

EAGER ANTICIPATION

by Steve Zeisler

I was meditating this week on Romans 8:18:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

As I was reading the newspaper yesterday morning, that verse was in my mind. Consider the contrast between Paul's words and three items that were on the front page. A blind Muslim cleric who inspired terrorist bombings in New York was detained amid the shouts of his followers promising bloody reprisal. A sixty-seven-year-old man who had never married and had no children, no friends, and few acquaintances, who had lived alone in a trailer with the curtains drawn, was found dead surrounded by more than \$100,000 worth of model cars in cellophane packaging that had never been opened. And a handsome newlywed husband, loved by a wide circle of friends for his capabilities and generosity, died shielding his wife with his body from a crazed gunman in San Francisco. The world is filled with suffering people who often spread suffering to others. Yet in contrast the apostle says, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

The eighth chapter of the book of Romans is the central text in all of the Bible that makes plain the ministry of the Spirit of God to us. The opening verses that we considered last week speak of the power of the Spirit to release us from the slavery that fear causes when we find ourselves fighting a losing battle with our sinful nature. The subject before us this morning is suffering.

Let's go back to Romans 8:15 to set the context for this material: "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs---heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." This testimony has encouraged believers who have encountered it in every generation, the marvelous witness of the Spirit with our spirit making us sure that we are children of God. We are not children of God who are at some great distance from him; but we are children who can approach him and call him "Daddy," the most intimate and loving term for a father who cares for his child. In addition, Paul goes on to say that we are children who will inherit what is their father's. We are co-heirs with Christ. Our older brother Jesus Christ has won the victory for us, we are united with him, and the inheritance of everything he will receive is our inheritance as well.

But then Paul insists on facing the interim: "...we are co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." Though we are those who call our heavenly Father "Daddy" and have ahead of us an inheritance filled with beauty, there is a time between now and the end that we must get through. Because Jesus himself is living in his own people, and his heart is broken when we who are his suffer persecution and other hurts, he is still suffering in this world through his own. Therefore we suffer together with him as we wait for the end. The Scriptures tell us clearly that we have everything already, and yet we don't yet have everything.

And then Paul speaks the wonderful word of verse 18: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

TWO TRUTHS

There are two great truths at the heart of this passage that are both very important for us to remember about

suffering. First, as we just saw, our destiny as Christians is wrapped up with Christ, and so we suffer with him. It is frequently the experience of believing people that it is our very sufferings that draw us near to Christ. We think we can handle life without him, and it is the hardship and hard blows and difficult treatment that make us draw near to the Lord. And he does not abandon us in the midst of it. He is available to help us.

The other great truth about suffering is that it is not without purpose. Suffering is going to take us to the place we want to be ultimately, and that is glorification. One of the most awful things about deep suffering is the fear that nothing beyond all the anguish exists. But these sufferings are not to be compared with the glory that is coming, however hard it is right now. The analogy that Paul will use later in the passage is that of birth pangs. I have heard mothers testify as to how difficult the contractions and the struggle of labor are and yet how quickly they are forgotten when the child is in their arms. The child's beauty, softness, and gentleness make the hardship worth it.

Let me ask you to think just a moment about what suffering is. Suffering is not the same thing as pain. Pain can be, and in fact very often is, a good thing in our experience in that it puts necessary limits on us. Perhaps you have seen a child put his hand on a hot object. If there were no pain to make the hand recoil its flesh would be destroyed. Pain makes us pull back so we do not experience greater harm. What qualifies something as suffering is the heartache that goes with pain, limitation, and difficulty that strike us as wrong. Suffering is pain that seems tragic and without any benefit.

In the examples I mentioned from yesterday's newspaper, the young husband by all accounts was an attractive, vital and giving sort of man. He threw his body across his wife to shield her from gunfire, and his life was forfeit. That wife will wake up today or tomorrow in a hospital with bullet wounds in her shoulder, and she will hurt not just physically, but she will remember the man she was married to for only a few months, with whom she looked forward to sharing the rest of her life. He is dead, and she will suffer his loss.

There are times when death does not cause suffering (may even be a time of joy). We're told in Genesis 25 that Abraham lived to a good old age; he had a full life. He was surrounded by his family, he had done everything in life that there was to do, and he died with a degree of happiness and the approval of everyone around him. Death isn't always tragic. But when it is violent, untimely, and violating suffering results.

You may have at times awakened with aches and pains in your body, having done something noble to achieve them---catching the game winning touchdown, or hiking a hard trail to alake in the Sierras. You could spend the next day hobbling but grateful for the experience, and you would do it all again if you had the opportunity. Someone else might wake up bruised and remember a terrible beating. It was not only physical hurt but rejection and hatred. And the beating had no good purpose. These bruises, because of the context in which they were experienced, produced suffering.

GROANS ACCOMPANY SUFFERING

Paul is saying here that Jesus has to suffer still, that he will be rejected in every generation, and therefore his people must hurt and be willing to walk with him.

The term groaning is used three times in this passage we are about to read. Paul is going to say that the creation groans, that we believers groan, and that the Spirit of God deep inside us groans. This word speaks of a heavy awareness of how wrong this life is. There will be suffering for believers and we can't deny that, but we can see its positive end and trust the Lord to walk alongside us in the midst of it.

There are unbelieving alternatives in the world to the groaning that we are called to here. One is to rage, challenge, revolt; to insist on having one's rights, fight against all the restrictions, and grab the world by the throat and make it do what you want it to do. But it never works. No one is ever capable of banishing suffering.

Another unbelieving option is to withdraw into some kind of mystical experience in which you can imagine yourself floating above the world, disengaged from the world and its suffering, perhaps by the use of drugs or by some tough shell that you pull around yourself. Remember Paul Simon's lyrics:

I am a rock, I am an island...
And a rock feels no pain,
And an island never cries.

It is saying, "I will refuse to let this world touch me." But that doesn't work either.

What we are called to do as Christians is to recognize that between now and the end there are going to be difficulties, some of which can be profoundly hurtful. But we will groan in them, sigh, heartsick about a world dominated by sin. We will feel the hurt, and are certain of the companionship of Christ. There is no escaping and no fixing it by our own efforts. And we will see the end before us.

THE CREATION WAS SUBJECTED TO FRUSTRATION

Let's consider what we are told here about groaning. Verses 19-22:

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons 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 glorious freedom 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.

There is poetry in every language and every culture that gives the natural world a personality. Psalm 98 speaks of the rivers' clapping their hands and the mountains' singing. Elsewhere in Scripture it talks about the hills' skipping, the trees' clapping, the morning stars' singing together, and so on, giving creation a personality. That is the poet's way, and here in this passage it is the apostle's way, of telling us something about ourselves. It is true that when Christ returns and sets everything right again, the natural world will be given all its beauty, purity, and abundance back again; the natural world will be glorified when the glorious freedom of the children of God is made plain. But what he is saying here as he imagines creation to be straining forward, looking to that day, is really about our experience.

Whenever we think of a ruined creation; a scarred, polluted, damaged, and depleted natural world; we are reminded of the Garden of Eden. A ruined physical world is a testimony to innocence lost. Remember what the Lord God said to Adam as a result of his sin in Genesis 3: "Cursed is the ground because of you." And ever since then, the human race has blighted the planet. You can hike to the most remote locales and find beer cans and cigarette butts marring the beauty of what God has made. Air, water, and land are all contaminated. We see wildlife destroyed by the thoughtlessness of human beings. We have unleashed forces of destruction in nature, floods and fires and other terrors, because of our intervention in re-routing water, tearing down forests, and so on.

So the natural world is in anguish because the ground has been cursed by the sin of humanity. And this passage reminds us that we wish for the days of innocence, paradise lost if you will. There is something in every man and woman's heart that can imagine purity, unscarred beauty, and even relationships that are filled with nothing but honor and blessing and joy, although we have never experienced these things. There is a kind of haunting and sad music that reminds us of the beauty and wonder that should have been but are nowhere to be found.

I have been reading a book called *Peculiar Treasures* by Frederick Buechner this week. This is his description of Eve many years after she had been banished from the garden of Eden:

It was only once in awhile at night, just as she was going off to sleep with all of her usual defenses down, that her mind drifted back to the days when because there was nothing especially important to do, everything was especially important. When too good not to be true hadn't turned into too good to be true. When being alone was never the same as being lonely.

Then sad and beautiful dreams overtook her and she would wake up homesick for a home she could no longer name to make something not quite love with a man whose face she could not quite see in the darkness at her side.

It is that wish that we could have things right again that rises up in us when we imagine the creation to be groaning. We can never be innocent again, and there is a heartbreak, a form of suffering, in all that is lost.

It is important to hear clearly what Paul is saying in this section as he identifies the groaning of creation. At the entrance to the Garden of Eden, God placed an angel with a flaming sword to forbid Adam and Eve from entering there again. Once they were banished from the Garden they could not go back by their own efforts. And that is true of us as well. It is important and honoring to God for us to act on behalf of the environment. Yet as much as we want to intervene and restore what has been lost, we will not completely succeed. In the end, what is going to bring about innocence and beauty is for a remade human race to be displayed for what it is. The most important work of all is the work of the gospel. What the creation is waiting for to be liberated from its bondage and decay and saved from its futility is the glorious freedom of the children of God.

WE HOPE FOR WHAT WE DO NOT YET HAVE

Verses 23-25 speaks of the second groaning:

Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, 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 he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Not only does creation groan, but we ourselves groan. We have the Spirit of God, the firstfruits of the harvest. We have tasted of what it is like to know God and are able to pray, "Ab ba, Father." But what we haven't yet heard is his voice speaking clearly back. The child is comforted by the presence of his Father, but he can't see his face yet. There is still what Paul calls in 1 Corinthians a dark glass. We see him as if through a smoky glass; we can't see everything yet. We know the peace of God and the enlivening presence of the Spirit, and we have seen his power at work in us, but our adoption as sons is not done yet.

Paul's warning here is very important: Don't settle for this world. If you have what you hope for, you are no longer hoping. If you have decided that it is okay to be sort-of redeemed and not quite as bad off as you used to be, a little bit happier and not as dominated by sin as you once were---you have made some progress, and that's the most a person can hope for---if that is who you are in life, don't let yourself stay there. We have only tasted, not ingested, a glorious meal. So there is a groaning, a sense of suffering that goes with seeing ourselves as we are and wishing that we were stronger and wiser and kinder and more loving.

Again, Frederick Buechner writes on Sarah, the wife of Abraham:

Laughter is what the Lord himself is talking about when he says that on the day he laid the cornerstone of the earth, the morning stars sang together and all the angels of God shouted for joy. And it is what the rafters rang with when the prodigal came home and his father was so glad to see him he almost had a stroke, and they began to make merry and kept on making merry until the cows came home. It is what Jesus means when he stands in that crowd of cripples and loners and oddballs and factory rejects and says, "Blessed are you, those that weep now, for you shall laugh." Sarah and her husband had had plenty of hard knocks in their time and there were plenty more of them still to come. But at that moment when the angel told them they had better start dipping into their old age pension for cash to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they had ever had hadn't been half wild enough.

There is something to come that we can't even imagine in our wildest dreams, so we must not settle for less, but groan and follow our Lord as he is bringing it about in our experience.

THE SPIRIT HELPS US IN OUR WEAKNESS

The third groaning is the groaning of the Spirit. Verses 26-27:

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 with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

Prayer is that which aligns us rightly with God. When we pray about ourselves, we are reminding ourselves that God is interested in us. In our prayers we are putting ourselves consciously in his presence. He communicates with us and we are changed. Prayer changes us more than it does anything else. It puts us in a place to both appreciate and hear God, to think his thoughts with him, to be sure that we matter to him and what we pray about matters to him.

But having to live with that which we can't explain, which makes no sense to broken people, can cause tremendous weakness to the point that we don't even know how to pray. We find ourselves inarticulate in the presence of God. We don't even know how to say, "Thank you," or "Help." It can get so hard that we don't know which direction to turn. And then Paul says that the Spirit of God, the living presence of God himself in us, prays in a language that no human speech can ever utter. It is too profound, its insights too deep. The Spirit groans with us. He speaks of us and he is within us, and he aligns us with God the Father.

To conclude, let me share with you a quote from C.S. Lewis' famous monograph *The Weight of Glory*:

Ah, but we want so much more---something the books on aesthetics take little notice of, but the poets and mythologies know about it. We do not merely want to see beauty, though God knows that is bounty enough. We want something else that can hardly be put into words---to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why the poets tell us such lovely falsehoods. They talk as if the west wind could really sweep into a human soul, but it can't. They tell us that the beauty born of a murmuring sound will pass into a human face, but it won't, or at least not yet... The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last.

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