Help, Certainty, Purpose
Romans 8:26-30

We're working our way through Paul's letter to the Romans, and we're taking our time looking at chapter 8. Firstly, because it's so packed full of truth that if we tried to do it all in one go, we would miss stuff, or like someone eating a whole box of amazing chocolates, you'd get spiritual indigestion.

But secondly, because Paul's addressing the realities of life as a Christian. That life can be full of joy but at the same time marked by deep suffering. But you probably already knew that from experience! In the previous passage Paul talked of 'the sufferings of this present time' (8:18) and you could probably fill in the blanks of what that looks like from your own life.

Because if you haven't experienced suffering, that's probably because, as someone once said, you've not yet lived long enough. And it's that fact that we do all experience hard times eventually that tells us we need to learn how to handle them well.

And there lies the problem, doesn't it? Because when trouble does come your way, you can feel inadequate for the task.

And it's that feeling small in the face of trials that Paul calls, v26, 'our weakness'. Our physical weakness when sickness comes, or aging takes its toll. Our weakness of resolve when temptation comes. But also our weakness, our lack of wisdom in knowing 'what are we supposed to do?' How, as we saw last week, are we supposed to navigate this life with patience and perseverance when glory awaits us, but suffering is what we're currently experiencing.

I mean, let's say you're being unfairly treated at work, how are you supposed to respond? Or maybe your friend or spouse, or someone you love, is making decisions that you think are wrong or even harmful, what are you supposed to say or do? Or maybe it's as simple as *you* facing decision time - what career should you pursue? What job offer should you take? And you feel confused and you need wisdom and you feel your lack of it.

And all those - physical, moral, questions about life - are examples of living in a world where - as we saw last week, the world, and everything in it, including us, doesn't work as it should. It's what Paul called the 'futility' of creation. And there's nothing like things not working as they should to reveal our weakness.

But does God just leave you there, to sweat it out? And the answer's 'no.' And in today's passage, Paul tells us we have help, we can have certainty, and that God has a purpose in what you're currently experiencing.

Our Help
Look at v26, 'Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness.' *Likewise* - so Paul's referring back to the end of the previous passage, were he says, v25, '*If we hope* for what we do not see we wait for it *with patience*.' So our hope of future glory helps us live with patience and perseverance. But hope is not the only help we have. Verse 26 again, 'the Spirit [also] helps us.'

Think about that. Because he's talking about the Holy Spirit; God's Spirit. And in Psalm 46, the psalmist writes, 'God is our refuge and strength, *a very present help* in trouble.' And through Isaiah the Lord said, "For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, 'Fear not, *I am the one who helps you*.'" (Is 41:13).

And Paul is saying that the Lord is saying the same to you. That when you feel weak, when you feel unable, when you feel inadequate, and when you don't just feel it, *you know it*, God himself is your helper. And you may feel powerless, but he is not. It's why the writer to the Hebrews says, 'For God has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" (Heb 13:6).

'Great, but how does he help us? Because I don't see him leaping down to sort out my boss, or my husband, or whatever I need him to deal with.' Verse 26 again, 'For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.'

Because it's not just that sometimes, when we're faced with an issue, we don't know what to do, it's that sometimes we don't even know what to pray.

I mean, maybe you fall flat on your face in some sin… and it's not the first time… what are you supposed to pray? Or maybe you're facing a situation, and you don't know whether you should be asking God to change *it*, or your attitude. Or let's say you really want something - maybe a relationship or some specific job or opportunity, but the door's shut. Are you supposed to pray for God to open it, thank him for shutting it, or what? And in Luke 18, Jesus said we 'ought always to pray and not lose heart' (18:1) - but sometimes it's hard not to lose heart, isn't it?

Last Sunday, I was given a book by a young couple who are just back from their belated honeymoon. And I won't tell you their names, but imagine her husband's name is Alex and his wife's name is Emma. And on honeymoon this young couple were in a bookshop and came across a book they knew I'd love. It's called *'Ten Spiritual Lessons You Can Learn from Your Cat.'* Because they love cats, while I think cats are from the devil. So clearly this book was purr-fect.

And believe it or not, Lesson 10 in cat spirituality is that you've got to learn to purr like a cat. I mean, there is no point stressing yourself out about life - the path to peace is purring. Contentedly. And basically, Buddhism tells you the same, doesn't it: your problem is you care too much. You need to dissociate yourself from this world of tears. And instead, you need to purr.

Fortunately, the Bible is much less misty eyed about life. Because life is marked by groaning, not purring. And as we saw last week, as we wait for the day when everything's put right, creation groans, and we groan. But so too does God's Spirit, Paul says.

He too shares in this longing for the world to be made new. Verse 26, 'The Spirit *himself* intercedes for us with groaning too deep for words.' So when you're struggling to see a way forward, God's Spirit himself comes to your side and echoes your groaning. And when you don't know what to pray, he prays for you. When you struggle to put what you're thinking and feeling into words, he does the interceding.

In other words, the Spirit takes all our inadequate words, all our mixed motives, all our dodgy theology, and purifies it and presents it before the throne of God's grace. Later on, in v34, Paul says that 'Christ Jesus… is at the right hand of God… interceding for us.'

Which means when you feel weak and inadequate, you have an intercessor at God's right hand, God's Son; and you also have an intercessor in your heart - God's Spirit. But then look at v27, because, 'He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit.' And that's God the Father.

As Psalm 44 says, ‘He [God] knows the secrets of the heart.’ And as David said to Solomon, “The Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and every thought” (1 Chron 28:9).

Which means if you’re a Christian, the whole Trinity comes to your side in prayer. God the Father looks into your heart, and brings what you cannot see into the light. God the Son is at his side, pleading for you. And God the Spirit is in your heart taking the weakness and the groaning and transforming them into prayers that always hit home.

Because, v27, ‘The Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.’ Now, I come from a non Christian family, so when I became a Christian I was the only one in my immediate or extended family. So I was the weird religious teenager. And one Christmas dinner, we were sat round the table about to eat when one of my uncles said, ‘I think Martin should say grace for us.’ So I gulped, said, ok, and prayed, ‘Heavenly Father thank you for this food, Amen.’ Which was met by silence, until the same uncle said, ‘Is that it? Well, I was hoping for a bit more than that.’

But Jesus said, we’re not heard for our many words. And we’re not heard because we have all our theology neatly ordered, or because our words are beautifully and elegantly fashioned. We’re heard because we pray according to God's will. When we pray what he would pray.

And you can do that, Paul says, because the Spirit does it for you. And when you feel weak, he’s strong. When you feel like you just don’t have the words, he takes those wordless groans and prays them for you. So when you feel like you’re alone, you’re not. And when you feel like you can’t approach God - you can. Because the Spirit is interceding for you and he is always heard.

But it’s not just that we have a helper.

Our Certainty

Verse 28: ‘And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.’ So we may not know everything but we do know something: that all things work together for good for those who love God.

What does he mean by ‘all things’? Just ‘all the nice things’ or ‘all the things *you* would have chosen for your life’? No he means, *all* things. And in the context of Romans 7 and 8 he’s talking sin, and suffering, and groaning, and futility, and the world not working as it should. And he’s not saying, ‘all things are good’, because they’re not. He’s saying that you can know that God turns all things for your ultimate good. Including the things that are not good in and of themselves.

It’s why an older man who was like a spiritual father to me carried a little card in his wallet on which he’d written, ‘God will not let anything happen to me today that is outside his loving fatherly purpose for me.’

So maybe you see something that’s missing from your life, and you feel it. Well, Paul is saying, God is working even that for your good. Maybe you see stuff happening that you wish with all your heart was not happening, well, Paul is saying you can know that God is turning even that for your good. Maybe you see the sin of others against you - well, like Joseph - sold by his brothers into slavery, and falsely accused of sexual assault and thrown into jail, you can say, ‘You meant evil against me [and it is evil], but God meant it for good’ (Gen 50:20), because you can know God *will work* even this for your good.

And if *all* means *all* - and it does - it's not just the sin of others that God will work for our good, it's our own sins. And that does not justify sin but it does tell us our failures and bad decisions are not the final word.

I mean, I can look back at sins in my past that I bitterly regret. But I can also look back and see how God used it to humble me and help kill the pharisee in me. And he used it to teach me more of what John Bunyan writes about in his book, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. In fact, he used that book to teach it to me.

And nowhere is sin and suffering and weakness, turned for good, seen more clearly than in the cross of Christ - as he became weak and suffered for our sin. As Peter preached at Pentecost, 'This Jesus, delivered up *according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God*, you crucified and killed.' (Acts 2:23). So whose idea was it that God the Son would suffer and die? God's. Because he turned that infinite suffering to infinite good.

And when you know that's what God is doing, not just in all the things you suffer, but all the things that bring you joy, then you know you're not at sea in a universe of random chance. And you don't need to be paralysed by fear or indecision. God is in control of your life, and he's working it all for good.

And yet, if it's all things, it's not for all people, is it. It's 'for those who love God…for those who are called according to his purpose' (v28).

Now, if you've been tracking with Paul so far in Romans, and seen the priority he gives to faith, you might expect him to say that all things work for good of those who *believe in God*. But he doesn't. He says they work for good for those who *love* God? Why?

Because you can have an intellectual belief in God, or a utilitarian one that believes in him because of what you can get from him, but when adversity or trials, or a non-Christian boyfriend or girlfriend, or a job that pays considerably more but is morally suspect comes your way, such belief can crumble, and you quit.

But when you love God you cling to him. Because to love him is to see him for who he is and to respond to him with a whole life commitment. And to love him is to obey Christ. As Jesus said, "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me" (John 14:21).

So 'all things working together for good' is not some kind of universal slushy sentimentalism. And it's not rule-keeping moralism. It's about God turning everything for the good of those who respond to him in love. And if you're a Christian, that's you.

But what if someone does not love God? Because the implication here is that then all things do *not* work for their good. And you can see how that can happen, can't you. I mean, if you love God and you know he's good, then when bad things happen to you, you know he's allowing them for a good purpose, so they'll work to make you more humble, and more dependent, and more compassionate of others. And if good things happen, you'll know they're his good and generous gift to you, so they'll make you more grateful, more thankful, and more generous.

But for the person who doesn't love God, who doesn't think he's good, when bad things come along, they can embitter them, or turn them further in on themselves. While if good things happen,

they'll think it's their doing: 'I'm a self-made man', and they can make them proud, or more self-sufficient, or draw them further away from God. And this thing might be good, but it's not working good in your life.

So those who love God and those who don't face the same circumstances, the same challenges, receive the same good gifts - but they work very different things in their lives.

But, of course, the question is, if God is working all things for our *good* - *what is that good*?

God's Purpose

Let me ask you a question: have you ever wondered, 'what's God's will for my life? What would he have me do?' And if you *have* ever asked that question, maybe you've been left paralysed in indecision waiting for an answer. Well, I'm going to give you one. Because the strange thing is that, read the Bible, and God is much less interested in what you do, in what career you pursue or what job you take, as in the person you're becoming.

And in Homer's Odyssey, Odysseus' goddess changes him, a man in the prime of life, into an old and ragged beggar. And the change is instantaneous and temporary.

But God has a much better transformation in store for you. And his will and purpose for your life is that transformation. Verse 29, 'For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.'

And his purpose in the sufferings and groaning of your life, and his will in all the wonders of life is that you become more like Jesus. That's the good he's turning all things to in your life. As Paul writes to the Thessalonians, 'This is the will of God, your sanctification' (1 Thess 4:3).

So the great design he has in mind, the blue print, the model he is working from, the image he's changing you into, is the Lord Jesus. And he's using every blow of the hammer and every chip of the chisel on the marble; every imprint of his thumb on the clay; he's using the good and the bad, the successes and the failures, to make you more like him. So like Christ you become more humble, and more desirous of the good and more firmly opposed to the bad; more loving and more constant, more forgiving and more gracious; more courageous and more self-controlled. That in all things you're growing more like him.

Verse 29, 'In order that he [Jesus] might be the firstborn among many brothers.' So that you might bear the family likeness.

And if you're a Christian, that sculpting work in your life has already begun, and he will see it through to completion. Because did you notice how it all depends on him? Verse 29 again, 'For those whom he foreknew he also predestined…'

And to be foreknown is to be fore-loved. Because God *knows* everyone. I mean, when Jesus says that at the end of time there will be those to whom he says, 'I never knew you' (Matt 7:23), he does not mean 'I'm sorry, but I don't think we've been introduced'! He means there's been no relationship of love. But when he *really* knows you, he has set his love upon you.

And to be predestined means to be predestined. It means that before you were born, before you were a twinkle in your father's eye, or he was a twinkle in his father's eye, God pre-ordained a

destination for you. And that destination is that you become like his Son in all his glory. And if that's the destination he's fore-ordained, you will arrive.

But what if you're not yet a Christian, does the Bible's teaching on predestination mean any decision you do or do not make about Christ is meaningless, that you don't have to make one? No! Verse 30, 'And those whom he predestined he also called.' But what you have to do with a call? You have to respond, by faith. And the call is the gospel, the proclamation of all that Jesus has done for you. So how are you going to respond to that?

Well, if you respond with repentance and faith, one day you'll look back, and see how there were all these things, outside of your control, nudging you, pulling you, drawing you, to that decision. There was that person who plucked up their courage to speak to you about Jesus, there was that couple who were praying for you, there was that book that was given to you, there was that seeming chance encounter that turned you, and there was that Bible verse that opened up your heart. And you realise 'was this my choice? Absolutely it was! But Someone was working behind the scenes for your good. Calling you. And his calling is always effective.

And that gives you huge confidence, because your salvation does not rest in your hands. I mean imagine if my eternal security, or my being made into the image of Jesus depended on me! What a scary thought! I mean, whose hands would I rather be in? Mine? These faithless hands? Always prone to dropping things? Or God's - who has never dropped a single thing?

And he doesn't stop with calling you. Verse 30, 'and those whom he called he also justified.' And to be justified is to be declared not guilty, it's to have your sin counted to Christ, and to have his righteousness counted to you.

Foreknown and fore-loved. Predestined, called, and justified. They're golden links in a chain that's drawn you to God, and placed you clean and uncondemned before him. And if you're a Christian you can look back and see those links in your life. But now turn around and see the one that's yet to come. Verse 30, 'and those whom he justified he also glorified.'

Why use the past tense for something in the future? Because it is as good as done. It is as certain that you will be conformed to the image of his Son as it is that he saved you in the first place.

So, in your weakness, you have a helper. And you can be certain that God is working all for your good. And you can look backwards and know, he fore-loved me. And he predestined me, and called me. And because of Jesus, he's justified me, and the day will come when he will glorify me and finish his work of making me like his Son.

That's why, if you're a Christian, you can persevere in the hard times and not lose your head in the good times. And if you're not yet a Christian, maybe today's the day to become one. Hear his call, and respond with faith.