

Fallen World, Real Hope

Series on Hope

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Bible Text: Romans 8:18-30

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Well, it has become a bit of a national obsession, warning labels. Perhaps it started with the surgeon general's label on the side of a pack of cigarettes, but it has become a bit of a national joke. We take warning labels to levels unconceived by the normal person. Buy a hair dryer and you will be told not to use it in the shower. A person who is using a hair dryer in a shower has greater confusion than just about the nature of electricity. You look at a box of package of Nytol which is a sleep medication. It will warn you that it will make you drowsy. I was using some mints for years that had a warning label on them that I should not insert them in my eyes. I never had that desire.

And yet if you live in a fallen world there are things to be afraid of. There are things to be concerned about. There are things that you need to be prepared for. You need to be warned. And Romans eight is really one of those passages if you would look there in your order of worship or page 944 in your church Bibles. There is a real way in which Romans eight beginning with verse 18 is just one big warning label. You live in a broken world, suffering will come. And so that you would not be caught up short, so that you would not be unprepared, so that you would not give up hope, so that you would not doubt Christ, this passage is in your Bibles. This is a warning label that we need.

Notice what Paul does in this passage. Maybe you noticed that when it was read. Suffering can be a very isolated individual experience. Often when you are going through suffering it feels like no one could possibly understand what you are going through. And no one, because they can't understand, no one can come to you and make sense out of your experience or give you hope. And in that cocoon you are in a very dangerous place.

And so what Paul is doing is he is sort of lifting us up to give us the helicopter view of suffering so that we would understand thing that you don't typically think about when you are in your particular moment of difficulty. And so that you would carry these things with you as you will be greeted in those moments of life with suffering. Very often you are unprepared for the suffering that you are going to face. And so this is God's gracious warning label.

Look at 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.”¹

Could you say that? Is that the true confession of your heart, that whatever you are going through, no matter how grave, no matter how confusing, no matter how difficult, no matter how long term, you understand that what you are now experiencing pales in comparison to the future that is promised for you. Well, if you can't say that, then you really need what follows, because what follows really makes sense out of the statement.

Here is the first thing that Paul does. Look at verse 22.

“For we know that the whole creation has been groaning.”²

He uses that term creation a few times in the passage. Here is what he wants you to know. It is not just you. The whole creation is suffering. This world is now in a position of suffering. Physical creation suffers. Everywhere you look this world is groaning under the weight of its falseness. This world is a terribly broken place. Nothing you will encounter actually operates the way it was intended to operate. And so it is not that I have somehow been singled out.

Now here is the problem for all of us. It is very tempting when you and I are going through suffering to go dark. And there are typical things that we say to ourselves in those moments of darkness. Here is the first one.

“I have been singled out for particular suffering. My life is more difficult and more grave than anybody I know.”

Well, the fact of the matter, your suffering is your suffering so you feel it more intensely, but perhaps if you began unpacking people's stories you would want to switch to stories. And it is very tempting to go there, to think that somehow, some way my situation is more difficult than what is around me.

Paul say, “No, no, no, no, no.”

This is a universal condition. Every thing in this world is suffering the effects of the fall.

There is a second thing.

“Perhaps this is God's personal punishment of me. I know what God is doing. God is punishing me.”

And there is no indication in this passage that that is what is going on at all.

¹ Romans 8:18.

² Romans 8:22.

Paul says, “No, no, no. This is the general condition of this moment of the cosmos. This world is groaning. It will not operate the way it was intended to operate and because of that your life at moments will be difficult.”

Maybe there is a third thing that you are tempted to say to yourself.

“God has turned his back on me. He doesn't hear my prayer anymore.”

Well, we are going to see this passage argue against that very powerfully. The reason Paul says the whole creation is groaning so we would understand we haven't been singled out. This is not personal punishment. This is not God's rejection. This is the general condition of life in the here and the now.

Now why is that an important place to begin? Because as I have said to you before and I will continue to repeat, you are in a constant conversation with yourself. And the things you say to you about you, the things you say to you about God, the things you say to you about your world are profoundly important. Your thoughts always precede and determine your activity. And so you need to have these kind of perspectives breaking in, interrupting your personal conversation so that your personal conversation becomes growingly more biblical so in those moments of suffering you can say good, gospel things to yourself. It is very important. And there will be moments where there will be no body that is part of that conversation, you know, those moments when you are laying in bed and you are rehearsing your life. No one is there to mentor you in that moment. It is very, very important that growingly your thinking is infected by the truths of God's Word so you can say the right things to yourself in those moments.

It is the whole creation that is suffering. You have not been singled.

The second thing Paul would say is that this suffering is not an interruption of the plan, it is the plan. It is tempting to think, oh no, what has happened to God's plan? Where is he? Where is his grace? Where is his power? The world looks like it is going in the wrong direction. Oh, no.

Notice what he says here, verse 20:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.³

We all experience the two things that Paul mentions. We experience the futility of this world, the fact that things are broken and they don't work. Sometimes it is so frustrating. Sometimes it feels like you just ought to quit trying. For all your good efforts it blows up in your face again.

³ Romans 8:20-21.

I love the way that is captured in Psalm 73 as Asaph says, “Surely for no reason have I kept myself pure. I have obeyed for this? Now let me think. I have followed God and this is my reward. It just seems futile.”

The world is subjected to decay. Things die around us. We are used to death. It is just everywhere around us. And yet Paul says this radical thing. These things that we experience are the result of God’s sovereign rulership over his world. What does that mean?

Well, Paul points to two things here. One is more subtle than the other. First of all, this condition of falseness, this futility and decay are meant by God to be judicial. The world is meant, the fallenness of the world is meant to operate as a constant reminder that things have a consequence, that we live in a moral world. Listen. We need that reminder. You can’t choose to do whatever you want to do. And you see that very clearly in that horrible moment in Genesis where Adam and Eve in an act of selfishness and arrogance and rebellion refused to obey God. Sin has consequences. This world is ruled by somebody who is awesome in his power, who is unchallenged in his glory, who is holy in every way and his law is his will and there is consequences to disobeying him. And literally every day you are faced with the consequences of disobedience to God. And that reminder is meant to change you. It is meant to echo in your ears. It is meant day after day after day until you finally get it. You say, “I get it. All of the ways of the Lord are right and true. I will run my life on his tracks.”

I need that reminder because I am like you. I am a little self sovereign. I want to set my own boundaries. I want to do it my way. I want to think I am wiser. I want what I want. And I need the reminder in my face that sin leads to death.

Is there a message that is more important of the culture outside these doors than that message? We don’t think that there is a such thing as sin anymore, let alone that sin leads to death. And as a congregation we need to be people who are morally sensitive and morally alive and morally committed and we take this sense of a holy God and a moral world out to the world that we meet with every day. And if only once you are led to help a person see the moral nature of the world and to fall in fear of God and cry out for redemption in Christ Jesus, your life has been worth living. It is a moral world.

Second, he says that this ... this futility in the day is meant to be redemptive. It is actually meant to produce hope. Because it teaches us what we can trust. This death and futility is meant to drive us to hope in Christ and this world will be liberated and will be recreated and will be restored and all things will be new again. And I let go of my hope in anything but the one who rules this world, who has the power to subject it. My hope is in God and God alone. The world cries out every moment of pain, every moment of discouragement, every moment of futility, every moment of hopelessness is a cry for a Savior.

Paul says a third thing here, verse 23:

And not only the 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. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?⁴

What are you hoping for? Where is your hope placed? If I were to, again, watch the video with you of your last six weeks what would I say your hope is in? When does your heart feel secure? When do you have that inner sense of well being? When do you feel motivated? When do you feel alive? When do you feel content? When do you feel satisfied? When do you feel happy? What is it that gives you hope?

Look back at verse 20. Let me read a little bit there.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.⁵

Now here is the third thing he says that is meant to give us hope, that this pain that we all now go through is a portal to life. The example is child birth. The pain of child birth is painful. Now I can only say that by observation, not by personal experience. I want all you women to know that I understand that. But that pain is a very different pain than the pain that someone knows is going to result in death. It is pain with an expectancy. It is pain with a willingness. It is pain with a hope. If I could say it, it is pain that is infused with joy, because what Paul is saying is this created world is going through his birthing process that will result in glorious eternal life, life that never ends, life where all of the suffering is over and all of the pain is over and all of the sin is over and all of the discouragement and all of the hopelessness and everything that was part of that experience of pain is forever gone. And on and on and on and on into eternity. We will experience that glory.

You see, we cannot, we must not, we should not live as if this is all there is. You can't treat this moment as ultimate. Hear this. Here is what Paul is saying. This moment that you are living in was never created to be a destination. It is created to be a passage way. It is created to be preparation for a destination. You are in trouble if you treat it as a destination. And I think that is what we want. We want to be able to live with a destination mentality. We want ultimate happiness, ultimate joy, ultimate satisfaction now. If you are God's child that experience is guaranteed you, but it is not yours now, because you need with joy and expectancy to go through this passage way. That is part of God's plan for you. It is part of his will for you. That is part of how he prepares you for the glory on the other side.

⁴ Romans 8:23-24.

⁵ Romans 8:20-22.

This moment is not ultimate. This moment is not a destination. This is a passage way to your destination. Now that is a good thing to say to yourself, because there will be moments where it seems like you pain will not end. It seems like a confusion will not end. It seems like you have no ability to get yourself out of what you are experiencing. And that is where you need to say, "I am moving because I am part of the plan of God and there will be a day, as much as it is hard for me to understand right now, there will be a day when this seems light and momentary."

Brothers and sisters, there are some of you in this room tonight you need to grab a hold of that with both hands and believe that you are a person in motion because by grace you have been included in this plan.

There is a fourth thing that Paul says that is very sweet and very encouraging. It is captured there in verses 26 and 27.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. 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. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.⁶

This moment is part of God's plan. You haven't been singled out for particular suffering. All of creation suffers. This, the pain of this moment is a passage way to life, life eternal. This is not a destination. And then Paul says, "You are never alone in your suffering. The Spirit of God is with you."

Hear the gospel. This is so amazing that God didn't just forgive us. Praise him for his forgiveness. I hope that statement didn't minimize it at all. Praise God for his forgiveness. But not only did he forgive us, he literally gets inside of us by his Spirit. The Holy Spirit of God if you are God's child now lives inside of you. God has made you the place where he dwells. That means it is absolutely impossible for you ever to be alone in any experience of life.

See, this theology that we embrace are not just to be abstract truths that we make sure we can recite. They are meant to change you, change the way you think about life, change the way you act. Think about this. God is with me wherever I go because God in the glory of his grace has come to make me the place where he dwells. God is with me. God is with me. God is with me. God is with me.

You are headed toward the doctor on a Tuesday morning. And you know you are going to hear crushing news about your physical condition. Preach the gospel to yourself. God is with me. God is with me. God is with you.

You hear devastating news about something that is going on in the life of one of your children that you deeply love. You wish at that moment you could be the Messiah and

⁶ Romans 8:26-27.

reach into the heart and change that person's heart, but you know you can't. You are confronted with your utter helplessness. But you say, "God is with me. God is with me. God is with me."

You face mockery and persecution because you are committed to do what is right and it seems like you don't have the strength to deal with it. You must preach the gospel to yourself. God is with me. God is with me. God is with me.

And as Paul talks about that he gets very specific about the ministry of the Spirit. Look at the words.

"For we do not know what to pray for as we ought."⁷

Sometimes you just don't know what to pray for. And the reason, brothers and sisters, you should not feel shamed by that. The reason you don't know what to pray for is because you are no privy to the secret will of God. You don't actually know what God is going to do next. And let me say this. Your job is not to figure the out. God's secret will is called his secret will because it is secret. You are relieved of that responsibility. Isn't that great? I do not have to plan today by some kind of figuring out of what God is going to do tomorrow. Please don't try that. Warning label. Put it on the edge of your Bible. Live by God's revealed will. His secret will is secret.

And so there are times when the most deeply theological prayer is to say, "God, I don't know what to pray for, but you do. And the Spirit that is in me, oh Spirit. Would you pray on my behalf, because I don't know how to pray?" What a beautiful comfort that is. Rather than God is not going to receive my prayer unless I have intelligently figured out things that have not been revealed. And what if I pray something that is not his will?

Be relieved. The Spirit has been given because we sometimes don't know how to pray. Thank you, Lord.

Second thing. There will be moments when you are too weak to pray, when the emotion is so great and the pain is so present and the weakness is so with you that all you can do is groan. God will never turn his back on your groaning, because his Spirit grabs that groaning and takes it to the Father and by the time it reaches there, they are intelligent requests carried by the Spirit. Praise God.

My mom tells the story, well, she is with the Lord, she told the story of dark days when my brother Mark was far from the Lord by God's grace. God rescued him. And her heart was so grieved she said, "Paul, I would try to pray and I couldn't get words out." And she said, "I kneeled next to my bed and the minute I thought of him I would begin to just weep. I couldn't stop my weeping and I would say, 'Oh God, Mark. Oh God, Mark. Oh God, Mark. Oh God, Mark. Oh God, Mark. Oh God, Mark.'" "

⁷ Romans 8:26.

Well the Spirit of God has no trouble making sense of that prayer. God hears. The psalm says God will never turn a deaf ear to the cries of his people.

And then the final thing that Paul says about that intercessory work of the Spirit is that the Spirit knowing us and knowing the will of God prays for us in accordance with God's will. The Spirit is aware of the plan and prays for us, prays on our behalf according to the will of God.

You see, maybe the lie of the enemy is this is all futile. Maybe what you believed is not true after all. Maybe God doesn't exist. Maybe his Word isn't true. Maybe he doesn't really love you. And Paul is marshaling for us arguments against that. The creation suffers. It is not just God singling me out. It is not God personally punishing me. It is not God rejecting me. And this subjection of the creation to futility and decay is judicial. It reminds me that I live in a moral world. Sin has consequence and because of my fickle heart, because of my desire to rule my life, I need that reminder again and again and again. This subjection is redemptive. It is the result in firm hope in God, because I have come to realize this truth that we have sung many times.

On Christ the solid rock I stand,
All other ground is sinking sand.

The most permanent thing will end up failing you. And this third thing, this is not ultimate. This moment is not eternal. This is a passage. This is not destination. This is preparation for a final destination.

And, finally, I am never ever, ever alone. By the shocking reality of redemption God now lives inside of me and that Spirit intercedes for me. He carries my prayer. He carries my groanings. He speaks on my behalf according to the will of God. He is my constant friend and my constant advocate.

Why can we find hope? Because of the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ all of these things are real and true of me. I have by grace been included in God's plan. I could have never earned it or achieved it or deserved it. It is grace that has included me and that Lamb was willing to subject himself to this world to live in the middle of its futility, to actually experience its death so that I would have life and hope that is absolutely eternal. And in moments when I am weak and in moments when I am confused not lose hope because the plan marches on ruled by a sovereign God. His Spirit is with me carrying my needs to the one who rules it all by his glory and grace.

Let's pray.

Lord, we would confess that we are the weak people of this passage. We are easily overwhelmed. We are easily confused by what you in the glory of your wisdom and sovereignty and grace are doing. We are easily tempted to doubt. And so we thank you for the encouragement of this passage that teaches us how to think about the here and now, to understand this world hasn't exploded into chaos, but is operating according to

the plan, to understand that this moment isn't ultimate. This isn't a destination. This is a passage way to wonderful, everlasting life in the new heavens and the new earth, to know that in the most individual moment of suffering we are not alone, because you are with us and you bear our cries to the Father. Thank you. We thank you with a hope that we can find in you and you alone. In Jesus' name. Amen.