

Present Suffering and Future Glory

Romans 8:18-25

Today's passage in Romans 8 begins with a very bold statement about the relationship between present suffering and future glory. Paul is speaking to believers in Jesus when he writes this:

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

He had added up all the evidence and concluded that if you had a balance with present suffering on one side of the scale and future glory on the other (Moo's analogy, p. 511), the glory would be so weighty that our suffering would fly "in the air as if it had no weight at all." It would be hard to make a more extreme comparison than the one Paul makes in this verse.

I acknowledge this because it's tempting to dismiss people when they talk about suffering - especially when they haven't suffered the same things you have. But Paul is not one of those people we can dismiss. His words flow from an experience of intense, sustained suffering and sacrifice. In 2 Corinthians 11 Paul gave a catalog of his sufferings. In contrast with his opponents, Paul had experienced these things:

23 Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. 24 Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. 26 I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; 27 I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches.

I've experienced almost none of those things; I've had a few sleepless nights and I do experience "the daily pressure" of concern for this church. Paul's "present sufferings" go far beyond anything I've experienced. Whatever else we think about Paul, we can never dismiss him as someone who doesn't understand suffering - whether physical or emotional or relational suffering.

We will see in this chapter that Paul never trivialized his own suffering; he never pretended that it wasn't painful or real. Paul was a realist about his present suffering. But he was also a realist about his future glory. He didn't dismiss it as irrelevant or inconsequential; he saw it as substantive and real.

It seems to me that God is calling us to have this same dual perspective. We can and should be realists about present suffering. As we go through this passage, don't shy

away from thinking honestly about your present suffering (physical, mental, emotional, relational). But we should also be realists about future glory. Don't shy away from this magnificent vision of the glory we'll experience in the future.

Present suffering is not worthy to be compared with our future glory. (Romans 8:18) In verse 17 Paul had mentioned that those who "suffer with [Jesus]" will also "be glorified with Him"; suffering is the prelude to experiencing glory.

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

When Paul says that he "considers" that present suffering isn't worthy to be compared to future glory, he is saying that this is his reasoned conclusion. He has added up all the evidence and concluded this. Paul has in mind **all** types of suffering, not only the persecution we might suffer as believers. At the end of this chapter Paul will mention "tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword" as things which threaten us in this life but cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (vv. 35-39). These are the type of sufferings that Paul has in mind - everything from "natural disasters" to persecution to "perils" of all types.

It's not that present sufferings are trivial; it's that future glory is more weighty than we ever imagined. The Hebrew word for glory actually had the connotation of weightiness and substance. The gods of the nations were light-weights, but the God of Israel was a heavy-weight; He had **glory**. Paul looked forward to the day when we would both **see** and **share** God's glory. Down in verse 30 Paul will write that those who are justified are also glorified.

Paul wants us to accept his conclusion that present sufferings aren't even in the same category as the future glory we will see and experience. He said something similar in 2 Corinthians 4:17.

17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,

By most standards Paul's afflictions were ongoing and severe. But compared to the "eternal weight of glory" they were "momentary and light."

Like everything else in the Christian life, this is something that we accept this by faith. Nobody can prove to you that our present suffering will pale in the presence of future glory. But that revelation is consistent with everything we know about God and about salvation. We aren't told as much as we might like to know about this future glory. But a core component involves being raised immortal - with bodies that are like that of the risen Christ. We'll see that later in the passage.

In verses 19-25 Paul reinforces this perspective by showing that both **creation** and **believers** long for the future glory of redeemed humanity. Our culture sometimes mocks the idea that we long for a place we've never been. People suggest that such a longing

leads to escapism or disengagement from this world and its people and its suffering. But today's passage suggests that the opposite is true. Those who understand the glory that awaits us in the future persevere in this life (and help others do the same).

Creation eagerly longs for our future glory. (*Romans 8:19-22*) In verses 19-22 Paul describes the longing of creation (non-human creation), and in verses 23-25 he describes the longing of believers. He repeats three key terms in each description: waiting eagerly (vv. 19 and 23), hope (vv. 20 and 24-25), and groaning (vv. 22 and 23).

Notice in verse 19 how Paul links the fate of creation with that of redeemed humanity.

19 For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.

The term translated “anxious longing” (NIV “eager expectation”) suggests the scenario in which you “crane your neck to see what is coming” (Moo, p. 513). If I’m especially eager for guests to arrive at my house, I may step out on the front porch and look down the street to see if they’re coming. Paul writes that creation has this eager expectation, awaiting “the revealing of the sons of God.” J.B. Phillips translates this verse, “The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own.”

In case you’re wondering why creation is standing on tiptoe to see the revealing of the children of God, Paul explains in verses 20 and 21. Ever since the Fall (Adam and Eve’s sin), the well being of creation has been tied to the well being of humanity. Creation was subjected to futility because of sin; creation will be fully and finally set free when the children of God are fully and finally set free. Notice how Paul describes this:

20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

God Himself was the One who “subjected” creation to futility/frustration. God created every “good” - fully hospitable for humanity. But when Adam and Eve sinned, creation suffered the fallout. God pronounced to Adam (Genesis 3), “Cursed is the ground because of you . . . both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you. . .” It’s hard to say exactly what became different for creation as a result of the Fall. But Paul here says that creation experiences “slavery to corruption/decay.” This is the term (“corruption”) that is applied to our flesh and blood bodies in 1 Corinthians 15:42 where Paul speaks of our bodies as “perishable/corruptible.”

Notice that Paul says God subjected creation to futility “in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its slavery to corruption ***into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.***” Again we see that the well being of creation is tied that of the children of God. Creation will be set free when we are set free. All of this presupposes that creation won’t be annihilated but transformed/redeemed. Just as there will be continuity

between our flesh and blood bodies and our glorified bodies, there will be some type of continuity between creation as we know it and the new heavens and earth.

As an aside, I would point out that until the day that creation is renewed, we have been given the responsibility to care for creation. Genesis 1 stresses that this responsibility flows out of being created in the image of God. God created the heavens and the earth “good.” One way that we show our love for God is by caring for His good creation.

In verse 22 Paul personifies creation much the way the Psalms and the prophets did (see Psalm 65:12-13, Isaiah 55:12).

22 For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.

Those of you who’ve given birth to a child understand this imagery much better than the rest of us. But basically Paul is painting the picture of the agony that precedes joy. In retrospect, most moms would say that the groaning and pain and distress associated with childbirth were overshadowed by the joy of a newborn. [Jesus used this very imagery in John 16:20-22.] Here Paul depicts “the whole creation” groaning and suffering the pains of childbirth anticipating the day that all things are restored.

In various parts of Scripture we see creation itself reflecting the spiritual realities of the day. At the crucifixion of Jesus, for example, “darkness fell upon all the land” - reflecting the spiritual darkness of that day. Authors such as JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis developed this theme masterfully in their writings (LOTR and Chronicles of Narnia). Paul tells us that creation eagerly longs for our future glory to **remind us that God’s plan for all of creation is wrapped up with our salvation** through Jesus Christ.

We ourselves eagerly long for our future glory. (Romans 8:23-25) In verse 23-25 Paul describes how we as believers share creation’s “anxious longing” for our salvation to be fully and finally completed. In these verses he uses several of the same terms he just used for the rest of creation.

23 And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

Here Paul uses the agricultural imagery of “first fruits.” The first fruits (whether wheat or barley or whatever) represented and the entire harvest. The Holy Spirit is the first fruits of salvation for believers. We are given the Holy Spirit as the pledge and guarantee of our full salvation. In Ephesians 1:13-14 Paul writes that the Holy Spirit is given as a pledge that we’ll one day receive our full inheritance. That’s what Paul is also saying here: the Holy Spirit guarantees that our eager longing won’t go unfulfilled.

One aspect of this longing involves “groaning”: “we ourselves groan within ourselves.” Just as creation groans, we groan within ourselves. Sometimes the pain and frustration of this life stops us in our tracks, and internally we groan because we know that some

things won't be fixed in this life - some relationships, some illnesses and infirmities, being separated from loved ones by death, certain types of injustice and violence. Inwardly we groan within ourselves.

Specifically, we "wait eagerly for our adoption as sons." You might read this and think, "Wait a minute. . . Back in verse 15 Paul said that we have already received 'a Spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father."'" That's very perceptive of you. This is a classic example of the "already" and "not yet" in Paul's theology. We have already been adopted as children of God, but we have not yet experienced the fulness of that status. We will experience the fulness of our adoption at "the redemption of our body." When our redemption extends even to our bodies, we will be revealed fully as children of God.

In verses 24 and 25 Paul acknowledges that this is a hope that lies in the future. But it is a hope that should fuel our perseverance.

24 For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

By definition, a "hope" involves something in the future that you don't yet see. As NT Wright says, "One does not anxiously scan the horizon for a boat already in port." But we do eagerly scan the horizon for the return of Christ and our full adoption as children of God. As Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:13, ". . . fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." We persevere through this life, believing that present suffering doesn't begin to compare with the glory that we will see and experience at the return of Christ.

It seems to me that we need an extra measure of discernment in applying a Scripture such as this one to our lives. We need to cling to this vision of our eventual glory without letting go of other Scriptures.

First, it's okay to groan. Next week we'll see in verses 26-27 that "the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." Don't be afraid of groaning and acknowledging that some things won't be healed in this life. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Psalm 34:18 tells us:

18 The Lord is near to the brokenhearted
And saves those who are crushed in spirit.

We experience the nearness of God directly through the Spirit. But we also experience the nearness of God through His people. Sometimes we push others away during our suffering, but we need to let at least a few others stay close enough so that they can help bear our burdens. We need to let others grieve our losses with us and remind us that we do not grieve as those who have no hope.

Second, we need to help each other persevere so that we fulfill our calling as the body of Christ. We aren't supposed to retreat from this world because of our suffering or because one day things will be different. Even though we experience tragedy and suffering, we are still the body of Christ; we still represent Him here on earth. We still have a mission to make disciples among every grouping of people here on earth. We still trust God to work in us and through us.

The consistent application of Scriptures that discuss our future glory is that we should persevere and not give up hope. At the end of 1 Corinthians 15 - the passage that speaks most extensively about our future resurrection - we are told this:

58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

We need to encourage each other with these words.

Third, we live in light of our future glory. We let this vision influence how we live our lives. Perhaps you've read C.S. Lewis' essay "The Weight of Glory." I'd like to close with an often quoted passage because it's hard to say it any better than he did. In light of the weightiness of glory that's promised in Scripture, Lewis discusses the importance of relating to people in light of what they might become.

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization —these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.