

Sermon 72: Romans 8:18: A Christian Response to Suffering

OUTLINE

What should I think?

What should I expect?

What should I hope?

INTRODUCTION

Atheism truly is one the world's saddest, most hopeless, purposeless, meaningless, moralless, systems of thought. They have a system of belief that says we are here by chance, exist for no reason, this is all there is, there is no purpose to our existence, no objective grounds for right and wrong; and when you die it is all over. This short life of pain, with its mixed joys, passing satisfactions, and fleeting pleasures is all there is for the Atheist. Significance is left to be found in our high school year book accomplishments, how many likes we get on facebook, how many views on Youtube, the partial memory of our children who mostly remember our faults, and our contribution in a world of 7.1 billion people. Every one we love dies, every relationship will be affected by selfishness, every pleasure will fade as old age dulls our senses, and we will have to contend with pain, immobility and a possible painful death when it all comes to an end. If the atheist is right, that there is no God, no right and wrong, no purpose for our existence, there is no compelling reason why life is better than death. Life simply is and not ought to be, nothing is better than anything else because all that is, is merely incidental. Lack of meaning, lack of purpose, lack of hope and lack of norms are the inescapable conclusions of atheism.

Imagine now you want to commit suicide, you phone a helpline and at the end of the helpline is an atheist. You have suffered some deep mental, emotional and physical pain; you are depressed and feel you have no reason to go on. You fear the pain of death but you are not sure that that is enough to scare you off death anymore, you need someone to remind you why you should not kill yourself. What response would an atheist give to this predicament? Lets think about what they would say.

You should stay alive for your loved ones: What if your pain is the loss of an only child, or the pain inflicted by your loved ones?

You should stay alive because you are special and have unique value: This is hard to believe when you believe that you are here by chance and not necessity and that you have no purpose given to you by a designer.

Happiness is just a concoction of chemicals in the brain no more right than hatred. If the atheist is consistent then these are the sorts of things they should counsel.

'Don't feel guilty over your actions, there is no God to tell you what is right or wrong, your emotions are the result of your upbringing, cast off these moral restraints and silence those emotions.'

'We all have to die, this life is all there is, live for the now! Stop wasting time whining and start living!' Or 'stay alive so that you can bear offspring.'

None of these things will satisfy, we have eternity in our hearts, we long for greater joys than this world can offer.

Paul in the verses before us gives us a totally different picture, a picture of hope and perseverance in the face of suffering. He puts before us the picture of a man who believes in God, and a God who has saved us in Christ, a God who has reached down to fallen man and saved them and is keeping them for the new heavens and the new earth. He paints the picture of a human being who can cope with suffering and disappointment because he knows that glory and not suffering is his ultimate portion. He paints the picture of a human being in a suffering world who does not learn to cope by being stoic and indifferent to the pain, or by drowning out that pain in some fleshly distraction, no he sets his mind upon his hope in Christ, the glory that lies waiting for him.

Paul has been talking about how suffering is a part of every child of God's life, our portion in faithful following after Jesus. And with the introduction of the theme of suffering ending in a participation in Christ's glory, this set the tone for the rest of the chapter. It is as if Paul is now handling in detail this concern. If I am suffering as a Christian what is the guarantee that I will not be submerged and not reach heaven? Think on the rest of this chapter with this concern in mind. You will notice that he gives us perspective on our sufferings, v18, that creation is groaning and waiting for our glory, that we ourselves grown with the Spirit who is the firstfruits and guarantee of the resurrection, that the Spirit prays for us in our distress, that God is working all things out for good, that if God has called you you will also be glorified, that His salvation cannot be undone by anything, the suffering of the apostles is for your salvation, and nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ. You are not conquered but more than conquerors. Suffering will end in glory.

As we enter into this new section in chapter 8 we will be looking in depth at v18. We are looking at how a Christian faces suffering and want to answer three basic questions, what should I think?, what should I expect?, and what should I hope?

What should I think?

As Paul shows us how to face suffering he reminds us that the most important thing is how we think, 'For I consider....' This is the same word that he used when he told us to consider ourselves as dead to sin (Rom. 6:11). It is not a case of cognitive therapy where we merely lie to ourselves, but rather that we align our thinking with divine realities. In other words that we remember the truth that God has wrought, the nature of our sufferings and how it all ends. Based on the verses we have in front of us and others where Paul speaks about suffering we have some good lines of thought to follow.

Firstly, taking a long view of things our sufferings are temporary. Secondly, compared to the weight of eternal glory that is going to be revealed they are insignificant. Thirdly, we

have the help of the Spirit in our sufferings. Fourthly, we know that God is working all things out for good. Fifthly, no matter how bad it gets nothing can steal eternal life from us.

Here are the same thoughts contrasting suffering and glory.

Suffering is short, glory is eternal
Suffering is light, glory is weighty
Suffering is reversible, glory is irreversible

We have the certainty of glory after suffering (Rom. 8:17)
The greatness of glory over suffering (8:18)
The glimpses of glory in suffering (1 Pet. 1:8; Rom. 5:3)
The glorious aids of God in suffering (Rom. 8:26-28, intercession and providence)
The increase of glory by suffering (2 Cor. 4:17, 'For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.')
The transformation into glory through suffering (James 1:2-4, 'Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.' Christlike character!).

Suffering is seasoned by the facts:
It is for His name
It is the fellowship of His sufferings
It is temporary
It is working for good
It is from a Father's hand
And it will all end with, 'and they lived happily ever after.'

These are the thoughts we need to think as we face suffering. We are not like the Atheists who only have nothing to look forward to. We have an abundance of hope.

What should I expect?

Paul identifies for us the nature of our sufferings in the phrase, 'the sufferings of this present time,' helping us to categorise the types of suffering we should be expecting. The hope that we have extends to all the suffering that we suffer in this present time. What Paul is not saying is this, 'that God will save us from suffering in this present time.' No we certainly will suffer but our suffering is limited to this present time, and to the sufferings typical of this present time. In other words, we will only suffer from the sufferings that cannot kill, we will not suffer hell now, and we will only suffer them temporarily, in this present time.

The Christian in this present evil age suffers both more and less than the unbeliever. We suffer more because we not only exist in a fallen world and suffer all the weather changes,

earthquakes, plagues and other effects of the fall along with the rest of humanity, but we also suffer as Christians for the name of Christ.

It would be helpful for us to keep with Paul at this point, after all he is speaking from his own perspective of suffering as a Christians and the way that he thinks about his own sufferings. Lets quickly remind ourselves of the sufferings for the same of Christ and the church that he underwent. 2 Cor. 12:7-10, 'So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.'

2 Cor. 6:4-10, 'but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, 5 beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; 6 by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; 7 by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; 8 through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9 as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.'

2 Cor. 10:23-27, 'Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one---I am talking like a madman---with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. 24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?'

All of these are not worthy of being compared to the glory that we will one day have. This is part and parcel though of what we should expect, and count as nothing for the sake of knowing Christ in the fellowship of His sufferings. They are more than the world would suffer but I hope you can say with Paul that you would gladly suffer all things for the sake of the elect. They are painful but there is a sweetness in them.

Then we could list all the ailments known to humanity since the fall, all the things that Christians suffer, but which ultimately add up to less than what the unbeliever suffers because they are controlled by God for good, from a Father's hand, never beyond our ability to endure, as a refining furnace for our faith and opportunities for character growth. We suffer as children in God's hands with the assurance that He is in control and oversees all

the fallout of the effects of the fall and turns them into things beneficial for us. He gives purpose and meaning to our suffering, so that our present sufferings are tamed and they have the poison removed. They are painful but they do not destroy they end up building up and furthering God's glory.

What should I hope?

Paul has told us how to think and what to expect in our sufferings, but he also gives us the happy ending pointing us to the glory that we will receive. He indicates this in the words, '...the glory that is to be revealed to us.' What does Paul mean by 'the glory that is to be revealed to us'? We gain from the context that the glory in question is the glory of the new creation when Jesus makes all things new. The very next verse talks about creation waiting for the day when we receive our new bodies. Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones discussed a very important theme at this point in his exposition of these verses. He traced out the glory lost in Adam and regained in Christ, let me do that quickly as well.

In trying to answer the question, 'what is the nature of the glory?' beginning with what Adam lost and Christ gained gives us a helpful perspective. Adam was created perfect, he was sinless and righteous, he had a certain glory due to the unfallen nature of his condition. However, although Adam was perfect, he was not glorified. He was in a probationary period where he had to prove faithful before he would be allowed access to the tree of life and move into a higher state of righteousness and glory. He failed to stay obedient and win the right to eat of the tree of life and lost his original righteousness. As human beings we lost all the original gifts and benefits that Adam had when he sinned. We lost life, holiness, integrity, and fellowship with God. We lost any opportunity to even try to be good and earn glorification. The law only condemned us and could no longer offer any way to glory. However, Christ who was promised as a deliverer came and He was obedient His whole life through. He resisted every temptation and obeyed every command. He was obedient unto death and earned by His obedience the name above all names and His human nature was glorified into all that Adam fell short of, He became a life giving Spirit, Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:45. Christ won a state of human existence that could never taste death, in the direct presence of God in a new creation where satan, sin and death cannot dwell. Christ won more than Adam lost, this is the glory that will be revealed to us, and not only will we be spectators of the greatest display of glory in the universe, a glory that outstrips the birth of a galaxy of stars. We will also partake and participate in this glory.

How will we participate? Last week I glossed over the last words of 8:17, let me emphasize them now, 'provided we suffer with Him, in order that we may be glorified with Him.' We died to the Law in Christ's death, we resurrected to life in Christ's resurrection, we are justified as righteous in Christ's own righteousness, we are sons in Christ's Adamic sonship, we are heirs in Christ, we suffer in Christ, and we will participate in a resurrection like His and be glorified in Him too. As irreversible as Christ's own glorification is, so will ours be, as glorious as His was so will ours be, as definite as the end of His relationship to sin and death and satan is, so will ours be. We will be glorified with Him.

Our hope is the total reversal of every evil, the punishment of every sin, the drying of every tear, the destruction of death, the eternal vanquishing of satan, this and much more is what we anticipate and wait for. It is this which makes all our burdens light. It is this which as Paul puts it in 8:25 causes us to wait with patience. Suffering is not a soul crushing, despondent, hopeless, endless futility but a temporary discomfort.