Westlake Church Lausanne

Suffering and Glory
Romans 8:18-39

There are some places you visit that are so amazing that you come back and say, 'you've just got to go there, the view's breathtaking, the beaches are incredible, the people are wonderful' – and you want your friends to experience what you've experienced. Or, maybe there are places you keep going back to, because for whatever reason they hold a special place for you, and you go back there, again and again.

Well, that's the kind of language you could use for the second half of Romans chapter 8. It's *the* chapter that throughout your life you keep on coming back to – and especially when life is tough. It's the kind of chapter that you point others to and tell them – hey, you need to read this. You need to go here.

You see, when you're exhausted, sometimes you just need somewhere to lie down, don't you? Or if you're walking in the mountains there are some narrow ledges, where you are glad for a chain to hold on to. Or when you're in a boat and the sea's getting rough, you need a harness to keep you strapped in. Well, Romans 8 is that for the Christian life – it's the pillow for your weary head, it's the chain to hold onto when it feels life has narrowed and is falling away under your feet; it's the harness that keeps you safe in the storm. And when you've experienced that, you keep on coming back to this passage, and pointing others to it.

Let's read it together: **Romans 8:18-39**

Before we look at it, look how the previous section ends: Chapter 8:17, that you and I, as Christians, are 'heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we might be glorified with him.' Now you've heard that expression, 'No Guts, No Glory'. Well, when it comes to being a Christian, Paul is saying it's 'no suffering, no glory.' That just as it's impossible to separate Christ's glory from his suffering, that it's in the suffering of Christ that God is most glorified, so there is this indivisible link between suffering as a Christian in this life and the glory that's coming in the next.

Which sounds great and heroic, 'no suffering, no glory', until you're actually suffering. Until life is not going well, or you really do face opposition for being a Christian, until it seems life is falling apart. Then it seems much less heroic. Then you just want to know how you can get through it, and keep going. So, when you do feel exhausted, when life is falling away beneath you, when the storm is coming on, where can you find a pillow for your head? Where can you find the chain to grip to, or the harness that will hold you?

Well, Paul tells us here. Three points: Our hope in suffering, God's purpose in our suffering, Christ's victory in our suffering: Hope, Purpose, Victory.

Our Hope in Our Suffering

Look at v18, 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time…'. Just stop there. What sufferings? What sufferings was Paul or these Roman Christians experiencing, that prompts him to write this? Well, back then, you faced a cost if you became a Christian. There was a social cost, as you risked exclusion from your community. There was an economic cost, as you risked being frozen out of the local economy, no longer 'one of us.' And there was a safety cost, you put your self at risk of prison, or slavery, or death, because to say Jesus is Lord, is to say Caesar isn't. And Caesars don't like that.

And the truth is that in whatever age you live, there is a cost to following Jesus – if by following him you refuse to live like the world. You'll face the struggle of fighting temptation, that can leave you spiritually and emotionally worn down. You face subtle put downs, or maybe outright insults that can leave you feeling wounded, or excluded from the inner ring. You face the narrowing down of your choices, as you decide that some friendships or relationships are off limits, and you will only marry a Christian, which means you might never marry. You refuse to compromise your integrity and find yourself shut out of certain jobs or promotion in those jobs. And on top of it all, just like everyone else, you can face the weakness and sickness of your physical body.

So when Paul talks of the sufferings of this present time, he's including everything and anything, the difficulty of life in the now, and especially the difficulties that come when you decide to follow Jesus.

But when you experience that, how do you handle it? Because it's easy to get dragged down by stuff and for stuff to consume your life and your thinking when things aren't going well, isn't it? And we worry and fret and grumble and fear. But Paul sees things differently. Verse 18 again, 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.'

So how does Paul handle suffering? He compares it to something else, to the glory that's to come. Now, notice what Paul isn't saying. He isn't saying what we might sometimes say, or people might say to us: 'hey, it's not so bad, look on the positive side, don't make such a big thing of it.' No, bad things are bad. The sufferings of this present time are sufferings, and sometimes they're terrible. But in comparison to what lies ahead, Paul says, they are nothing. The cost of that right decision you made, the pain of what you are going through, the awfulness of what you have suffered, they are all real, and you may be experiencing 20 tonnes of suffering now, but that is nothing in comparison to the 20 billion, billion tonnes of glory are coming. It's why Paul writes in 2 Cor 4:17, that 'This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.' And you read that and think, are you serious Paul, everything you have suffered – floggings, shipwrecks, not having enough food or clothes, persecutions, imprisonment, it's all light and momentary? Yes… in comparison to

the weight, the heavy, off the scales weight of glory that's coming and will last forever.

But it's not just you who longs for things to be better. Creation does too: v19, 'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God'. Paul personifies creation and says it cannot wait, it's eager, it's longing, for the day when this glory comes in all its fullness.

And that's because it's not just your life that has been made difficult by sin. It's affected the whole of creation, everything is out of sync. Verse 20, 'For the creation was subjected to futility.'

Now when you look at the news, and you see the landslides in Columbia, or the earthquakes in Italy, how do you respond? Because they keep on happening, there's a danger of compassion fatigue, isn't there. But when you think about what has happened, whole communities wiped out, doesn't it leave you thinking - 'God why would you let this happen? This makes no sense.' It's the futility, the seeming meaninglessness of creation when it goes bad.

Now, is the world beautiful? Yes, it's stunningly beautiful. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote, 'the splendid order, beauty, and providence shown everywhere in nature' leads to 'faith in a wise and great author of the world.' In other words, the beauty and design in creation is one of *the* great evidences for God. And yet…. sometimes it doesn't seem like that. Sometimes the mess of creation seems so… futile. Pointless. It makes no sense.

And so Paul is saying that sin entering the world hasn't just affected you, it's affected the whole created order. Everything has been touched by it. But then look how Paul describes the suffering creation can produce: v22, 'For we know that the whole of creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.'

Now, when I was a doctor, my on-call bedroom was situated half way between the neonatal unit, where I worked, looking after the sick babies, and the labour ward – where mums delivered their babies, which is where I would have to run to if something went wrong. But in the floor above me was the children's cancer ward. And frequently when I was on call, I would lie in bed and could hear the screams coming from the labour ward as the mums were delivering their babies. Now, imagine how different my reaction would be if those screams were coming from the children's cancer ward above me.

But why would it be different? Why could I lie there, tolerating the screams from one ward, when I would never have tolerated them from another. Because when someone is crying out in labour, you know that something good is coming. You know that there's a point to the suffering, that new life is on its way. Is the pain

real? Yes, but soon that will change, and in place of screams there will be tears of joy as mum gets to hold the baby.

And that, says Paul, is what is happening in creation. The pain and suffering are real, and sometimes terrible. But it's the suffering of child-birth. Something far better, something that will make all this pain worthwhile, is coming. It's why Paul says that God subjected creation, 'in hope' (v21). And one day all of creation will be freed from this bondage to decay. As Isaiah wrote, there will be a new heavens and a new earth, and the desert will bloom with flowers, and the lion will lie down with the lamb.

So, when you look at creation and the suffering that's out there, or you look at your own life and see your sin, or the stuff you're having to go through, and you think, 'life shouldn't be like this' – you're experiencing this same kind of groaning – the labour pains, that tell you something better is coming. Verse 23, 'And not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.'

And that tells you that in all that we've learned going through Romans, Jesus hasn't just secured the salvation of your soul, he's also secured the redemption of your body. And not just your body, but the whole of creation, and the day will come when all will be made right. And for now, we're caught in the in-between time – the now and the not yet. As a Christian, do you have God's Spirit now? Is he at work in your life? Yes, but it's just the first fruits, the full harvest is still to come - the exceeding glory of all that God has for you, that's up ahead.

And that's the hope you can have in the face of suffering. Paul says in v24, 'For in this hope we were saved.' And because that's our hope Paul says in v25, 'we wait for it with patience.' Now, there are alternatives to waiting with patience, aren't there? You can wait with impatience and frustration and you want God to make everything right now, and you want total victory over sin now, and for everyone to be healed now – and when it doesn't happen you get frustrated, or cynical, or critical of those you think have too little faith. Or instead of patience you can become pessimistic and think nothing will ever change, so I might as well give in, or quit. But when you can look down the line and keep your eyes fixed on the glory that is to be revealed, you can wait with eager, expectant, but steadfast patience.

But, there's not just hope in suffering.

God's Purpose in Our Suffering

And in v26 Paul writes, 'Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness.' In other words, God does not leave you to suffer alone, rather, when you feel weak rather than steadfast, when you feel impatient, rather than patient, when rather than persevering you feel like quitting, when rather than looking up in hope your

head falls down in doubt or despair, the Holy Spirit helps you. And he helps you by praying for you. Verse 26, 'The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.'

In other words, when you just can't find the words to pray, when you're longing for things to be different, and you're desperate for God to turn things around but you just can't put it into words anymore, God's Spirit inside you prays. And when you groan, he groans; when you can't pray he does pray.

And the reason he can do that is that he knows what you and I can sometimes forget, and that God has a purpose in what you're going through. Look at verse 28, 'And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good.' Now, if we're honest with ourselves, there is some stuff about life that even EPFL or UNIL students don't understand, isn't there? And there are times when you wish you could work out what God was doing, but you can't. But Paul says there is this one thing that you can know, and that is that for those who love him, God works all things for good.

All things. Now what do you think that word *all* means? Everything. Your suffering. Your trials. Your weakness. Even the sin of which we have repented. He works it all for our good. Now, when you work, how productive are you? Sometimes you may get masses done, but at other times, you sit there and an hour passes and then another and what do you have to show for it? Not a lot! You've been daydreaming. But when God works – stuff happens. So, when God takes the hard stuff of your life and puts it to work, there is going to be an outcome. And that outcome is your ultimate good.

Now that does not mean the things that happen to you are good – it means he works them for your good. And for your good, not necessarily your comfort, or pleasure, or prosperity, but your good.

And in v29 Paul tells us what that 'good' is: 'For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.' So before you were even a twinkle in your mother's eye, from all eternity past, God has known you, and set his heart upon you, and set you apart to become like Jesus. And so at the very moment when you might be tempted to think God has forgotten you, when you can't see what God is doing, underneath it all he is working out his purpose to make you more like his Son.

Just think how that works. You feel like you don't have the strength to carry on, or the courage to do what you know is right, so you learn to trust God more – like Jesus. You face temptation and you resist, even though it costs you, and you become more like Jesus, who never gave in. You go through something you wish you never had to, but as a result you're able to help those who are also

struggling, just like Jesus. And so at the very time when you begin to question whether God loves you, he's working out his purpose in your life because he loves you.

And that purpose is simply unstoppable. Listen to how Paul puts it in v30, 'And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.'

Now, do you remember in the Lord of the Rings when Frodo is kebabed by an orc spear, but somehow survives? And he peals back his top to reveal a chainmail shirt underneath made of mithril – lighter than silver, stronger than steel, it's the unbreakable metal. And here Paul gives you this unbreakable five-linked chain of God's purpose in your life: he foreknew you, he predestined you, he called you to himself through the gospel, he justified you declaring you not guilty in Jesus, and in the age to come he will glorify you.

Except he doesn't say he *will* glorify you, he says he has glorified you, past tense. Because when God has purposed to make you ever more like Jesus it's as good as done.

And if that's the unbreakable chain of God's work in your life, then nothing can harm you.

Christ's Victory in Our Suffering

Now when you, or someone you love is struggling, or when you see what's going on in the world, it can bring up a whole load of questions, can't it? Well, Paul anticipates some of those and he asks a whole series of questions, except he never really give us any answers – because the answers are in the questions. Verse 31, 'what then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?' Now, if Paul has just asked, 'who can be against you?' you could come up with a whole list, couldn't you? My sin's against me, the devil's against me, my boss, or that other person, they're against me, this cancer or those circumstances, they're all against me. But that's not what Paul asks is it? He asks, if God is for us, who can be against us. And when you know that God is for you – that his purpose towards you is always your eternal good, then no one else and nothing else that stands against you matters.

Then he asks in v32, 'He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?' Now, if Paul had asked, 'will God give you everything you need?' When life is not going great you might think, 'I don't know. Right now, I'm not so sure he will give me everything I need.' But when you know that God loves you so much that he did not spare his own Son for you, then you know he will always give you everything you need to stand.

Then in v33 he asks, 'Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?' And you might think – well, there are plenty of people who can accuse me, who might look at me and think, 'you? A Christian? I don't think so!' But when you know that God has chosen you to be a part of his family, that he has put his love upon you, that you are God's elect, it doesn't matter what others say about you, because you know what your heavenly Father says about you. And when your loving heavenly Father has chosen you, no one can unchoose you. Which is why Paul says, 'it is God who justifies' (v33). It's God who declares you not guilty because of Jesus, it's God who says, 'you are ok, and I love you, no charge against you can stand.'

Then he asks in v34, 'who is to condemn?' And again you might think, 'well there's this list of people who could condemn me. I look at my sin, and there are days when I condemn myself. And those who know what I'm really like, they could condemn me. And satan, he's always condemning me and whispering in my ear, 'you're useless, God could never love you.'

But look how Paul answers this: v34, 'Christ Jesus is the one who died - more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God who indeed is interceding for us.' And when Jesus is your defence barrister, when Jesus says to the Father, 'I have died for their sin, Father see my hands and my feet and my side', when he is your defender, you having nothing to fear from your accusers.

Which is why Paul asks his last question: v35, 'What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?' Can any of these things do it? Can anything you're experiencing now, or in the future – trivial or terrible – cut you off from Christ's love? And Paul's answer is clear isn't it: v37, 'No'! None of these things can do it. There is nothing strong enough, or dark enough, or thick enough that can blot out the burning light of Christ's love for you. So, Paul says, '*In* all these things…' even when you're experiencing them, even when you're in the midst of suffering, 'we are more than conquerors through him who loved us' (v37).

Now how can you be more than a conqueror? Because Christ got into the ring to fight the fight of sin and satan and death, and won, and then gave you the prize. And you're more than a conqueror, because you have won without a fight, because Christ fought for you. And you're more than a conqueror because it's not just that he neutralises your enemy and defeats his plans against you, he takes hold of them and turns them around. And what the enemies of sin, or sickness, or suffering, or satan mean for your harm, he turns for good.

So Paul says, v38, 'For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, not things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' Nothing can block out his love for you. Nothing can stop

his purposes for your ultimate good. Nothing can destroy your eternal hope. Because your hope, your good, his love, his purposes for you, do not rest on you, they rest on Jesus and the victory he has won for you.