Present Suffering, Future Glory
Romans 8:18-25

If I were to ask you, 'life: is it filled with joy or sorrow? Laughter or tears?' What would you reply? You'd probably say, 'both', wouldn't you?

And the Bible is very realistic about that. Just in this Chapter 8 of Romans alone, Paul begins by telling us that because of all that Jesus has done for us, even though we still struggle with sin, we no longer stand condemned. And he says that, because of God's Spirit at work in our lives, we can experience real victory and freedom from sin, and have great confidence and assurance that we are God's beloved children.

In other words, we can begin to live the kind of abundant life Jesus promised to those who trust him.

And yet, look how Paul ended last week's passage: we are, he says, 'heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, *provided we suffer with him* in order that we may also be glorified with him' (Romans 8:17).

So, we all want the confidence, assurance, victory, freedom and, ultimately, glory God promises, but, what we get along the way as well, is suffering.

And in today's passage, in fact to the end of the chapter, Paul takes a deeper dive into those twin realities of the Christian life: the joy and the sorrow, the suffering and the glory. So that's what we're going to look at: the problem, the promise, and the path to walk between the two.

The Problem of Present Suffering
Verse 18: 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.'

So, this period that we live in, the span of your life, this present time, he says, is marked by suffering. And not just on an individual level, but on a cosmic scale.

Verse 20, 'For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it.' And the word Paul uses for *futility* is the same word the Septuagint - the Greek translation of the Old Testament - used to translate the word that keeps recurring in Ecclesiastes: *hevel:* meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless; vanity of vanities, everything is vanity.

And read Ecclesiastes - or just live life - and it's that sense that the world is not as it should be. That things don't work as they should. That creation is out of kilter, out of sync. And you see that on a major scale in earthquakes, landslides and floods. But you also see it on the minor - that you can work hard tending your little garden, but leave it for a few weeks and weeds infest it. Or you build up a team at work, only for the bosses to cut it down. And you think: this shouldn't happen, the world shouldn't be like this. What's the point?

As one writer puts it, it's 'the existential absurdity' of life… and death… and everything in between.

But of course, our sense that things are not as they should be tells us something, doesn't it? That deep down we have a sense for how things *should be*. We get angry at injustice, and that tells us there is such a thing as justice. We see children suffering and dying from disease or war and think, 'this is not right'; so there is a right.

As CS Lewis puts it in Mere Christianity: 'My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.'

And Paul is saying, the futility of creation is alien to it. The line should be straight, and it was straight - but someone has made it crooked. Someone has subjected it to futility.

And the question is: Who was that? Answer: God. Because in Genesis 3 we're presented with the fall out of humanity's rebellion against God, as God curses the created order: "Cursed is the ground because of you… thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you…by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:17-19).

And farmers and gardeners know, when God talks of thorns and thistles he means it. But it's also a metaphor. You pour hours of work into something, only to see it fail. You try and live a good life - but die young, while the guy who couldn't care less about living a good life ends up enjoying a long and pleasure-filled retirement.

It is, Paul says in v21, creation's 'bondage to corruption'. Or, as other translations put it, decay. As one writer puts it, (Stott), it's decline, decay, death, and decomposition. And you go out for a hike and the sheer scale of the mountains, and the song of the birds, and the joy of getting to do it with friends, the beauty of the world, takes your breath away. But only if you forget all the pain and suffering of the world. Verse 22: 'For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.'

But it isn't just cosmic, it's individual. Verse 23, 'And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly.' So creation groans, and we groan. Why? Because we're experiencing 'the sufferings of this present time' (v18).

The question is though, what are those sufferings? What qualifies?

Well, go back to v17, where Paul says 'we suffer with him,' with Christ. So Paul is thinking of any hard thing these Christians in Rome, or you and I today, have to endure because you're a Christian. Anything from the low grade mockery of friends or colleagues, to the loss of life or livelihood or life. Which is what his original readers faced.

And if you're a teacher, you're probably experiencing that at some level - because you see how every other ideology is platformed at school, but Christianity? No, that's out of bounds. And you raise that, and your view point is dismissed. Or for any of us, it might be the loneliness you feel when non-Christian family members mock or criticise the faith, and you feel inadequate to defend it.

Or maybe if you're a student, you see your non-Christian friends all coupling up and partying into the night, and getting into bed with each other, and you feel like you don't belong. Because you don't belong.

And yet, the word Paul uses for sufferings is the same one he used in chapter 7 for 'sinful passions' (7:5). And the fight against sin involves its own suffering. And fail in that fight, and the shame and

guilt you feel is of another kind. So you suffer when you fight and you suffer when you fail. It's the sufferings of this present age.

But so too is anything you have to endure because this world we live in is broken. You see, in v22 Paul describes how 'the *whole* creation has been groaning *together*.' And you're a part of that creation. So when you lose your job, or struggle to find one, you might not just suffer financially but psychologically. When a relationship is strained and it feels like you just can't communicate and you keep talking past one another - you feel the pain of that; or if you watch as people you love make decisions you grieve - it hurts. It's the sufferings of this present age.

And then there are our bodies. The sufferings of cancer and chemo and an endless list of lesser issues. There's the fact that we live in an age - this present age - that idolises image and appearance over character - which means you can look in the mirror and you're a child loved by God, but you don't like what you see.

Or maybe you just feel the relentless decline of age - and your body doesn't do what you want it to do, what it used to do. And shadow, and reality, of death overshadows us and those we love.

And with the whole of creation, we groan in what one writer calls 'a collective lamentation'.

And yet…

Because there are *groans* and there are *groans*, aren't there? Look again at what Paul writes, v22, 'For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together *in the pains of childbirth* until now.'

When I was a junior doctor, my on-call bedroom was just off a corridor that linked the maternity ward, were mums gave birth, to the acute children's wards where we looked after kids with life-threatening disease. And sometimes, when I finally got to bed, I'd lay down, and I could hear the screaming coming from the maternity ward - as another mother was about to give birth.

Now, I know I'm a guy, but the way we respond to a mother screaming in labour is very different from the way we'd respond if that screaming was coming from the children's cancer care ward, isn't it.

Because that would be the screams of death and disease. But the mum in labour, her pain is real, but they're the pains, the groans, of childbirth, of new life on it's way.

And your suffering, and creation's groaning, are those birth pains, Paul is saying: evidence that something wonderful is coming. That like a mother experiences *the most intense* pain, only to hold this beautiful bundle in her arms, and look at what she has brought into the world, and think it was worth it, so one day we will look back on our suffering and think the same.

You see, every time you see the news of another landslide, earthquake, flood, or war, and think: 'The world should not be like this'. The Bible says, correct. It shouldn't be like this. But atheism tells you, 'nope, sorry, this is life. Nature red and tooth and claw. So suck it up.' But deep down you know that's wrong. You know the line's crooked. But what does that tell you? There is such a thing as straight.

And that world we all know should be, the world we all long for, is coming, Paul says.

The Promise of Future Glory
Go back to v18: 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us.'

Look what Paul doesn't say. He doesn't say: 'look, in comparison to the life you're currently experiencing, the one to come is going to be an upgrade, so keep your chin up.' It's, 'the life that is coming your way is in a totally different league to what you're currently experiencing.'

And suffering will be transformed into glory. And when Paul thinks glory, he's thinking Old Testament, Hebrew, God-given and God-derived glory - a word that comes from the word for *weight*. Something so heavy, so full of meaning, so concrete and so tangible, so opposite from the meaninglessness and vanity of futility, and yet so filled with beauty, that it far outweighs anything else.

And that's not Paul making light of present suffering. I mean, this man *knew* what it was to suffer, and to grieve. It's that the weight of wonder to come outstrips everything. It's why he writes in 2 Corinthians: 'For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.' (2 Cor 4:17)

So what is that glory? Well, he is sparse on the details. It's as if he gives us the frame and the outline and leaves us to paint in the picture. Why? Because in some ways each of our suffering is unique - so what each of us is longing for may subtly differ. But whatever it is, that too will be made good, Paul is saying.

Firstly, v18, the glory will 'be revealed to us.' So you are not going to be absorbed into some eternal oneness of non-existence. You will see, and you will know, and you will experience the putting right of all things. Including in yourself. Because, in v17, Paul said that we will be glorified with Christ. Which means the day is coming when you will be as beautiful and as whole and as complete as him.

Secondly, v19, 'the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.' So part of the glory to come is that one day you will be vindicated. Whatever the world or your enemy says about you now, however much you've struggled and fought and, at times, failed in your sin, the day is coming when the wraps will be taken off, and all will see: you really are a beloved child of God. And you weren't stupid to stay faithful to him. And you've not wasted your life, or your resources in service of his work. Your accuser will be silenced, but so too will your doubts.

You see, in the previous passage Paul spoke of us being adopted as sons *now*, in this life; but here, in v23, he says 'we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly *as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons*.' In other words, our adoption is future. So is Paul contradicting himself? Can he not remember what he wrote a few verses back? No. It's that what God has started, he will see through to completion, and it won't just be the Spirit witnessing to our spirit that we are God's children - Romans 8:16 - it's that God is going to declare it to the whole of creation.

And the work of the Spirit in your life now is just the first fruits. What are first fruits? They're the first fruits of a harvest that signal the full abundance of harvest is coming. But they're also a

foretaste of that abundant harvest to come. And if you're a Christian, you've tasted something of the new creation. You've tasted something of the work of the Spirit and power of the age to come. And it tastes good! So if this is just a foretaste, imagine the feast that lies ahead!

Because aren't there days when you long for more of God? When you wish you could feel his presence more closely, hear him more clearly, love him more dearly. And as CS Lewis would say, those desires would not exist if the means to meet them did not also exist. That if you find yourself with desires that nothing in this world can satisfy, then you were made for another world. And Paul is saying, that world is coming.

And with it, thirdly, 'the redemption of our bodies' (v23). And so Christianity is not about some gooey, floaty, disembodied, sitting on cloudsy, harp-playing future that none of us want. This is about you - and your physical body - being more glorious that you could ever imagine.

I mean, this present age is a body obsessed age, isn't it? Whether it's weightless drugs, or wellness culture, or looksmaxxing, our bodies matter. And losing some weight is good. And getting fit is good. And thinking you need to get a chiseled jaw line is less good. But however good any of these things are, the external stuff only goes so far.

In contrast, what God is going to do will be far deeper and far more glorious. So much so that in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul describes it as the difference between a seed dropped into the ground - your current body - and the harvest that grows from it. That like a magnificent oak tree comes from an acorn, or the most beautiful rose comes from a seed - your body, the seed, matters. But it's nothing compared to what you will be.

And aches and pains, and anxiety and depression, and cancer and chemo will be gone, and, v21, 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God' will be yours.

But not just yours. The whole created order will be enveloped in that glory. Verse 21, 'The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.'

And the Old Testament prophets use image after image to spark our imaginations of what that could be like: of desert places rejoicing and blooming like a crocus; of wildernesses running with water; of mountains and hills breaking out into song, and of trees clapping their hands; of the lion lying down with the lamb; of death being swallowed up forever; and of God himself wiping away every tear from every face.

What is that? It's the curse being reversed. It's Eden being restored. It's the pain of labour being followed by the joy of childbirth. It's the sufferings of this present age being swallowed up in glory. Isaiah 65:17: "For behold [God says], I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered."

Present trials, future glory. The thing is - we live in the in-between times. So how do we do it?

The problem, the promise and…

The Path of Patient Hope

Verses 24-25: ‘For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, *we wait for it with patience*.’

And if you’re English, hope is a wishy-washy kind of word, isn’t it? Like ‘I hope my train isn’t late. But I’m in Germany, and this is the Deutsche Bahn, so it probably will be.’

But when the Bible uses the word hope, it means a rock-solid expectation that this thing you are hoping for will happen. And it’s not happened yet, but boy, o boy, it will.

And it’s knowing that means our present sufferings are not worth comparing to what’s to come. Because if glory means heavy, and weighty, put future glory in the scales opposite present sufferings and there is no contest!

Which is why Paul says, v19, that ‘The creation waits with eager longing.’ It’s as if the whole created order - the mountains and rivers, the trees and fields, the birds and fish, are all standing on tip-toe (if they have them!), craning their necks - Is it time now?!

Because when God subjected creation to futility, he didn’t do it in a fit of spite. Verse 20 again, ‘But because of him who subjected it, *in hope*.’ And embedded into the curse of Genesis 3 is a promise. A promise of another child birth, of a Son to be born, of an offspring to come, who will undo the curse and defeat the enemy. Genesis 3:15 as God addresses the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heal.”

And Lord Jesus came as that serpent crushing, dragon slaying Offspring. And how did he do it? By being crushed himself. By entering this present age, and suffering in our place, and taking upon himself the curse that was ours to bear.

And sin and death leave us hopeless, but the Lord Jesus was raised to restore our hope. Because his resurrection tells us, sin and suffering will not have the last word. And elsewhere Paul tells us that Jesus’ resurrection was the first fruits of our resurrection. And when you know *that* future, the redemption of our bodies, the way you look at the present changes, and your heart will be filled with hope.

And that won’t just give you peace and joy in the midst of suffering, it’ll give you courage and purpose. Or as Paul calls it here ‘patience’, perseverance. Because, is it worth the cost of being a Christian if this life is all there is? No. But what if this life is not all there is? What if your desires really are pointing you to a greater reality? What if there really is such a thing as a straight line? Then any suffering we face now is worth it. In fact, it’s not worth comparing to what is to come. So patience, perseverance grows.

So if in the days to come you feel like quitting, don’t. Instead, as Jesus said, ‘straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near’ (Luke 21:28).

Or maybe life is good right now, and you’re not suffering - so thank God. And take a moment to reflect, in the light of what’s to come, how are my priorities doing? What am I giving weight to? And is that consistent with the weight of glory yet to come?