

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 14, 2016**

SUFFERING BEFORE GLORY

Romans 8:18-27

These last few weeks have been eventful for Mary Sue and me. Two weeks ago today I had the pleasure and privilege and honor of officiating at the wedding of our son Nate in Spotsylvania. It was a beautiful day, a beautiful ceremony, and a beautiful celebration. We have gained a beautiful daughter-in-law, Amy, whom we love dearly. Our hearts are overflowing with praise and gratitude to God for His grace in bringing Nate and Amy together.

After the wedding, Mary Sue and I took some time off and spent several days in Wilmington, NC, with my brother Gary and sister-in-law Jane, who welcomed us with open arms and treated us like family – which is appropriate, since that is what we are! Then we went to see former Faith members Mike and Paula Callahan, who also live in the Wilmington area, and Pat and Jo Marino, who now live in New Bern, NC. The Callahans and Marinos treated us like rock stars! It was so good to reconnect with them and to catch up on what has been happening in their lives. Last Sunday we worshiped with Mike and Paula at Myrtle Grove EPC in Wilmington.

As always, it was good to get away for some R & R. And good to come home again, just as it is good to be back here with you today.

As we resume our “Journey on the Romans Road” this morning, I invite you to follow along in your Bible or one of the Pew Bibles as I read from Romans 8:18-27. Let us give our full and reverent attention now to the reading of God’s holy Word.

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The Bible has much to say about suffering, because the Bible has much to say about life, and suffering is an inescapable, universal part of life. If you don’t know it yet, sooner or later you will learn that suffering of one kind or another comes into every life. And we should not be surprised when it happens to us or to someone we love. It comes, of course, in an almost infinite variety of shapes or forms –

- from cancer or another serious illness to the death of a spouse or child or parent;
- from chronic physical pain to the pain of betrayal, rejection, abandonment, or ridicule;
- from death of your marriage to the void of growing up without a dad or without a mom in your life;
- from the loss of your job to the loss of your home in a fire or flood or some other disaster;
- from a financial setback to an ongoing struggle with depression or mental illness;

- from regrets over the past to fears about the future or a burden for someone you love who is on the wrong road in life;
- from wounds suffered in war to the wounds of racial prejudice or discrimination;
- from injustice and its effects to hatred and violence;
- from poverty to persecution;
- from the violence and destruction of civil war and terrorism to targeted attacks on Christians and Christian beliefs;
- from the groaning of our bodies as they erode with time to the groaning of our hearts for an end to all the evil, pain, suffering, and sorrow of this fallen world.

The list could go on and on. In the here and now, in one way or another, every life is tinged with suffering. The Bible attests to it, and we know it to be true in our own experience.

I've preached on suffering a number of times over the years, most recently this past February as part of this series on Romans when we considered Paul's proclamation of the paradox of joy in suffering in Romans 5:1-5.

In today's passage (8:18-27), Paul focuses on the relationship between suffering and glory – that is, between the suffering that is an inevitable part of life in this world and the glory that is yet to come for all of us who are God's children through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, between the reality of the present and the promise of the future, between the "already" and the "not yet" of God's kingdom.

In the lives of Jesus' followers, says Paul, suffering and glory are inseparably connected. Any Olympic athlete can attest to the truth of the old adage "no pain, no gain." No matter how talented you are, there is a high price to be paid – in training, in sacrifice, in sweat and self-denial – in order to make it to the Olympics. Ask a gymnast like Simone Biles or Aly Raisman. Ask a swimmer like Michael Phelps or Katie Ledecky.

Just as "no pain, no gain" applies in the wide world of sports, "no suffering, no glory" is true in the spiritual realm of life. Not all suffering results in glory – if, in our suffering, we fail to look to God and learn to rely on Him (2 Corinthians 1:9) – but suffering is the necessary prelude to glory. It was true in the life of Jesus. It is true in our lives as well. As Peter testifies in 1 Peter 5:10, it is only "after (we) have suffered a little while" that we will enter the "eternal glory in Christ" to which God has called us. There is no glory in the life of a follower of Jesus without suffering. And no suffering is wasted in the life of one of God's children. There is always a purpose in it, even if we cannot see the purpose while we are going through it.

While suffering and glory are inseparable, Paul says unequivocally that they are not comparable. Just as Paul trumpeted the good news in Romans 8:1 that there is now "no condemnation" for those who are in Christ Jesus, here he announces that there is no comparison between the trials and troubles and hardships – the sufferings – of this life and the magnificence of the glory – *God's* glory – that will one day be revealed when God brings His gracious plan for us and the whole creation to complete fulfillment. No condemnation! And no comparison!

There are echoes of this passage in 2 Corinthians 4 and 5. Listen to what Paul says in 4:16-18: “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” *The Message* expresses it this way: “Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without His unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There’s far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can’t see now will last forever!

If we’re honest about it, we have to admit that the sufferings of this life hardly feel like “small potatoes.” They seem to us to be anything but “light and momentary.” They are often excruciation, devastating, and seemingly unbearable. If anyone besides Jesus understands what it means to endure suffering, you would think it is Paul. Not many people have gone through the kind of suffering he did. This is a man who was beaten with whips and rods, stoned, imprisoned, chained, shipwrecked, targeted for assassination, in constant danger, a man who experienced hunger, thirst, nakedness, and cold. Paul was not a wimp. Nor did he live a life of privilege. He knew what it was to suffer. And yet, he says, “our present sufferings” in this life “are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

This is not in any way to dismiss or diminish the suffering that is part of our common human experience. We know it can feel unbearable. Sometimes it reaches a point where we think we cannot endure it a moment longer. We have heartfelt compassion for others in their suffering. But Paul says that the intensity of our suffering in this life is infinitesimal in comparison with the immensity and intensity and immeasurable magnificence of the glory that is yet to come.

Suffering and glory are inseparably linked, but they are not comparable. Because we have not yet experienced the fullness of God’s glory, because the fullness of God’s glory is yet to be revealed, we must take the promise of future glory in faith. For, as Paul says, in 2 Corinthians 5:7, “we live by faith, not by sight.” By faith we believe that what God has in store for us is unimaginably greater than anything our finite minds can conceive, and incomparably greater than the suffering and hardships of this life.

Not only this, but we also believe that both the sufferings of the present and the glory yet to come involve not only us – not only humankind – but the whole creation as well. The whole creation was affected by the fall of man (Genesis 3). The effects of sin have tainted all of creation. Nature itself shares in the curse that was the consequence of Adam’s sin. “It was man’s sin,” as Ray Stedman said, “that put thorns on roses. It was man’s sin that made the animals hate and fear each other.... With the fall of man came the spread of fear, hostility, and hatred in the animal world, and the whole of nature testifies to it” (Stedman, *From Guilt to Glory, Vol. 1*, 289).

Just as nature shares in the effects of sin, so it will share in the glory to come at the revelation of God’s children (8:19, 21) and the renewal of all things. Until then, creation itself “waits in

eager expectation” (8:19). It is “standing on tiptoe,” as one writer (J. B. Phillips) put it, looking with intense desire and longing for the fullness of God’s glory to be made manifest. Until then, as Paul says in verse 22, the whole creation groans in pain like a woman in labor, eagerly awaiting the birth of a child.

Creation groans, because, as a result of Adam’s sin, it was subjected to “frustration” (NIV) or “futility” (ESV) (8:20) and is in “bondage to decay” (8:21), awaiting its liberation in the glorious day still to come when Jesus returns in glory and power and sets all things right. As it is, the world is not the way it was meant to be. The world as we know it is not the best of all possible worlds. Not only has sin polluted our souls, our lives and relationships, it has polluted the whole world and everything in it. But the world as we know it is not the way it will be in the future God has ordained for it. God’s plan for the world, you see, is not its total destruction but its transformation. And the transformation of the creation is tied to the transformation of God’s children – the called-out, forgiven, redeemed people of God, which includes you and me.

So creation groans. And so do we. As Paul says in verse 23, “we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as (God’s) sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Though we have a foretaste of the blessings of heaven through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who has come to take up residence in the life of every believer – in your life and mine – we long for heaven itself, to be in the presence of God in His glorious kingdom.

Until then, we groan. Why? We groan because life is hard. We groan because suffering and pain and sorrow and grief and loss are real. We groan because there is brokenness and disappointment and hurt and alienation and hate in the world. We groan because loneliness and poverty and hunger and war and disease and violence and deceit and greed and idolatry abound.

We groan because of the ravages of sin in our own lives, in the lives of people we love, and everywhere in the world around us. We groan because of the heartache we ourselves experience, and because of the heartache and hardships of others.

We groan because of the frailty and mortality of our bodies. None of us, you know, is as young as we used to be. Our bodies decay with time, our original parts wear out, pain of one sort or another comes to take up residence in our bodies, and every day we live brings us one day closer to the day of our death. Increasingly, as we age, we ache and creak and hurt and groan. It happens to everybody, if you live long enough. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul says that we groan in the clothing of our earthly bodies, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling (5:2, 4), which can only refer to the resurrection bodies we will receive on the glorious day yet to come.

But it is not only the decay of our body (Greek, *soma*) that causes us to groan. There is also our fallen nature (*sarx*), which hinders us from living the way we should. As John Stott points out, “we long for our *sarx* to be destroyed and for our *soma* to be transformed” (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 242).

For the Christian, this groaning, says Paul, this longing for something better, is intertwined with hope. Look at verse 24: “For in this hope we were saved.” Our salvation is not in doubt. It is an accomplished fact. If you know Jesus as Savior and Lord of your life, the best is yet to come. But the corollary is also true. If you do not know Jesus as Savior and Lord, if you are not a follower of Jesus, no matter how bad or good the circumstances and experiences of your life may be, the worst is yet to come. What you decide now about Jesus will echo in eternity. *Without* Jesus, you have nothing in eternity to look forward to, only the just judgment of God. *With* Jesus, you have a hope that will not disappoint you (Romans 5:3), because your salvation is assured, along with all the promises of God for eternity with Him.

So we groan, but we groan with hope. We groan in hope, because, as Paul wrote to Titus, “we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13) – whose coming again will usher in the fullness of God’s eternal kingdom.

Nobody hopes for what they already have. This is intuitively obvious. If you already have it, there is no need or reason to hope for it. But in Christ we hope for something we do not yet see or have, and so, as Paul says, “we wait for it patiently” (8:25). We wait for God’s time. We wait for God to fulfill His promises. And we know He will.

In the meantime, there is another who groans. *The creation* groans. *We* groan. And the *Holy Spirit* groans, too (8:26). The groaning of the Spirit is part of His ministry in us and for us. Paul reminds us in verses 26 and 27 of the Holy Spirit’s presence and active ministry in our lives. It is not a picture of the totality of the Spirit’s work in our lives, but this is one vital aspect of the Spirit’s ministry: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness” (8:26). Specifically, the Holy Spirit helps us in our praying – and who doesn’t need help in your praying? There are times when we just don’t know how to pray or what to pray for. There are times when words just fail us and we don’t know how to put our longings and desires and petitions into words. In those times, Paul says, “the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (8:26).

Let it be a great encouragement to you to know that the Holy Spirit groans with you. The Holy Spirit feels the burden of your weakness, your suffering, and the longings of your heart that you don’t know how to express. The Holy Spirit takes those inexpressible prayers to the throne of grace on your behalf and intercedes for you and me in accordance with God’s perfect will.

This, too, is a taste of the glory yet to come.

Do not be discouraged or disheartened by the suffering that comes into your life. It is an inescapable part of life. In his book *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*, John Piper observes that “life is not a straight line leading from one blessing to the next and then finally to heaven. Life is a winding and troubled road. Switchback after switchback.” What God wants is for us to “feel in our bones (not just know in our heads) that (He) is for us in all these strange turns. God is not just showing up after the trouble and cleaning it up. He is plotting the course and

managing the troubles with far-reaching purposes for our good and for the glory of Jesus Christ” (Piper, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*, 101-102).

In the midst of it all, God is with you. God is at work. In fact, as Paul says in the very next verse (Romans 8:28), “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.”

It is all for good, even the suffering and hardships we must go through. It is all for good, because we know the fullness of God’s glory and “the glorious freedom of the children of God” (8:21) are yet to come.

Suffering now, but incomparable, inestimable, unimaginable glory lies ahead. Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.