

Knowing God In Suffering

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[0 : 0 0] Turn your Bibles to Romans chapter 8. I'll be reading from that chapter in a few minutes. As I have occasion to speak in the next number of months, I want to speak on the topic of suffering.

The scripture reminds us that man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward. Another place that says that man is a few days and his days are full of trouble.

Jesus tells us that since he suffered persecution, we may expect persecution. In another place, he says, we will weep and mourn while the world rejoices, but that grief will be turned to joy.

Our master assures us in John 14 that in this world we will have trouble, but we should be of good cheer because he has overcome the world. And even the great apostle had suffered all kinds of trials and affliction.

In 1 Corinthians 4, he says, to this very hour we go hungry and thirsty. We are in rags. We are brutally treated. We are homeless.

[1 : 1 0] We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we are blessed. When we are persecuted, we endure it. When we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment, we become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.

In 2 Corinthians 1, he speaks of hardships that they suffered in Asia. And he says the suffering was so great that they even despaired of life.

And he speaks later in that same epistle of troubles and hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonment, riots, hard work, sleepless nights, hunger. Suffering is a lot of Christians.

And the passage that I'm speaking from this morning in Romans chapter 8, that's the statement to the apostle beginning with verse 18. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us.

For the creation waits in eager longing for the revelation of the sons of God. 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 corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

[2 : 3 3] For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we eagerly await the adoption of sons, the redemption of our bodies.

This is the word of the Lord. Let me pray with you. Father, we come asking that you would be with us, that you would take the words of Scripture and apply them to our hearts, and that you would teach us this morning about what you have taught in your word regarding suffering, and that we would be equipped by that to face the suffering that we endure as we live in this fallen world for your glory.

Grant us this grace, we pray in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. In fact, the passage is full of metaphors for suffering.

Verse 20, the creation was subjected to frustration. The creation as we know it is an abnormal creation because the creation has been subjected to frustration.

Normal was the creation before the fall. But the effects of the fall of mankind have so thoroughly had impact on the world that even the creation doesn't function in the way that it ought to.

[4 : 29] Verse 21, we have another metaphor of suffering. The created order is in the bondage of decay. We see decay. We see decay all around us. And decay in the creation is a picture of suffering.

The apostle is saying to us, do you have any doubt about the universality of suffering? Look around you. Look around you. You see decay everywhere.

Everything loses its beauty. Things corrode. They become faded. Cracks appear. Things were once strong and firm become wobbly. The beautiful things grow old and ugly.

Gravity has its way with our faces. We see change and decay all around us. You live in a world in which you cannot escape change and decay.

We see it every day in the mirror. However, we have another vivid metaphor of suffering in this passage in verse 22. It says, the whole creation groans, groaning like the groaning of childbirth.

[5 : 30] The pain and travail of childbirth is a universal experience that is relatable to all of us. Mothers, of course, have experienced it. But the rest of us have heard of it and learned of it and observed or heard of the groaning and travail that is entailed in bringing a child into the world.

You actually hear echoes of Genesis 3 in all of this if you think about it. Because the elements of the curse of God on sin on a fallen world are all here.

The ground is cursed. It's through toil and hardship that we bring forth food. Futility and decay are everywhere. It's through pain that women will bear children. And Paul is very selective in the metaphors that he uses for affliction in this passage.

If he had just used metaphors of physical disease or physical suffering, not all of us experience that. All of us don't experience imprisonment for our faith.

We don't all experience betrayal like Hosea. We don't all experience natural calamity or natural disasters. We don't all experience times when the heavens are like brass.

[6 : 42] But Paul uses these very broad metaphors for suffering that all of us can relate to. And the theological assumption of this passage is that suffering is the universal experience of every Christian.

Indeed, of every person. The Bible describes for us a range of these sufferings that we are subjected to. And if you're counting or keeping notes or trying to figure out when I'll be done, I have 10 of them here that we find in the scripture as descriptive of suffering that we experience.

The loss of fortune. Remember, for example, Job. Job lost everything he had in a single day. The Sabaeans and the Chaldeans raided his flocks and carried them off.

Fire fell from heaven and destroyed his home and consumed his servants and his sheep and his family. And in a moment, this man who had been the greatest man in the East lost everything and was brought to poverty.

Or physical suffering. Not only did Job suffer loss of fortune, he also lost his health. Remember, after he had lost his cattle and his wealth and his children, the devil came to God again and he said, Skin for skin, stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones and he will curse you to your face.

[8 : 13] So Job was subjected to intense physical suffering. He had open wounds, we read, from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. Do you remember the passage in Luke 16 that talks about the poor leper who was covered with boils and the only comfort he received was the dogs licking his wounds to soothe him.

And the great apostle describes the agony that he experienced. The physical ailment that we assume is a physical ailment he describes as a thorn in his flesh.

And perhaps many of us, even today here, are suffering various forms of physical affliction and weakness, disease, discomfort. A third would be political affliction.

Do you remember in Acts 12, Herod had James, the brother of John, put to death? And he saw that that pleased the Jews and so he seized Peter and had Peter put in prison.

And some, like the apostle Peter in Acts 12, find themselves imprisoned for the faith. Even today, there are people who are suffering in prisons all over the world on account of their faith.

[9 : 31] I read a letter from a man in Iran who had suffered for nine years in an Iranian prison for his faith. And the letter read like Psalm 23 as he described his suffering and God meeting his needs in the midst of his suffering.

In fact, in one section of the letter, he says, God has blessed me with years in which I've been relieved from my normal responsibilities and been given this unique opportunity to spend my time studying the word of God and praying.

What a response to suffering. He was released after nine years through the help of people who advocated for him from the West. And within nine days of his release, he was found dead in a prison in Tehran.

Or in a park, excuse me, in Tehran. Or a fourth type of suffering is persecution for faith. Some intense forms of suffering don't come from the state.

They come from others. Remember Paul's words to Timothy. Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. It's a universal statement of reality.

[10 : 43] If you live in a fallen world and you live a godly life in Christ Jesus, you are going to face persecution from others. Remember the words of Christ in John 15.

If you belong to this world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you don't belong to the world. I've chosen you out of the world. That's why the world hates you.

Remember the words I spoke to you. No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they had obeyed my teaching, they will also obey yours.

They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me. A fifth kind of suffering is suffering at the hand of enemies. Sometimes we face suffering from implacable foes.

People who hate us. And they desire to destroy us. And the Psalms are full of laments about that. I think of Psalm 56 as an example.

[11 : 44] David says that men are in hot pursuit of me all day long. They press their attack against me. In verse 2, he says, I'm being slandered by proud men.

In verse 5, he says, my words are twisted. My enemies are plotting against me. In verse 6, he says, they conspire.

They're eager. Waiting to take my life. In chapter 57, he describes men who are like lions. Like ravenous beasts.

Men who are plotting against them, ready to pounce. It's bad enough to be, have an enemy conspire against you.

But sometimes it's even a friend. And that's another sixth form of suffering we see in the scripture. Betrayal by a trusted friend. David, again, describes that to us in the Psalms.

[12 : 40] He describes it so vividly in Psalm 55. If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it. If a foe were raising himself up against me, I could hide from him.

But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend. One with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng in the house of God.

You see, you expect an enemy to attack you. An enemy makes no secret of his hatred. And David says, I could endure this from an enemy.

I could hide. I could try to protect myself. But I'm open. I'm vulnerable to a friend. And you can't miss in this passage the ways that his suffering is intensified by the fact that it is a friend at whose hand he is suffering.

A companion. A trusted friend. One with whom he once enjoyed fellowship with God as they went into the house of God.

[13 : 43] The closer the relationship, the more painful the betrayal. The seventh type of suffering described for us in the scripture is family suffering. Perhaps suffering at the hands of friends or even at the hands of enemies is not as painful as the turmoil that comes even within our own family.

Sometimes the most basic human relationships, even marriage, become a context of turmoil.

Rather than being full of joy, they're full of strife and acrimony and contention and sorrow. We have that illustrated for us too, don't we? The life of Hosea, who was betrayed by Gomer.

He went out in search of her and found her in the marketplace being auctioned off and bought her back for a few ounces of silver and 300 liters of grain.

And I imagine with a strange mixture of emotions, he brought her home, cleaned her up. Perhaps had to even endure the gossip and intrusion of neighbors about his unworthy wife.

[14 : 59] Think of the agony of a parent whose child has gone bad. Think of the agony of a parent whose child has gone bad.

The rebellion has been crushed, but all David can think about is his son. And he says, and is the young man Absalom safe?

The poignancy of his grief over Absalom's death, you can feel as he cries out, Oh, Absalom, my son, oh, my son, my son Absalom, would that I had died rather than you.

There are people here today who have faced the agony of children who have turned away. Turned away perhaps from the faith, sometimes turned away from them.

Made shipwreck of their lives. Or any type of suffering is spiritual oppression. Sometimes we experience affliction, the kind of affliction the psalmist describes in Psalm 88, where it seems like the heavens are brass.

[16 : 42] And he says in verses 1 through 3, I cry out day and night, my soul is full of trouble. In verses 3 and 4, I've lost my strength, I'm exhausted, I feel like dying.

In verses 6 and 7, I'm in the lowest pit, the waves are crashing over me. Verse 88, he says, I've lost all my friends, I'm repulsive to me.

In verses 9 through 14, he says, I call out to you day and night, and you reject me. Terror and despair have swept over me like a flood.

And he ends the psalm with these words of despair, The darkness is my closest friend. Maybe you've experienced that kind of spiritual depression, where it seemed like the heavens were brass, and you couldn't get a hold of God, and you prayed, but it felt like your prayer was bouncing off the ceiling.

C.S. Lewis writes about that so poignantly in the book, Grief Observed. He says, but go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find?

[17 : 56] A door slammed in your face, the sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside, and after that, silence. And you might as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become.

That kind of spiritual depression is something Christians sometimes experience. That's why God in such mercy gave us Psalm 88. Or we have circumstantial suffering, a ninth form of suffering.

The Apostle Paul describes this in so many places. In 2 Corinthians, he says, We were utterly burdened beyond our strength, so we despaired of life itself.

In fact, in our being, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. Later in 2 Corinthians, he says, As servants of God, we commend ourselves to you in every way, through great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger, through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise.

We are treated as imposters, and yet we are true, as unknown, and yet well known, as dying, yet behold, we live, as punished, yet not killed, as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

[19 : 25] In 2 Corinthians 11, he describes his suffering of flogging. He says that he was flogged five times.

That's a remarkable statement. Because 39 lashes with the Roman lash was such a cruel form of punishment, it tore into the subcutaneous layers of skin on the back and often even exposed the ribs on the back of the rib cage.

Frequently, people would have an artery severed during a flogging and would instantly bleed out. And yet the apostle had endured this flogging five times.

His back must have been just covered with scar tissue. And in addition to flogging, he says, He was beaten with rods, stoned on three occasions, and spent a day and a half in the open seas.

He experienced danger from rivers, from bandits, from Jew and Gentile alike, from false brothers, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, poverty, nakedness, exposure to the elements.

[20 : 35] Circumstances, difficult, painful circumstances, circumstantial suffering. Suffering. And then finally, there's the suffering the scripture describes as the suffering of chastisement.

Think of Jonah running from God in disobedience. And as the storm rages in the sea, he is thrown into the sea and swallowed by a great fish and eventually vomited up on shore as a changed man.

But a man who has endured the chastisement of God and has been transformed and has made submissive to God's will through the suffering of chastisement.

So suffering, in summary, is a universal experience of every Christian. There are no precautions you can take that will guarantee you to avoid suffering.

You can work hard to construct a safe and pleasing life. You can plan your career. You can do careful financial planning. You can eat the right foods and you can exercise to maintain good health and you can cultivate solid relationships with your family and your friends.

[21 : 53] You may nurture your children, but something outside your control will intrude on your plans. And what Romans 8.18 is teaching us is that we will all suffer.

Now I've identified for us some of these broad categories of suffering and affliction that we find in the scripture. But in our lives, of course, suffering is not so carefully compartmentalized into just those ten forms.

Sometimes they overlay one another. And so financial suffering may be due to unemployment, but it can quickly bleed over into emotional distress or marital conflict or even health problems or suffering can impact our children and distract us from our calling to shepherd them.

And these broad categories of suffering can overlay with one another and create a perfect storm of affliction. And probably many of us here today can think of times or maybe even now are experiencing times where we've known several types of suffering all at the same moment.

And in our text, the apostle identifies the ways that we suffer, but he also places the suffering on the balance scale. And he asserts that our suffering cannot be compared to the glory that will be revealed in us.

[23 : 27] I think sometimes we read this passage wrongly. We think that it's describing the glory that will be revealed to us. And we think of being present and seeing that glorious day of the Lord when God will exalt the Lord Jesus Christ to the highest place and give him a name that is above all names and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father.

And what we think of that day and what a day that will be. How glorious that will be. And how we will weep in that day with tears of joy and hearts overflowing with thankfulness to God for his kindness and his care.

What a sublime moment that will be. As glorious as that is, I think that's not the glory described in this passage.

This passage is not describing just the glory that will be revealed to us. It's describing the glory that will be revealed in us.

Human beings were once beautiful. Adam and Eve were the glory of God's creation. They excelled all the rest of the created order in such profound ways.

[24 : 53] Mankind was beautiful and glorious made with an intelligence and rationality like God's. Human limited but of the same sort of rationality and intelligence.

And mankind lived in fellowship and communion with God. Possessing a nobility that we cannot even fathom. And the end of God's saving grace to us is not merely the forgiveness of sins and all the problems of evil and suffering that has been brought upon mankind because of sin.

As glorious and as marvelous and as incredible as that is, the end of God's purpose is his glory, his glory in us, his glory revealed in us.

We will experience something greater than just the restoration of the glory that Adam and Eve lost. We're to have an enjoyment of God and a participation in God that will surpass what Adam experienced.

He was in a state of innocence. If he had continued in that state of innocence, he would have been confirmed in righteousness.

[26 : 15] And the glory, that would, that being confirmed in righteousness would have been the reward that God had given him if he had perfectly obeyed.

That reward will be ours because Christ has perfectly obeyed for us. And we'll be confirmed in righteousness. The glory that will be revealed in us is more glorious and more delightful even than what Adam experienced.

Because we'll be confirmed in righteousness, unable to fall, always delighting ourselves in God and the splendor and glory of God that we see from time to time, that we experience sometimes, that we, in times of enlargement of heart, experience glimpses of and are melted by will be our experience.

So Paul's comparing here the future glory of God's people to our present suffering. And he's saying our present, he puts them on a balance scale and he says our present suffering is not worth comparing to the glory that'll be revealed in us.

The picture here is that it's something that is heavy enough, the glory is heavy enough to tip the balance scale. And the idea is that our future glory revealed in us is so weighty that our pleasant afflictions will seem like a load of feathers by comparison to the glory.

[27 : 43] Very similar themes in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, our light to momentary troubles, Paul says, are achieving in us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all.

How is that? How is it, how does it far outweigh everything else? Let me give you at least three ways. One is in intensity. The comparison is between the intensity of our suffering and the intensity of the glory that'll be revealed in us.

And our suffering is heavy. It hurts. It overwhelms us. We groan and cry and sometimes scream under the weight of our suffering. But Paul, a man who is profoundly acquainted with suffering, says the weight of our present suffering is not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us.

So the intensity will be much greater. And of course, the location is the glory will be revealed in us, literally in our being. It's the same thing that he says in the parallel passage in 2 Corinthians 4.

Outwardly, we're wasting away, but inwardly, we're being renewed day by day. And the sufferings we experience in this life affect us outwardly.

[29 : 03] We waste away because of them. But the real me, the inner me, is going to participate in his glory. Not just that we will observe the glory and beauty of the triune God, we will experience it.

One day, God will give us the wonder of sharing in his sufferings and we will also share in his glory. What an amazing thing.

And of course, the duration is another way in which it is intensified for us because our sufferings we experience in this life are for the moment of time. But the glory that will be revealed in us is eternal.

However much we suffer in this life, it is just a blip on the screen compared to unending glory that will be revealed in us throughout the coming ages.

So how should we respond to suffering? Each of us is suffering in some way.

[30 : 09] Perhaps even today, each of us, I'm sure each of us have one of these ten sufferings that I've listed that we can relate to even at this moment. And of course, we will suffer.

And what perspectives can enable you to endure it? One is we need to have a long view because our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us.

Any moment of suffering can only be understood, cannot, excuse me, cannot be understood in terms of this life. Because without a vision for eternity, without a vision for future glory that will be revealed in us, we can't endure our present sufferings.

And the assertion of this passage is that our present sufferings pale when compared to the glory that will be revealed in us. Of course, our concept of time is flawed.

We think in terms of our life on this planet, we forget that we are immortal beings, forgetting that the days and months and even years of present suffering will give way to an eternity in the presence of God.

[31 : 29] And our means of evaluation is flawed because we're corporal creatures. We live in bodies which we experience and evaluate through our five senses. So we experience suffering through our senses.

We feel pain. We hear accusations. We experience betrayal. We suffer financial loss. We watch our children make poor decisions. In our minds, we replay the discouragements and disappointments of our days.

It's hard for us to step out of this sense-oriented world and make a spiritual evaluation of the grace of God that is at work in us.

So we have to remind ourselves that the experience of trials cannot be accurately interpreted through our five senses. So that's my first point.

Have the long view. Secondly, how do we respond? We're to stand firm. Suppose that this life was all that there is.

[32 : 34] What if there were no hope of glory? What if there was no glory to be revealed in us for which we wait? If that were true, I cannot imagine enduring anything that I could avoid.

But I can't imagine crumbling under the weight of any suffering that was brought to me and was unavoidable. But there's an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs it all that enables us to stand firm in the face of present suffering.

in the words of 1 Corinthians 15, therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord because you know your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

There's that eternal weight of glory. Do you remember the words of Jesus that I referenced earlier in this message that he said that we would suffer as he suffered?

Jesus entered into all manner of suffering for us. He faced the political persecution of a rigged trial that was held illegally in the dead of night.

[34 : 02] He was abandoned by his friends. He was beaten and mocked and spat upon by his enemies. He was betrayed by Peter who only hours earlier promised he would die for him.

He was hung naked on a cross to die. Even on the cross he was mocked by the men who hung beside him and taunted by the mob and those who were around the cross.

And most profoundly he suffered the loss of the most important relationship he had experienced from all from before all time.

He was abandoned by the father as he bore our sins. We hear his cry of agony from the cross. My God my God why have you abandoned me?

He had all power. He could have come down from the cross. He could have brought instant retribution on his tormentors but he stayed on the cross.

[35 : 23] He stayed on the cross and he suffered. Why did he stay on the cross? He stayed on the cross because he was suffering for you and me and everyone who would ever repent and believe.

If he had come down from the cross he would have disassociated himself from us and we would have been consigned to everlasting suffering.

This is how our Savior suffered for us. He was the only truly innocent sufferer ever.

What sustained him in his suffering? Hebrews 12 says it was joy for the joy set before him he endured the cross.

He looked beyond the cross. He looked beyond its shame to the joy that would be his in the presence of the Father and in the company of all the redeemed.

[36 : 31] He looked forward to that experience that is described in Isaiah 53 seeing the travail of his soul and being satisfied as he brought many sons to glory for joy he endured for the glory set before him he endured.

May we follow in his steps. Let's pray together. Father we confess that we do not like suffering we groan against it and we complain against it and we sometimes even question your kindness and your providence because of it and we ask that you would forgive us for our hardness of heart and our spiritual blindness and we pray that you would help us to find our joy in you in the midst of suffering and to look forward to the glory that will be revealed in us in that great day of the Lord.

Help us Lord to contextualize all of our suffering not just with our five senses but with this larger picture of the fact that through suffering you are bringing many sons to glory and we praise you for this in Christ's name.

Amen.