



In his talk entitled “The Sense of an Ending,” Jeremy Begbie tells a story about attending a worship service in a poor South African township. He tells how a few days before a tornado cut through that town, ripping apart fifty homes; killing five people. Not only that, the very night before, a gang ran down a 14-year-old, a member of the church’s Sunday school, and stabbed him to death. The pastor began his opening prayer: “Lord, you’re the Creator and the Sovereign, but why did the wind come like a snake and tear our roofs off? Why did a mob cut short the life of one of our own children when he had everything to live for? Over and over again, Lord, we’re in the midst of death.”

As he spoke, the congregation responded with a dreadful sighing and groaning. And then, once he finished his prayer, very slowly they all began to sing, at first very quietly, then louder. They sang and they sang, song after song of praise to a God who had come in the person of Jesus and suffered to give us a promise of glory. It’s like the singing gave the church a foretaste of what’s to come. The groaning wasn’t just the painful groaning of those who’ve suffered, but it was the beautiful groaning of those anticipating the glory to come.

In Romans 8:18–30 Paul describes something quite similar. Remember he’s been talking in Romans 8 about the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. He’s shown how the Spirit gives us the ability to put to death the deeds of the flesh, and how the Spirit bears witness with our spirit and by him we cry out as adopted children, “Abba, Father.” But then Paul said something rather curious in verse 17: As children of God we share in Christ’s sufferings so we may also share in his glory. Notice those two things: suffering and glory. They go hand in hand. And that’s the theme of today’s text.

Here, Paul gives us a perspective on suffering. Why do we all have to face up to it? How do we deal with it? We all suffer. We may suffer because of our faith in Christ. We may suffer just because we make poor choices that come back to haunt us. We may suffer just because we live in a fallen world with fallen people and bad stuff happens. We may suffer because these bodies of ours are subject to disease, injury and decay. Last week I had surgery on my hand. It’s not a big deal. I had what’s called a Trigger Finger. Believe it or not, it’s my middle finger. As a pastor, you don’t want your middle finger to get stuck! But even with something as insignificant as that, you feel vulnerable having surgery. You have to wear one of those silly gowns. They make

you sign your life way. They wheel you into the operating room. It’s all quite sobering. But this is life in a decaying body.

So as followers of Jesus we all suffer. And the first thing Paul wants us to know is that it’s all worth it.

It’s All Worth It

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).

When he says, “I consider...” he’s saying he’s thought this through carefully. Here’s a man who knows what it is to suffer. This is the guy who once wrote, *“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, 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 fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers”* (2 Cor. 11:24–26). I think all that would cause me to think it through carefully as well! Is it really all worth it? Absolutely! Notice he calls it our **present** suffering. Elsewhere, he calls it *“this light momentary affliction”* (2 Cor. 4:17). As believers, the glory to come far outweighs whatever we must suffer now. It’s the difference between a thimble of water and the Pacific Ocean!

The word “glory” is usually used in conjunction with the unapproachable and mighty manifestation of the immediate presence of God. The word carries with it the idea of unimaginable beauty and majesty, as well as terrifying holiness. But this glory we look forward to isn’t just something we’ll be in the presence of. He says this glory will be revealed “in us.” There’s a glory coming that’s so blindingly overwhelming it will transform everything in its wake, including us! Not only our bodies but our very nature and character will be dazzling, beautiful and holy as Jesus is! That’s why it’s all worth it.

But the reality is we don’t get to experience that yet. What we do experience is a deep longing. And that’s so great Paul goes on to describe how in our present experience we actually groan for it.

Life is Full of Groaning: Creations Groans

But it’s not just us. Starting in v. 19 he talks about what he calls “creation.” Look what he says.

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time (verses 19-22).

"Creation" here refers to the earth, both inanimate and animate, with the exception of human beings. He says it waits in eager expectation for us to be revealed. He uses a word that pictures creation stretching and craning its neck forward to see what's coming. Notice what creation is so eager to see. He says, we, the children of God, will be **revealed**. It's like that old TV show *Extreme Home Makeover* and how at the end there was always the big "reveal" where the family saw their glorious new house for the first time. The shocking thing is, **we** are the ones who'll be made over and revealed!

Meanwhile, he says creation was subjected to frustration. That means nature isn't what it ought to be, nor what it was meant to be. The word "frustration" means emptiness and futility. And it's become this way because "of the will of the One who subjected it..." That's talking about God. When Adam sinned, that affected not only human beings but the rest of creation. God said to Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you...it will produce thorns and thistle for you." Here in v. 20 Paul calls it "bondage to decay." Nature is caught in a continuous cycle of death and decomposition. The whole universe is deteriorating and running down. We see evidence in this drought we're still in, not to mention earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, avalanches, floods, volcanic eruptions, mosquitos carrying the Zika virus, bee stings and poison ivy. Death stalks the earth. It's all evidence of the creation being subjected to frustration. I mean, you can't even buy a dozen roses for your sweetheart on Valentine's Day without having to deal with the thorns!

But then he says creation itself will be liberated from this bondage to share in the freedom of the glory of the children of God. So not only will we be transformed to glory, but all creation as well. Can you imagine? There's so much beauty in nature now—oceans, mountains, valleys, forests—but imagine what it will be like then. The Bible talks about the new heavens and the new earth; the desert will burst into bloom and the lion will lay down with the lamb. It's in hope of all this that creation groans. Paul likens it to the pains of childbirth. Many of us have pictures in our minds of our wives after they've given birth. The baby is in their arms and mom is radiant. We don't think of our wives in labor. We don't reach into our wallets and say, "Hey, let me show you a picture of my Betsy groaning in labor. Look at that agony in her face!" No! Creation will one day be delivered from

its groaning and the difference between then and now will be the difference between agony and ecstasy.

Life is Full of Groaning: Believers Groans

But not only does creation groan, we groan. Look what he says.

Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently (verses 23-25).

The hardest part about my surgery was getting a shot in the palm of my hand, and believe me, I groaned! In this life, we'll never stop groaning. We groan because of our own physical frailty and mortality. Watching Peyton Manning last Sunday was kind of sad. He's not even close to what he used to be. We also groan because tragedy touches all of us. We groan because of the ravages sin makes in our lives and in the lives of those we love. I groan every morning I read the news. It's like when Jesus drew near the tomb of Lazarus, he groaned in his spirit, being so burdened by the reality of death and loss. He groaned even though he knew he'd soon raise Lazarus from the dead. So we groan in physical pain, or we groan in disappointment, or we groan in bereavement.

But there's a positive aspect to this. He says we groan "as those who have the first fruits of the Spirit." The first fruits point to the start of the harvest and the promise the full harvest would follow in due time. God gives us his Spirit to live within us and it's like we have a foretaste of the full glory to come. We have the love, joy and peace the Spirit brings. Through the Spirit, we grow ever so slowly holiness. But all the while we groan because it's incomplete and we want more.

Paul says what we're waiting for is our "adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies." We learned up in v. 15 we've already been adopted by God, so what does it mean that we're still waiting for it? He means there's an even richer experience of this child-Father relationship to come. It's like we've been legally adopted but we've yet to experience the fullness of our relationship with our new Father and we've yet to take on fully the family resemblance. In the same way, we've already been redeemed, but we still wait for the redemption of our bodies. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:53, "**For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies**" (NLT). This is what we're waiting for.

Paul is a realist. We have some of the goodies, but not all of them. This is the tension of the Kingdom of God which is already here, but it's also still to come in its fullness. We live in a middle place between the already and the not yet. So what do we do? We wait patiently. We live in hope. Make no mistake, the normal and

healthy Christian life is a life of groaning. There are too many Christians who think to be a real Christian you have to be grinning rather than groaning, so they wipe a smile on their face and pretend. This is why it's so important we're real with one another. The Bible says, bear one another's burdens. How can we do that if we're not real about our pain, grief, disappointments and even our sin?

Life is Full of Groaning: The Spirit Groans

So creation groans, and believers groan, but there's one more voice in this chorus of groaning, and it might surprise you — the Spirit groans. Look what Paul says.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God (verses 26-27).

If we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit there are times we can't pray. There have been times I've been so worried about one of my kids I couldn't bring myself to pray. When I stared into my father's eyes and watched him take his last breath on earth, I couldn't pray. Someday I'll get wheeled into an operating room for something far more serious than a Trigger Finger, and may not have the will to put two thoughts together in prayer. Sometimes we just don't know what to pray for. Do we pray for endurance to make it through the trial, or do we pray for deliverance from the trial?

In times like this, Paul says the Spirit helps us in our weakness. The word he uses for "help" indicates the Spirit lays hold of our weakness along with us and carries his part of the burden, like two people carrying a log, one at each end. The Spirit doesn't give armchair advice, he rolls up his sleeves and jumps in to help us. And one of the ways he helps us is with prayer. In our weakness we don't know what to pray for, but the Spirit of God within us does. Do you know the Spirit intercedes for you with wordless groaning? This isn't what's commonly called speaking in tongues because tongues can be understood and interpreted. No, these are wordless groans. But God the Father, who searches our hearts, interprets the Spirit's groans because he knows the mind of the Spirit. And the great thing is the Spirit's prayers directly align to the will of the Father, and so they're always answered.

Charles Spurgeon once wrote, "It's a mark of wondrous condescension that God should not only answer our prayers when they're made, but should make our prayers for us. That the king should say to the petitioner, 'Bring your case before me, and I will grant your desire,' is kindness. But for him to say, 'I will be your secretary. I will write out your petition for you. I will put it into proper words so that your petition shall be framed acceptably,' this is goodness at its utmost stretch."

That's precisely what the Spirit does for us in our weakness. He becomes our secretary, writing out our prayers for us, framing them acceptably and bringing them to the Father. So the great thing is, when we can't pray, or we don't know what to pray, the Spirit prays within us, and the Father hears and answers. When **our** prayers are **not** answered, we can take comfort in the truth that the Spirit's prayers **are** answered, and he knows what's best for us.

Nothing can Thwart God's Purpose to Glorify Us

Creation groans, we groan, the Spirit of God groans. It's all part of suffering and glory. In the midst of this there are things we don't know. We don't always know why we're going through a difficult time. We don't always know how things will turn out. We don't always know how to pray. But there's one thing we **do** know. We know nothing can thwart God's good purpose in our lives. Look what Paul says next.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified (verses 28-30).

Here, Paul gives us an unshakable promise to comfort us in the midst of our suffering and groaning: nothing can thwart God's good purpose in our lives. Look what's packed into this promise:

- He says, God works. God is at work in your life. It doesn't matter what you think, how you feel or what's going on in your life. If you're a child of God, he's at work!
- But not only that, God works for your good. It doesn't say all the things that happen to you are good, but God is at work for good. Some things are terrible! That's why we groan. Bad things happen to us, but God is always at work for your good.
- And he's at work for your good in all things. No matter what happens—good, bad, ugly, whatever—God works for good in **all** things! That doesn't mean "everything will turn out okay." But it means you don't need to fear anything that comes your way because God will somehow use it for your good. So if there's some good thing God has withheld from you, in reality you didn't need it. Or if you feel your life has been ruined by some bad thing, in reality God is using it for good.
- But this promise doesn't apply to everyone. He says, God does this for those who love him and are called according to his purpose. You may not like this, but this is only a promise for certain people. How do you know if you love him and are called according to his purpose? We've learned in Romans it starts with recognizing we're lost, full of sin and under condemnation. Then we believe in God's Son, Jesus, who

came to rescue us and reconcile us to God through his death and resurrection. Then God sends his Spirit who pours God's love into our hearts, and that overflows in love for God. Still, we don't always feel like we love God, nor do we always act like we love God, but in the midst of our suffering and groaning our love for God is tested and refined and we learn to love God for who he is in himself and not just for what he gives us.

But what is God's good purpose for us? What can we confidently expect God to do "in all things"? Verse 29 tells us **"to conform us to the image of his Son."** It's that family resemblance he's bringing about by placing some of his own DNA inside of us. Notice he says, **"that we might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters."** Everything that happens to us, both good and bad, is working to make us more loving, true, wise, strong, good and joyful, just like our brother Jesus. He's the master design form and everything that happens to us is meant to shape, sculpt, polish, melt, and smooth us into the mold of Christ's perfection.

Paul wants us to be sure of that, and so he lays out the process by which it takes place, from start to finish. He mentions five things God has done:

- First, God foreknew us. Of course, God knows the future, but this means more than that. In the Bible, when it says God "knows" someone, it means he's set his love on him. It's like God fore-loved us. He set his love on us before the beginning of time.
- Second, God predestined us. God also set a destination for us, which he planned ahead of time—to be with him and be conformed into the image of his Son. God chose us for this glorious purpose long before we chose him.
- Third, God called us. How do we know God called us? In 1 Thessalonians 1:4–5a he explains how we know. He says, **"We know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you."** How could he know that? **"Because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction."** Paul preached the gospel to many people, but only those who respond with conviction and faith are called.
- Fourth, God justified us. We're made right and put into a right relationship with Jesus by faith in his death and resurrection. Notice justification isn't an isolated event, but it's linked to the whole plan and purpose of God from eternity.
- Finally, God glorified us. Even though this hasn't happened yet, he puts this in the past tense, like it's a done deal. It's

such a sure thing you could say it's already accomplished. One day, all your sin will be eradicated. One day, you'll be like Jesus!

Some have called this the unbreakable chain. We stand now in the middle of the chain as those who've heard the call and believed the promise and been justified before God. But we look back down the chain and see that from eternity God fore-loved us and predestined us for this. We can also look up the chain and see in eternity God has also glorified us. All of this means nothing we can do can thwart God's good purpose for us. God **will** bring glory out of groaning.

It's like the story of Pinocchio. Remember the lonely old wood-carver named Geppetto who carves a little puppet boy and names it Pinocchio. He dreams of how wonderful it would be to have a real son. Upon seeing the wishing star in the sky, he wishes Pinocchio would become real. That night, the Blue Fairy brings Pinocchio to life and instructs the wooden boy to never tell a lie because when he does his nose will grow. But although he has life, he isn't fully alive; he's still made of wood. He longs to be a "real" boy.

One day Pinocchio discovers a gigantic whale has swallowed Geppetto. He dives in the sea to save his father. After helping free him from the belly of the whale, Pinocchio drowns and is washed to shore. Geppetto is brokenhearted and kneels over his boy sobbing. But then the Blue Fairy speaks above Pinocchio, "Awake, Pinocchio, awake." Pinocchio is transformed from a wooden boy into one who's fully alive, complete with flesh and bones. He sits up and rubs his eyes. He sees Geppetto weeping over his bed and he calls out, "Father! Why are you crying?" Unable to comprehend what's happened, Geppetto answers, "Because you're dead, Pinocchio." Pinocchio replies, "No, I'm not. I'm alive. See? I'm real. I'm a real boy." Finally Geppetto can see the truth. What looked like death and sorrow was just the opposite. Pinocchio is at last complete.

And that's our story as well. We groan to be more than what we are; to be real. God takes us through this process, which is often quite painful. But what looks like death and sorrow is just the opposite because God is using it to make us complete and bring glory out of groaning.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1418–19FC