

The Connection Between Suffering and Hope: Romans 8:17-24, Isaiah 65:17-25

I promise that this Sunday's message is neither as long nor as theologically complex as last week's But in its brevity, it is still deep, profoundly deep. Because, in the second half of chapter 8, Paul explains – like nowhere else in the Bible that I know of – why God allows suffering in not only the life of believers but for everyone else and even the entire planet.

So if you have ever asked God "**Why?**"

- Why do good people suffer?
- Why does God let anyone suffer for any reason?

Today you may finally get an answer that will give you the **HOPE** that God wants to give you in all these situations!

I know it sounds strange, but instead of ending our suffering, God wants to give us the HOPE needed to live hopefully even in times of suffering; until such time when He can completely remake you. along with the rest of creation that has suffered along with us. . So you can understand how Paul get's to this point in his letter to the Romans, let's do a quick review of his argument thus far.

Paul begins his letter to the Romans by declaring that those who would live in a right relationship with God, must come to God by faith, accepting the redemption, reconciliation, and salvation that – out of His love for us – God has provided through his Son's sacrificial death in our behalf. A key verse for this whole letter would be

But God **proves** his love for us
in that while we still were sinners
Christ died for us.
Romans 5:8

Paul then explains why we could never save ourselves especially by just keeping the law. Since Adam we have always lived in a state of condemnation, but we never knew this – and could never be found guilty of this – until God gave us the LAW; both to restrain sin but to show us that as sinners, we have all missed the mark, all have fallen short of Gods required holiness. Since our sin has only earned us death, God provided another way by sending his son to redeem us from the penalty of sin. The key verse here is Romans 3:23

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;
they are now justified by his grace as a gift,
through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ...
Romans 3:23-24

Then, by chapter five Paul has shifted to a positive note, listing out the benefits that we get when we accept God's offered gift of salvation. Here is a brief

listing of all the benefits we get from our new relationship with God, by faith in his son Jesus Christ:

We are justified by God's grace as a gift
we have peace with God
we are reconciled to God
we will be saved by Christ's life
We are no longer condemned
The Spirit has set us free to live for God

That's a rather amazing list, demonstrating that when we accept God's gracious offer of salvation, our relationship with God undergoes an amazing transformation! Later on, Paul will summarize all this by saying *if God is for us, who can be against us!!* (Romans 8:31). But Paul closes this section with the comment...

All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God...
and if children, then heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ —
if, in fact, we **suffer** with him so that
we may also be **glorified** with him.
Romans 8:14-17

Whoa! What's this bit about "suffering" if we are now in God's family, and He has done all these wonderful things for us, **shouldn't He also take care of our suffering as well?**

Let me explain how God does this as well, says Paul, which brings us to verse 20:

for the creation was subjected to futility [by God] ...
in the **hope** that the creation itself will be set free ...
and will obtain the freedom of the glory
of the children of God. Romans 8:20-21

Think about what this verse is saying for a moment, as we back off for a moment to take a look at our planet from a human point of view.

From our perspective, we can see this planet is very lovely but also a rather badly messed up place. Not just because of what we humans have done to it in our rapacious quest for power and what we call "the good life." But on top of that there are cataracts, cancer, plagues, and arthritis; earthquakes and Hurricanes, raging fires, and drowning floods, not to mention madmen shooting out of hotel windows and mad dictators challenging the world with nuclear destruction or mad armies wantonly driving unarmed villagers out of their homes in ruthless acts of genocide. So, **If God loves us as much as He claims to, why does**

God allow all this evil, both human and planetary to continue; why doesn't God step in and do something?

Philosopher John Stewart Mill spoke for the spirit of our age; when he said considering the manifest daily presence in our world of pain, suffering, violence, and wickedness, **if there is a God, then he is either not great or not good.** Because if God is, as He claims to be, a "God of Love" while allowing all this suffering, then he must not be powerful enough to stop it: so God is not great. But if God is powerful enough to stop evil, yet does not do so, then He is not good. So Mill concluded that there is either no god, or none worth worshipping. BUT what Mill failed to figure in, was how human sin had entered into the planetary equation.

Human evil is of course always our own doing. Having been created in the image of God and given the ability to choose, God must let us also choose to do evil – largely without His interference – for the sake of giving us the opportunity to choose to do right. Somehow in the mysterious interworking of God's predestination with our free-will, if God were to design us so that we could only do good then we would not be in God's image any longer, we would only be self-deluded slaves who think we are free when we really are not (sort of like the human batteries in the Matrix – if you saw those movies). This allowing of evil to exist along with good is the same as needing darkness in order to see the light. If everything was all light, then we would be just as blind as if it were all dark; We need darkness to comprehend light, we need to know evil to understand good.

But as for the evil or suffering caused by the natural world – lightning strikes, and tornados – what we euphemistically label as "acts of God," Paul says, that God originally put such things in our world ("the curse") *in the **hope** that the creation itself would one day be set free* of all this along with the Children of God.

Back at the beginning, Adam's sin brought spiritual death (separation from God) upon all his children. In casting him out of the garden, God didn't explain to Adam why He cursed the ground but He said it was "*for thy sake*" (Genesis 3:17 KJV) Our Bible says God cursed the ground "*because of you,*" which makes it sound like punishment. **But Paul says that God's curse on the planet was not intent on punishing us but rather in the **HOPE** that causing such suffering would eventually lead to humanity's redemption and with them the entire planet's redemption.**

You might say that with humanity's spiritual death, God had to rewire the planet not to serve us as much as to drive us back to himself. The thorns, thistles, hurricanes and floods, heart attacks and cataracts, sweat of our brow, were to prove to us that we were not sufficient in ourselves to run our world. In contradiction to the serpent's lie, we would never in this way be like God – except in that we now know the difference between good and evil. And seeing the evil surrounding us should drive us back to a restored relationship with our creator.

Letting evil run loose in the world seems a rather stern form of discipline, but then again we are a rather stubborn people – always thinking ourselves self-sufficient, always forgetting

God in times of prosperity. So our both good and all-powerful, loving God let's suffering enter our lives in order to drive us back to Himself for the remedy: which is forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration of our relationship with our creator.

As Paul declared to the philosophers assembled on Mars Hill,

From one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live,

so that we would search for God ... and find him though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being' Acts 17:26-28

That's God's reason for allowing evil to continue in our world and that is God's hope for where it will drive us. But what about the suffering that we continue to face as God's children? Can't God just eliminate that? (*What an amazing evangelistic tool that would be, trust God and get cured of cancer*).

But the problem is of course that our physical lives still have to run their natural course. Even though we have been "saved" by Grace and have God's spirit living in our lives as the "first fruits" of what will one day be our full-redemption (this mortal body putting on immortality), our cursed physical bodies must live out their allotted time in our cursed physical world until that day when God calls an end to our times and then remakes us along with the new Heavens and new Earth in fulfillment of the assured HOPE that God had in causing such futility in the beginning.

So as God's child

- we are adopted but not yet home.
- We reconciled in relationship but not yet restored in body
- We have the first-fruits of God's Spirit now living in us and assuring us that we a "*children of God and joint heirs with Christ*" (8:17), but we have not yet received our full inheritance
- And while we have not yet received our inheritance it is being kept secure in Heaven for us by our Heavenly Father (1 Peter 1:3-6).
- And this gives us the same assured **HOPE** in the midst of our suffering that God had in bringing such frustration onto the planet in the first place.

To be blunt, if we never knew suffering, we would never know what it feels like to be in need of another's held, and we would never know the HOPE that our faith gives us, the same way we cannot know light without darkness.

Let me remind you of two more connections between suffering and hope. Back in chapter 5, Paul opened his section on the benefits of our restored relationship with God this way.

Please follow along with me in your own Bible or on the overhead (N.T. page 155 in pew Bibles),

Therefore, since we are **justified by faith**, we have **peace with God** through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and **we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.**

And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that **suffering** produces endurance, and **endurance** produces character, and **character** produces hope,

because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. and **hope** does not disappoint us, Romans 5:1-5

So while we wish it were otherwise, and one day again it will be, for the present, suffering is a necessary part of our growth process and when combined with faith it produces hope.

Because God has poured his love into us we can now have the same **assured hope** of the redemption and restoration of our suffering bodies – as God did back when He informed Adam that the ground was cursed *for his sake*. And you know what, our entire suffering planet is waiting for that same day as well: *when nothing will ever hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain* (Isaiah 65:25b).

Paul then concludes this section by stating that he considered *the sufferings of this present time* – and Paul certainly knew suffering – *are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed in us* (8:18). The glory of our eventual restoration will by far and forever overshadow whatever we are now suffering and that is the hope we have as God's child now.

Paul conclude that this **HOPE** we have in trusting God – even in the midst of our suffering – is also what saves us. For the righteous will live by **FAITH**. More on this next week. But for now, let's go to a take home.

Love sometimes allows even bad circumstances to happen because it hopes to cause a change for the better. Sometimes after warning them, we allow our child to touch the hot stove – so long as it is not too hot - so that they will learn to trust our teachings and not do such foolish acts of rebellion. As parents we try to punish our children not out of anger – but sometimes unfortunately anger does enter into it; we punish them to make them regret their evil deed and to encourage them to never do it again. God, our loving Father, works the same way with us. There is no getting around the fact that suffering is necessary to produce both and character and endurance in our lives. **Thus, it is a sad but necessary truth that suffering is a vital part of our growth process. And When combined with faith, our suffering can teach us hope.**

Our Bible teaches that the three most enduring characteristics in our world are: FAITH, HOPE and LOVE. And now you know how these three relate.

Back in the late 80's early 90's an eccentric millionaire constructed a completely sealed – self-sustaining dome environment in the desert of Arizona, named Biosphere 2, to test the possibility of living long term on places like Mars. The experiment did not succeed for long because of mostly human failings – the Biosphere crew were as eccentric as their creator – but they did learn some vital lessons about domed life. For instance the trees planted in the dome apparently grew quite well up to a certain height, at which point they snapped and fell over. After much investigation they concluded that because of the lack of wind inside the dome the trees did not develop the structural integrity to stand beyond a certain height. Who would have guessed that wind was needed to help trees grow strong. And as painful as this truth is, suffering serves the same purpose in our lives: to make us strong, to drive us back to reliance on God. And combined with the newfound hope that we have from God's indwelling Spirit now in our lives, we can join with Paul in rejoicing even in the midst of our suffering, its making us stronger, and encouraging our HOPE because, no matter what today holds, we know where one day we will be and what we will be in that place we can eternally call home: Children of God an joint hears with Christ.

So let's pray about this.