

FOUR GREAT ENCOURAGEMENTS

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Our text today is Romans 8. Rather length passage of scripture but a wonderful passage of scripture as of course, all of scripture is. Verse 18 to the end of the chapter, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration not by its own choice but by the will of him who subjected it in the hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so but we ourselves who are the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly as we await eagerly for our adoption as sons the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have we wait for it patiently. In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words could not express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son that he might be the first born among many brothers. Those he predestined he also called, those he called he also justified, those he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say in response to this? If God is for us who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things. Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies, who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus who died, more than that. Who was raised to life is to the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written for your sake we face death all day long. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, Spirit filled believers, we have great confidence that when we pray the Lord is able to change our circumstances. Thus we pray for healing, we pray for deliverance. We pray for miracles of God's provision. But the fact is sometimes God chooses not to give us what we ask for. We are often as Spirit filled believers ill prepared to handle God's No's or God's Wait's.

Here is a marvelous text of scripture which undergirds our faith in a time when circumstances are not dealing us a fair hand. When instead we are being asked to persevere in the midst of those.

In Italy Orson Wells said "For thirty years under the Borges they had warfare, terror, murder, bloodshed. But they produced Michaelangelo, Leonardo DiVinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love, five hundred years of democracy and peace and what did the Swiss produce? The coccoo clock."

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So what are you producing?

Every year at the end of the Major League Baseball season I clip out of the paper the final results. The won and lost standings for every team in the American League and the national League. It not only has the Won/Lost record but it breaks it out to the Won/Lost record at Home and the Won/Lost record in Away games. It's much harder to win on the road. I have a theory that the teams that wind up as the division champions and into the World Series are the teams which have the best away game record. Even the bad teams sometimes, most of the time – in fact the bad teams win more games at home than they lose. But the great teams win on the road.

The fact of the matter is that the Christian life is one long road game. Paul in this marvelous text of scripture uses words that may be offensive to some Christian ears today who are into denying the reality of these words. But Paul the apostle uses them. Words like suffering, frustration, groaning, weakness, trouble, hardship.

Why do we have these things? Why do we suffer?

We're linked to two people that are the reasons for our suffering. First we're linked to Adam. Romans 5:12 "Sin entered the world through one man and death through sin and in this way death came to all men because all sin." It's because of Adam that we get death. Not just the act of death but the whole process of getting there. Which at this point in my life is late middle age – falling out hair, teeth in trouble and arches falling. Death, the whole process of unintended consequences. The non suspension by God of the law of cause and effect which allow drunk drivers to plow into innocent people. All of that wacky and weird and problematic and accidental and illness stuff that happens in life stems out our linkage with Adam.

But the New Testament goes on to tell us also that some of our suffering is linked directly to Jesus. 2 Timothy 3:12 "In fact everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." The persecution may take more subtle forms such as a decision in your own personal life, in your own professional life, in your own business to do things ethically and morally at consider cost perhaps even promotion, perhaps even advancement of financial blessing. In most countries in the world today outside the United States there is a greater cost to following Christ than we American Christians bear. Perhaps we will bare more cost as the time comes.

Some of that we visit on ourselves by always lecturing the world on how they ought to behave. We ought to be demonstrating through deeds of compassion the mercy and the kindness of Christ that would do more than anything in this world to help us bear witness to Jesus than a thousand lectures to the culture.

We often when we're going through hard times in our life ask why? The New Testament forever is looking away from the *why* question to the *what* question. What do I do now? These words from Paul in Romans 8 give us four great encouragement.

The first encouragement. This may not seem like much of an encouragement to you. You have to have a long view to have this encouragement. It is this: compare the coming glory to the present groaning. Verses 18-25.

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Paul is saying in this paragraph don't focus exclusively on the present. You need to look ahead. Put the present groaning on one side of the scale. Imagine the future glory on the other side of the scale. When the two are weighed against one another it will become apparent in that day that the future glory far outweighs the present groaning.

So knowing that the future glory is coming helps us not to divorce the present groaning from what God has in store for those who love him.

Of course the coming in this passage is not a "this world" glory. Paul says the whole created order is groaning as in the pains of childbirth. It's waiting for the liberation of the children of God. You could spend a long time meditating on that. But the intriguing thing about groaning here is its related to childbirth not the groaning related to death.

I have been blessed by God to have a gender that disqualifies me from childbirth. But the pain of childbirth is not because dying is coming. The pain of childbirth is because life is coming and birth is coming. And Paul says we must conceive of groaning in that kind of context. Nature is groaning and even he says we are groaning. We are not charismatic Christian scientists who deny pain, deny evil and pretend everything is well when its not. We also are groaning.

In our attempts to make the gospel relevant to culture and each people how to live a better life we have almost let glory, i.e. heaven, become a neglected doctrine. If you live in Orange County why do you need heaven?!! But even with the Spirit, Paul says, we are groaning. If we took the time to go across this room this morning and you could honestly and transparently tell what is in your heart and the pain you carry and the burden you bear or the suffering you endure, some of it very private, some of it very relational, others physical, financially. There would not be a dry eye in this house. When we're in assembly such as this we're all so fine and dressed well and we're at our best.

Paul just says, Remember what follows the groan – not death but birth.

When I was pastor, often at a memorial service I would pull out something like this very ugly, gnarly bulb and refer to 1 Corinthians 15 about the body is sown in dishonor but raised in honor. You could never guess by looking at the bulb what is coming. But what is coming in the springtime is this glorious cardinal tulip. The package tells us what the bulb is going to be. The gospel of Jesus Christ says to us that our whole lives which are tending toward death and tending toward the grave they're going to be laid in dishonor, laid in corruption. But they're going to be raised immortal, incorruptible and with honor. When we look at the resurrected Jesus Christ we've already got the photograph of what we will yet be.

The hymn writer had it well when he said, "It ill be worth it all when we see Jesus." C. S. Lewis eloquently said "Hope means a continual looking forward to the next world. It does not mean that we're to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world thought most about the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they are inefficient in this one. Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you will get neither."

Are you living a life that is "this world" only? Do you realize that the span of this life is but a sliver compared to the span a God has for eternity. Paul says never, never isolate from your thoughts or X out of your thinking the future glory. Even if you are not in a moment in life when

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you are groaning. Maybe everything is just great in your life right now. Wonderful! Keep it that way. But however great it is it is still miniscule compared to what God has in store for us.

The second great encouragement is the Holy Spirit is helping us. Verses 26-27. He says, “We don’t know how to pray what we ought to pay for. The Spirit is helping us in our weakness.” That’s why we need his help.

It’s interesting to look at the use of the word “know” in the Romans 8 passage. He says we know the whole creation is groaning, verse 18. In verse 28, we know that God is working good in all things. Verse 26, he says “We don’t know. We don’t know what to pray for.” I love the honesty of that. I think that sometimes as believers we try too hard to fake it in our faith. And provided quick answers for every dilemma. When there are moment when we just have to look at what’s happening and say “I don’t have a clue. I don’t know what God’s up to. I don’t even know how to pray for this situation. I’ve prayed every prayer I know how. Nothing has yielded.”

Paul says we don’t know what to pray for. He doesn’t mean he doesn’t know how to pray the Lord’s prayer, the high priestly prayer of John 17, or Ephesians 1 and Ephesians 3 show he does know how to pray in form and content. But the “We know not,” applies to situations where we are groaning and we don’t know how it’s going to turn out. But the Spirit knows. The Spirit who searches our hearts knows the mind of God.

We therefore in this Romans 8 passage are told that we have two intercessors – the Holy Spirit in the heart and Christ in the heavens who always lives to make intercessions for us.

The Spirit is praying through us for us in our weakness. With groans sometimes that can’t be uttered, words that cannot be expressed. Paul could here be referring to prayer language of speaking in other tongues. He could be referring just to a hard sigh and a deep grown. He’s saying in that inarticulate moment the Holy Spirit is praying through the moments you cannot even articulate the pain that you feel.

My beautiful daughter Evangeline is in the service today. I remember when Evangeline was just a three year old, sleeping in her bed one night. This night particularly stands out. I’ve reflected on that moment a lot. I was standing in the doorway watching her. Sound asleep. I felt the Holy Spirit had me pray for her in those moments. As I prayed for her and her life I thought she’s not even aware at this moment that I’m praying for her. But that’s ok. She doesn’t need to be are. It was like the Lord said to me, “And you don’t know, George, how many times I have prayed for you when you have been sleeping. And you haven’t been aware of it. Simply not because you’re not aware of it doesn’t mean I haven’t been praying for you.”

Hudson Taylor said, “It doesn’t matter how great the pressure is. It only matters where the pressure lies. See that the pressure never comes between you and the Lord. The greater the pressure the more it will press you to his breast.”

Third great encouragement. God is working for the good.

Romans 8:28-29 “We know God is working for the good.” I’ll never forget in this pulpit about 15 or so years ago one of our missionary families standing who had just come off an experience in a south Pacific island where their whole family had been brutalized by four thugs and had

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suffered unspeakable emotional, physical, psychological injury. They were in the process of recovery which has today put them on a complete course of wholeness and they are well. But in those early months they were struggling a lot with the feelings of the tremendous ravishing that had occurred in their life by the enemy. That missionary that day said, We learned in this experience to distinguish between our knowings. Feelings tell us that God is not working for the good. But the scripture says “we know,” not we feel. We know.

Without the resurrection of Jesus Christ it’s all puffery. It’s kind of nice idea but you could pick up the latest guru or self help book and get the same kind of stuff that would give you a little placebo for the pain. But Jesus is risen. On the basis of his resurrection we have authority to say what we’re saying. That just as crucifixion was not God’s final word. Jesus is risen. On the basis of his resurrection we have authority to say what we’re saying that just as crucifixion was not God’s final word and God was working good in the crucifixion of Jesus so God is working for the good in your life and in mine.

The Lord knows sometimes I’m not working for the good and other people are not either. And circumstances don’t seem to be working for the good. But I’ve always got someone in my corner who’s working for the good.

Notice the comprehensiveness of the working – all. All things. Not just some things – all. It’s kind of hard to swallow when the one thing you’re thinking of is the one thing that you wish would push out of your life.

Things taken by themselves are not always pleasant. But when they are mixed together and fired in the oven you will love the results. That’s the “all things work together.” The comprehensiveness.

The goal of the workings, secondly, is for good.

It does not say that everything that happens to us is good because a lot of stuff that happens to us is yucky! The goal is for good. Even the bad things can work for a good purpose. Jesus for example did not say, “Thank you God for the blessing of Lazarus being dead.” He doesn’t ever do anything like that. He instead finds what is true and good to give thanks for. He says, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me.” And in that hearing he’s is going to work for the good.

Steinway, the founder of the piano company said “In one of our concert grand pianos 243 taunt strings exert a pull of 40,000 pounds on an iron frame. It’s proof that out of great tension can come great harmony.”

Enterprise, Alabama in 1915 lost 60% of its cotton crop to the boll weevil. It had even greater destruction in 1916. It forced the farmers in the county into diversified farming. And in 1917 they began planting peanuts and other crops. By the time two more years had gone by they had become so prosperous that they unveiled in the main square of Enterprise a statue that no one else in the world has. It’s ten foot tall and it’s a symbol to man’s ability to adjust to adversity. It is a 10-foot tall statue of the boll weevil. The Chamber of Commerce told me on the plaque at the base of the statue: “In profound appreciation of the boll weevil and what it has done as the herald of prosperity the monument was erected by the citizens of Enterprise, Coffee County Alabama.” For 80 years in Enterprise, Alabama they had had a plaque to their plague.

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I like that. The goal of the working is for good.

I was at Yellowstone. I overlooked an area where there was a plaque that said “Five years after devastating wildfires burned about 1.2 million acres in the greater Yellowstone area researchers are finding long term beneficial effects. Including a vigorous recovery of most plants and steady or growing population of large mammals. The forest is going to be re-established. In many cases the seeding density is greater than the original stand density in many burned over areas where mature large pole pines once stood the number of established seedlings is eight times as large as the original number of trees. Then came a line which explains why the forest is more prolific than it ever was before the fire. I highlighted this line. “Many lodge pole seeds require fire to open.”

Maybe last year or last month or last week or yesterday a fire blazed in your life and burned up a lot of things you had gotten used to. But consider the density of new growth the Lord wants to bring into your life and ministry. Perhaps your experience will be like the lodge pole seeds. Only the fire could open the new potential God has for you. The goal of the working for good.

The lamentation of the working. You’ve got to love God and the godward limitation, to those who are called. The idea of calling there is effective calling. It’s different than when I was a boy and was out and my mother would say “Georgie! It’s dinner time!” and I would just keep doing what I was doing. But when dad came to the door and said, “George!” That was an effective call.

Perhaps you’re here and the soft voice of the Holy Spirit has been calling you and you just keep doing your own thing. God wants to get your attention. He wants to call you. Effective calling is one in which we’ll respond. Paul puts this in terms that really stagger our ability to deal with the text. He says you’re effectively called because he foreknew you and he predestined you to be conformed to the image of his Son. He called you, justified you and glorified you. Those are all elements of the call. What’s really intriguing if you want to do the fine skullduggery on this text is that the words are all in the past tense including the word “glorified” which hasn’t yet happened. We have not yet been glorified because our body has not yet received the benefits of the resurrection. But Paul says so effective is God’s call that your future glorification I’m going to say has already happened.

The fourth great encouragement is God is for us. verse 31-39.

Who is against us? Sin is against is against us. Satan, death, hell. Sometimes circumstances. Sometimes people we’ve had relationships with. But never God. Paul argues from the greater to the lesser. He says, “If God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us will he not also give us all things? Who therefore will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? Who will condemn? Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” He gives seven adversities which can separate – trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, or sword. He gives six polarities that can separate – death, life, angels, demons, present, future, powers, height, depth, anything else in all God’s creation. Then he says, None of that’s going to separate us. There are times when you may feel everything is against you. But there is always one who is for you. Jesus Christ our Lord.

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The most common picture people have of God in our culture is God as a policeman who is looking to see what you've done wrong and nail you for it. But the God who is represented by Jesus in that central parable of God's love the father of the prodigal son. God is not the policeman looking for an errant son who has been misbehaving. He is the God who looks and looks and looks hoping that the son will come to himself and come to his father.

God loves us. And is for us. Because of that Paul says we are more than conquerors through him who loves us.

The word for "more than conquerors" is an interesting word in the Greek text it's one word. It's *hyper* - more than normal. And *nike* - Paul says in the Christian life because God is for us we're not just winners. We don't just barely break the tape an eighty of an inch ahead of the next person. But instead we win by a mile. Especially when you're depressed and think everything is against you God is saying, no. You are a *hyper nike*!

I'm convinced not that circumstances will change, Paul says. I'm not convinced of that at all. Circumstances may get worse. But I am convinced that nothing will or can separate me from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Ruth Calkins paraphrase of this: "God, I may fall flat on my face, I may fail until I feel old and beaten and done in. Yet your love for me is changeless. All the music may go out of my life. My private world may shatter to dust. Even so you will hold me in the palm of your steady hand. No turn in the affairs of my fractured life can baffle you. Satan with all his braggadocio cannot distract you. Nothing can separate me from your measureless love. Pain can't. Disappointment can't. Anguish can't. Yesterday, today, tomorrow can't. Life can't. Riots, war, insanity, unidentity, hunger, neurosis, disease, none of these things nor all of them heaped together can budge the fact that I am dearly loved, completely forgiven and forever free through Jesus Christ your beloved Son." Hallelujah!

Thank you, Lord, for your presence. And may these words and this scripture be a powerful instrument in our lives to be of good cheer for you have overcome the world. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.