

“Good Pain, Really?”

Romans 8:18-25

Third in Series

May 3, 2020

Pastor Andy Kinsey

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us.”

- Romans 8:18

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, creation is indeed groaning in labor as it awaits your redemption: by your Spirit help us to receive the first fruits of your Son Jesus Christ and so live in the hope of your great love: Amen.

Message

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:28).

I cannot think of a more startling claim in all of scripture than what the apostle Paul says here: The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed.

Unless you are living in complete isolation, without contact to the news, the “sufferings of this present time” are evident everywhere. Indeed, I am wondering what such a list of sufferings might look like; what would be on it?

For example, would it have the ever-growing number of deaths in the United States, due to COVID-19, which are now more than all American fatalities during the Vietnam War? Or the growing number of families who are trying to make ends meet because a loved-one has died or has lost a job?

Would such a list include the growing number of healthcare professionals who are coping with this pandemic on a daily basis, who are dealing with the constant threat of sickness and death? Or the growing number of persons who are having a difficult time coping emotionally, psychologically?

Would such a list include the number of communities most vulnerable to the virus, especially communities of color and the underserved, along with those who have underlying conditions?

I can only marvel at this unique statement of faith: “I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18).

Unique Passage

What does the apostle Paul know that the rest of the world, even the church, does not know?

For it is a most “unusual” passage, as Paul mounts a “frontal attack” on the problem of pain and suffering.¹ And the reason it is so “unusual” is because this passage is the only place in Paul’s letters where he explicitly links the destiny of human beings to the rest of creation.² In other words, Paul does not simply reduce the activity of God’s Spirit to the individual. No, the redemption of our bodies involves all creation: all of what God has made, including human beings, is groaning in “bondage to decay” and waiting for salvation (Roman 8:22).

As Genesis makes very clear, the consequences of sin did not simply effect Adam and Eve, but the whole earth (Genesis 3:16-17). Creation itself is in labor pains (Romans 8:22). The whole of creation has been “subjected to futility” as a result of human wrong-doing (Romans 8:20).

It’s a sobering picture: *God’s creation is not in sync with what God intended – and that’s means all of life.*

And yet, the apostle Paul appears to have a *mountain top view* to God’s plan of salvation, to what God is doing, and it’s as if he sees how God’s Spirit is working to rescue the whole cosmos, in spite of decay and death and suffering, and put it back on the right track.³

And it’s quite a view for those who have been *adopted by grace* into God’s family – having the assurance of the Spirit, on the one hand, bearing witness with

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 251.

² Ibid.

³ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans 1-8 – Part I* (Louisville, KY: John Knox/Westminster Press, 2004), 152.

our spirit (Romans 8:16), and then reminding us that we belong ultimately to Christ on the other, as *heirs* of God and *joint heirs* with Christ (Romans 8:17).⁴

We are part of a new family. The Holy Spirit has given us this amazing view, this incredible inheritance, of grace in spite of how we have acted toward God (Romans 8:14). But it's an inheritance that comes with a qualification, and it's a big qualification: *if – only if –* we suffer with Christ will we be glorified with Christ (Romans 8:17).⁵

It's a reminder of what Paul wrote in Romans 6:4: "We were buried with Christ by baptism into his death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

It's a vision of what God's new family looks like and how it is to act – having died with Christ, we have lasting fellowship with God and each other, forgiveness of sins, joyful service, eternal life. But it is also a vision of identifying *with Jesus in his suffering*: that if we die with Christ in baptism, we will rise with Christ in glory (Romans 6:5).

Death-cross, resurrection-glory. This is the pattern we follow.

Reflections on Suffering

Now, I don't know if, over the last six weeks, you have thought a great deal about the problem of pain or suffering. It is pretty much unavoidable, especially if you know of persons who are going through times of loss right now, or if you know of someone who has been affected by the virus. But the reports are constant. And it is quite common to ask, Where is God in all this suffering and pain?⁶

I know one of the things I did a few weeks ago was get out my copy of the novel *The Plague* by Albert Camus. It is the story about the devastating effects a plague has on the city of Oran. As the novel unfolds, we read about the age old question of evil, as the town doctor says that "the only certainties we all have in common are love, suffering, and exile."⁷ But Camus's novel also raises the ageless

⁴ See Pastor Andy Kinsey's Sermon "Rebranded in the Spirit" based on Romans 8:12-17 (April 26, 2020) at www.franklingrace.org.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Giles Fraser, "Where Is God in this Covid-19 Horror?" at *UnHerd* (April 10, 2020).

⁷ Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York, NY: Random House, 2008), 5.5.2.

question of “If God is all-powerful and all-good, and hates suffering as much as we do, then why does God allow it to happen?”⁸

Unfortunately, Camus does not entertain the notion that God might be opposed to the plague as well, and he does not consider how, as C.S. Lewis puts it, God might be using suffering to get our attention, as suffering is God’s “megaphone to a deaf world.”⁹

That is to say, if we listen to C.S. Lewis and, of course, to the apostle Paul, we find a God who is able to weave a new creation in spite of the damaging events that work against it. On this view, even sickness and death can become, within God’s providence, a means of achieving good.¹⁰

To be sure, this does not mean that God *causes* sickness or disease. Rather, it means that not even sickness or disease are beyond God’s power to transform and even use for God’s final purposes.¹¹

God’s Final Word

It is a reminder that topics like suffering and death are not easy topics to address, especially when so much suffering and death stare us in the face on a daily basis. Indeed, I am sure that persons in a COVID-19 unit would question whether God would deliberately send this virus. It is certainly an explanation I don’t share.

For if I am reading Paul correctly, I am not reading about the cause of suffering. Rather, I am reading about the way in which God’s purposes will prevail in the end because of what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead (Romans 6:9). I am reading about the way in which God does not abandon us, but how God is with us, as God was with Christ in moments of darkness. In fact, what I am reading about is hope in the midst of death and despair.

Certainly, the question of evil and suffering is before us, but so is the message of hope and the very nature of hope. And if I hear what Paul is saying, I

⁸ Graham Tomlin, “In a Bewildering World, Easter Brings Hope” at *UnHerd* (April 12, 2020).

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1940/1996), 91.

¹⁰ Graham Tomlin, “Is the Coronavirus a Judgement from God?” *Church Times* (May 1, 2020) at www.churchtimes.co.uk.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

realize that it is in the nature of Christian hope to keep on hoping when there is no basis for hope.¹²

In other words, it is *in the very nature of Christian hope* to keep on longing for that day when there will be no more suffering, even when there is suffering amongst us; that there will be a day when there will be no more crying, even when there are tears on our faces (Revelation 21:4).

It is why as Christians we continue to hope against hope, even when we confront the impossible, for that's what hope does! It continues to believe in God's good purposes, when all the evidence runs contrary to it!

Now, to be sure, the skeptic may scoff, and if so, that's fine. Skeptics will be skeptics! But as Christians we continue to believe and have hope, and the reason we do is because of what God has done in Christ, of how God himself took on evil and defeated it on the cross, entering our darkness and lighting the way, taking the bad and transforming it into the good.

Such is the *source* of our hope! Such is the *reason* we can have hope, for even amidst suffering and death, there is the evidence of God's life and goodness and grace.

For there are people whose extraordinary lives, even now, are bearing witness to such a source of hope, to the truth of God's love and compassion, as they display courage each and every day, despite the odds; their lives convey hope, even when there appears to be no hope. There are people who are working for a cure and finding ways of helping, even now, when the odds seem to be against them.

Again, if such people can live in such hope, we can take comfort and live in such hope too, for we can live with the assurance that "God is working for good for those love him and who are called according to God's purpose" (Romans 8:28).

We can live in the hope that the future is not pointless: that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us; that God is able to take our pain and transform it; God is able to take whatever is facing us and bring about something we had not anticipated – a life filled with hope and light: the very goal of creation itself.

¹² Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*, 255.

Amen.