Paul begins with a summary statement. Romans 8:18:

**For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to [or better translated "in"] us. (Rom 8:18, NASB)**

Upon hearing these words we are tempted to say, "Paul, you can't possibly mean that. You don't know what I'm going through. You don't know how it feels to be abandoned by your spouse, or what it's like to hold a dead child in your arms. You can't possibly understand my feelings."

But Paul understood pain. Just read his epistles. Listen to his own description of some of the things that befell him:

**Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (2 Cor 11:24-28)**

Paul knew about pain all right.

But he knew something else. Here he reveals a number of important and encouraging truths about the relationship between suffering and glory. The first truth is this: suffering and glory belong together. That was Christ's experience, and it will be ours, too. Suffering is an integral part of the glory. And that glory is not going to be revealed *to* us, says the apostle, but *in* us. It is something that God is doing inside all of us. We will not be spectators in a cosmic grandstand, watching a beautiful performance in which we play no part. No, we are to be on the stage and very much involved. It is

a glory that will be “revealed in us,” because we are part of it.

God is making us into glorious beings—and suffering is an indispensable element of that. John Stott put it this way: “Suffering and glory are married; they can’t be divorced. They are welded; they can’t be broken apart.”<sup>1</sup> Paul wrote in 2 Cor 4:17 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.” Our afflictions are not only preparing us for glory, they are creating it!

But, though suffering and glory are inseparable they are not comparable. They must be contrasted, not compared. It doesn’t make any difference how much pain you are experiencing right now. You may be confined to a wheelchair; you may be dying; you may have learned that you have cancer; you may have discovered that your mate has committed adultery. These are terrible circumstances but, no matter what we have gone through, what we are presently going through or will go through in the future, the sum total is not worthy to be compared with the glory that awaits us.

That word “glory” means something that fills us with awe. Paul is saying that one of these days we are going to be totally awesome! In fact, C. S. Lewis reminds us that when we relate to each other we are not really dealing with mortals. One of these days we are all going to be as glorious as God’s Son. If we could see ourselves now as we will be then, we would be tempted to fall down and worship.

We won’t have any more aches and pains then. We won’t have to worry about disease or death. We won’t have to concern ourselves with the habits that enslave us, the warped personalities, the neuroses, the psychoses, the things that have haunted, disturbed and distressed us and made life hard. All that will be finished. This is what helps us get through the tough times—because we know that this is not all there is. There is glory on ahead. God is going to make something glorious out of us. This is Paul’s thesis throughout the rest of this section.

And suffering and glory affect both God’s creation and his children. First, as to creation. Verses 19-22:

**For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. (Rom 8:19-22)**

J.B. Phillips translates verse 19: “The whole creation is on tiptoe, eagerly awaiting for the time when the sons of God come into their own.” That is an excellent rendering of that verb, “to wait eagerly.” It means to crane the neck forward, waiting and watching. Creation longs

for the day of liberation.

In these verses Paul is describing the fall of creation, everything that exists apart from man: animals, mountains, streams. When man fell the whole creation fell. The world is not what God originally designed it to be. God is not attempting to run the world properly today and failing in his efforts. The world exists in a fallen state. That is what the apostle means when he says that creation is subjected to futility, by God’s will. In other words, the world is under the judgment of God because of sin.

And not only is the world fallen, it is falling apart. This is what physicists call the second law of thermodynamics, the law that states that energy is becoming less and less useable. The world is degrading, going downhill, decaying. And that is frustrating to creation. That is why creation sighs and groans. That is why nature has become our enemy rather than our friend. That is why we fear animals rather than evoking fear in them. There is something desperately wrong with creation. We are locked into the law of entropy and the whole thing is running downhill and decaying. Things are not as they should be. But not only is creation decaying, we are decaying as well.

Next, Paul moves from creation to the church, which is the new creation of God. Verses 23-25:

**And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it. (Rom 8:23-25)**

Not only does creation groan, people groan, too. The human race groans and struggles as well, because we are part of the fall. And Christians are not immune from suffering. They struggle, too.

But we do have the Holy Spirit indwelling us, in Paul’s words, the “first fruits of the Spirit.” He is the down payment of our inheritance, of everything that was promised to us when we were adopted as sons. Paul makes use of two metaphors, redemption and adoption, to describe our ultimate salvation. Though we have already been redeemed, our bodies have not. Our spirits are alive, and one day the Spirit will give life to our bodies. We will be set free from the slavery of our bodies, from the law of entropy, and decay. We are, of course, already adopted by God. It is the Spirit who assures us that we are his children. But we will experience a richer, fuller father-child relationship when we come into our own. On the day that we see the Lord, either when we go to him or he returns to take us, whichever comes first, then we will come into our own and be fully revealed as God’s children. That is when we will receive our inheritance.

It’s foolish to think we are going to have it all now:

the perfect body, the perfect marriage, perfect health, perfect children, etc. That won't happen until we see God. Some contemporary teachers today say that God's plan doesn't involve suffering. They hold that God wants to make us prosperous; that sickness and painful circumstances are not in his plan; that we just need to have enough faith. That is very wrong. Scripture clearly teaches that creation suffers and we suffer, too—because we are locked into creation. If we imagine we are going to go through life without suffering, then we simply don't understand the nature of the world we live in. We are residents of a fallen universe. We are fallen beings and daily we suffer the consequences of that fall. So we will have hurt and pain.

But, one of these days that law of entropy is going to be reversed and we will come into our own. What an encouragement this is to people who are living with bodies that are afflicted, or to people who just can't seem to fit in. Maybe you were abused as a child and the resulting neurosis has haunted you all your life. One of these days you are going to come into your own and you will have everything you have ever longed for. You may not have it in this world, but you will have it then. One day you will have a body that is unhindered and unharassed. That is why we can endure suffering now, what Paul calls it in 2 Corinthians, "light, momentary affliction." But all of this is nothing compared to the glory that will be revealed in us when we stand before the Lord.

Remember that when the cross of ministry is heavy to bear; when the rigors of righteous living become exhausting; when the responsibilities of discipling people get overwhelming; when the routine of serving others gets discouraging; when the sacrifices of giving your money, time and talents get tiring; when your efforts to lead people to Christ seem futile. Stay faithful! Endure! Press on—because it is all going to be worth it. The light, momentary affliction you are experiencing today is producing in you an eternal reward that is beyond your wildest dreams. Paul had a stranglehold on the fact that we are only here for such a short period, just an instant on the continuum of eternity.

We don't have glory now; we have to wait for it. But we don't need to be restless and irritable, discouraged and depressed. That is our hope. By "hope," Paul is not implying any element of contingency. He is saying, "That is my certainty. I am sure of it. I know that, and I am waiting for it." This is not all there is. There is more to come.

In the meantime, the Spirit is praying for us. Verses 26-27:

**And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groan-**

**ings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom 8:26-27)**

Creation groans, we groan, and the Spirit groans. So integrated are we with the Spirit that when we groan, he groans.

What encouraging words! David Roper summarizes these verses by saying that what Paul is declaring is that we can't go wrong in our prayers. When the pressure is on, when we are afflicted in some way, we wonder how we should pray. Should we pray for God to take the pressure off? to alleviate the pain? to be healed of our illness? to take a difficult person out of our life? We don't know how to pray. Most of our prayers are inarticulate cries: "Lord, I don't know what to do. Please help." We don't need to worry that God won't know how to help us because we don't know how to pray. The Holy Spirit knows the mind of God. Our Lord knows what is best for us, and he reveals that information to the Holy Spirit, who prays according to the mind of God.<sup>2</sup>

We may pray, "Lord, please take this difficult person out of my life," but the Holy Spirit counters, "No, Father. Don't do that. He needs to be more patient. He needs to learn to be less of a private person. He must learn to be more sensitive, sweeter, easier to get along with." In God's mind the problem is not the difficult person. It's me, but I don't realize that. So the Spirit interprets my prayer. He knows that there is more important work to do, something that is more eternal and deeper than simply releasing me from pressure.

God desires something glorious, and all through life we are being groomed for that as we are being changed into the likeness of Christ. The tough times are the tools that shape us and make us what God intends us to be. God knows what he is doing. He is infinitely wise. He knows when we need to be left in tough circumstances and when we need to be delivered from them. He turns our inarticulate cries into the proper requests. God hears the Spirit praying for us according to his will, and he answers that prayer to make us into the people that he has destined us to become.

Paul's message to us today is a word of assurance. He is exhorting us to not give up. Though the road may be long and difficult, our destiny is sure. Don't give up! Wait patiently for the coming glory. The apostle assures us that the wait will be worth it.

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1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 237.
2. *A Perspective On Pain*, a sermon by David H. Roper (Cole Community Church, Boise ID, 1/24/1998).