

Sermon for August 3, 2014 - 8th Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 8:18-25 (NKJV)

Theme: From Groans to Glory

- 1) *Creation itself suffers patiently in view of the promised glory*
- 2) *Suffering is the sign that glory is about to be born*
- 3) *Hope in this glory sustains us.*

¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; ²¹ because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. ²³ Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. ²⁴ For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.

Over the course of my short ministry, I have met Christians who suffered a lot: women who have been raped, families who lost everything in a natural disaster, men who have been beaten, and faithful followers of Christ who suffered very painful and prolonged deaths . . . And the question I am tempted to ask is: Why? Why does God allow some of his faithful followers to suffer so much on this earth?

Truth be told: God rarely answers that question. How come? Because, as hard as this is to accept, God knows that the answer to this question will not help or strengthen us in the midst of our suffering. Instead of answers, God offers us something far more important: hope.

And the hope God offers us in our suffering is not some mere wish or feeling. It is real, powerful and eternal. The hope God offers has the ability to strengthen and sustain us - turning the evil meant to devastate us into something that builds us up and brings us closer to God. But how can the hope God offers us do that? What is this amazing hope that promises so much? It is the almighty Lord himself and His promises of unconditional love, forgiveness and eternal glory.

With St. Paul as our guide, let us consider our path through suffering which leads **From Groans to Glory**. 1) *Creation itself suffers patiently in view of the promised glory.* 2) *Suffering is the sign that glory is about to be born.* 3) *Hope in this glory sustains us.*

Part One: Creation itself suffers patiently in view of the promised glory

Our sermon text is from the 8th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. If I were to describe this chapter of the Bible in one word, that word would be "comfort".

In the verses before our sermon text, St. Paul tells us how Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death - saving us to live to God's glory as His dearly loved children. God has even sent the Holy Spirit into every believer's heart to mark us as His children.

Paul makes this point in the verses right before our text, when He writes: "*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and joint*

heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. (Romans 8:16-17 NKJV)

Notice that God doesn't promise us an easy life on this earth. As Christians we can expect suffering, but Paul also writes: *I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*

Notice that Paul does not minimize the suffering we face - and neither should we. However, we should also be careful not to minimize the glorious salvation offered to us through faith in Christ Jesus. As bad as earthly suffering gets, it still does not even come close to comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us. What is that glory? It is that we are God's dearly loved children - coheirs with Christ who will live with Him forever in heaven. We can be certain that this is who we are because Jesus took all our sins upon himself and went to the cross - suffering the punishment we deserved. Through baptism God the Father declares every believer his dearly loved son or daughter - a coheir with Christ whom he will glorify on the last day.

St. John once wrote: *Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. (1 John 3:1-2 NKJV)*

Jesus said: *"I am coming quickly."* (Revelation 22:20 NKJV) Every day that passes is a day that brings us closer to the end of our suffering. We can't feel our glory now because it is hidden. But soon it will be revealed. Soon the suffering we face will come to an end.

For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God.²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope;²¹ because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

In order to understand what Paul means in these verses, we must first understand how closely creation is tied to man. Everything in this world was created for man - teaching him about the wonderful relationship he has with God. When man was perfect, so was creation. When man was cursed because of sin, so was creation. Why? To show mankind that his relationship with God is broken and needs to be fixed.

Paul says that *creation was subjected to futility*. . . "The purpose of creation is to glorify God. But ever since the Fall, people see created things, and not their Creator, as their highest good." People are constantly making things like spouses, children, friends, fame, money, leisure, etc... their gods, but these things - in and of themselves, are worthless. Ever since the fall into sin, their true meaning has been lost on sinful man.

And what is suffering other than God calling our attention to the futility of putting our love in created things? Sickness shows the futility of our bodies. Financial loss reveals the emptiness of money and material things. Death shows the meaninglessness of physical life. Suffering most certainly reveals the futility of the created world and forces us to look elsewhere for hope. Creation cannot comfort us. It cannot give us a future, but Christ, the Son of God can. He has restored our relationship with God. Through his life he won righteousness for us. Through his death he won the forgiveness of sins. Yes, the futility that creation is subjected to forces us to look elsewhere for hope, and God reveals to us where true meaning, comfort and forgiveness can be found, namely in his Son.

And so *creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God*. Once we, God's children, are liberated, then creation itself will be liberated. The new created order that will arise from the ashes of the old will once again serve the purpose it was originally created to serve: to reflect the renewed and restored relationship between God and man. Creation will be free from all pain, suffering and death - having the glory it had before the fall, only better (as God promises).

On the path from groans to glory, what will sustain us in our suffering? Well, look at what sustains creation in its futility: the promised glory of the revelation of the sons of God. And is that glory really coming? Yes it is. The suffering we endure are the signs that this glory is about to be born.

Part Two: Suffering is the sign that glory is about to be born

²² For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. ²³ Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

To understand the mindset God wants us to have when suffering, Paul uses the illustration of child birth. I remember when Isaiah was born. Laura had a tough delivery – 4 hours of pushing. I remember the loud groaning and the pain my wife was going through, but I also remember the anticipation of meeting our first child. He took a long time to be born, and I remember the worry Laura expressed: “When is he coming? Is everything ok?” Laura was getting tired. The doctor was getting a little apprehensive and told the nurses to get the operating table ready for a c-section, but then it happened. Isaiah was born, and what joy and relief it brought us – especially Laura.

Creation is groaning with birth pangs. Its pains are not in vain, but are serving a purpose. As a mother in labor groans in anticipation, groaning with purpose and meaning - knowing that each contraction is a contraction closer to the birth of her child - so also does creation. And so do we, as we suffer in this world.

In the midst of the pain, let us remember that Jesus has forgiven us all our sins through His life, death and resurrection. Salvation is ours through faith in Him. Our eternal deliverance is about to be born, but this process takes time. Why? Because God is patient - not wanting anyone lost, but all people to come to a knowledge of the truth. And so we eagerly wait for our redemption, groaning prayers for strength and endurance in the midst of our sufferings. And as we groan, we look forward to the birth of the glory that will soon be revealed to us. And hope in this glory sustains us.

Part Three: Hope in this glory sustains us.

For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.

I want to tell you a story about a young woman who was raped. About a year after it happened, she confided in me her story and feelings. You see, she blamed herself for what had happened (even though I can tell you with certainty that she was not at fault). She felt lost, alone, and abandoned by God. She never wanted to sleep because her dreams terrorized her. All she felt was blackness. The only thing that seemed to help was as much alcohol as possible, to temporally numb her continual, emotional pain.

I remember trying to reassure her of God's love, but she said to me, “I don't feel this love. All I feel is terror. How do I know that God loves me when I feel so dirty, sinful and abandoned?” This is when we

talked about hope. Of course we don't feel the glory that is ours in Christ in the midst of suffering and terror - just as we don't see or feel the sun during a cold, dark storm in the night. But this does not mean that the sun does not exist and will not shine upon us in the morning. God's love for us exists, even when we don't feel it. How do we know? Because, close to 2000 years ago, God sent his Son to suffer and die for all our sins. Nothing can ever change that fact. And nothing can ever change the promises God makes concerning you in Scripture. Deliverance from the painful earth and your future glory with him is real. How do I know? Because He signed this promise of your deliverance with the blood of his Son. In Baptism He has given you his Holy Spirit as a seal, guaranteeing your salvation. Just because we cannot physically see, touch or feel these things, doesn't mean they aren't real. They are very real; but right now they can only be possessed through faith.

And this faith, this most certain hope, has the ability to sustain you through the worst times imaginable. It is said that those who survived World War 2 concentration camps were those who did not give up the hope of being rescued – a hope that seemed impossible given their situation. But their hope turned out to be well placed. Now, if a mere, uncertain, earthly hope of rescue can accomplish that, imagine what true, certain, spiritual hope in your Almighty God can accomplish! (Actually you don't have to wonder. Study the life of Paul in Scripture and you will see the amazing things it can accomplish in the midst of suffering!)

Why do Christians suffer in this earth? God may never answer this question for us this side of heaven. Instead of an answer He give us something for more valuable: hope. So as you travel your path from groans to glory, remember that *Creation itself suffers patiently in view of the promised glory. Suffering is the sign that glory is about to be born, and hope in the glory God promises us sustains us in our weakness.* May the LORD ever comfort you in this life as you continue to press on in faith towards the glory that is about to be revealed. Amen.