

THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY

Romans 8:18–25

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Romans 8:18–25 (NIV)

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with 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 the one who subjected it, in 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 have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait 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.”

Notice that the sermon title this morning is “The Agony and the Ecstasy.” I think it might also well be entitled, “The Growing and the Glory.” Going through Romans is somewhat like climbing in a mountain range. Especially Romans 8, I think, is like this. You head up one peak and you think, as you’re toiling to the top, that when you have gotten to that point you’ll have the vista of everything else below you. It is the summit. Only to find that when you climb to that particular truth, you look around and there is a valley and yet another, higher peak to climb. It’s sort of like a mountain roller coaster. It gives you one spiritual high after another in going through it. We are let into the great secrets of God in this chapter, as well as throughout Romans. I think, for example, of the close relationship we have to God as sketched for us in Romans 7 and 8. In Romans 7, we find we have a new husband if we’re married to Christ. That bridegroom relationship is traced, which has to be the closest human relationship that’s possible. And that—

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when we're put into Christ—we have a new husband in Christ. We have a new name. We know His love, the love of a husband as only the bride can know it. We have the husband's wealth. We have the husband's future and his promise for success. We have his fortune. We have his glory. Then in Romans 8, we find our relationship with God is not now being traced as wife to husband, but we find our relationship being traced as son, or children, to father. We have been adopted by the Father through Christ our Lord. This adoption is both objective, and it is subjective. If we have come to Christ, it is objective in the sense that I don't have to feel it for it to be true. Indeed, as we traced last week, the Roman legal process was such that a person who went through the process of adoption was fully a member of the family and on equal footing with even the natural children born to the family. God has only one perfect Son by nature. That is Jesus Christ. The rest of us have been adopted into the family of God, and we've been made, therefore, joint heirs with Christ. But Paul goes on in Romans 8 to say, we're not only children of God objectively, but subjectively. We can feel it, for it is the Spirit of God himself bearing witness within our hearts that provokes the response "Daddy!" We can come to God in that familiar sort of a way: "Daddy, Father."

I'm tracing this background to get into the passage for today. When we look in Romans 7 and find the model that we're the bride to Christ, and in Romans 8 that we are the sons of God, we might well think, "The bride gets a honeymoon, and the son, if he's a child, gets to play." So it would be easy to make the deduction, therefore, of the Christian life that it is all honeymoon and all play. And Paul must now come in at this matter and speak to believing Christians—both in the first century and right now—to you and me in this room this morning. He must speak to us about suffering. How then—if we are the bride of Christ and the sons of God—how do we explain trial and trouble and sickness and suffering and death? Someone has sought to give a

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quick answer to that question by saying of the Lord—a kind of modern paraphrase of the Lord’s words—“Remember, I didn’t promise you Disneyland!”

We look now at the connecting verse which leads us into the section for today. We found as we closed last Sunday this in 8:17: “If children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs of Christ if we suffer with Him in order that we also may be glorified with Him.” When we came to that, I talked about the meaning of that word “provided.” Provided we suffer with Him, or if we suffer with Him. That there are two ways that the word “if” can be understood.

I’d illustrate it this way. Nearly six-and-a-half years ago now, when I was a pastor candidate for this church, I could have made this statement: “If I am pastor of this church, then I will preach systematic, expository messages.” The word “if” in that sentence was purely conditional. It was conditioned on the fact that this congregation would want me to become pastor. But now if I say the same phrase, “If I am pastor of this church, then I will preach expository sermons on a systematic basis,” there is no question as to my status. So I’m using it in a hypothetical sense and “if I’m the pastor” can be translated or used, “since I am pastor of this church.”

The reason why I use that is there’s an important distinction in language that’s being employed in 8:17. If we use the word “if” in a conditional sense, it means that in addition to being justified by grace freely, to be a Christian, one also has to suffer. So if you are not suffering, therefore, you are not a Christian. That is not what Paul is saying, however. He’s saying, “Since you are a Christian, you’re going through suffering.” In other words, suffering is an integral part of being a believer in Christ. We want to try to get a handle on this and understand exactly what is involved with suffering.

It is an escapable conclusion from all of the New Testament, and this passage included, that we, as believers in Christ, are not exempt from suffering. Jesus promised us in John 16:33: “In the world, you will have tribulation.” The word “tribulation” describes kind of being in a vice, or in

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pressure, that squeezes you. It's the sort of thing you'd do to grapes when you put them in a wine press. You would subject them to tribulation. Someone would stamp on them and get all the juice out. So in the world, expect this afflicting type of pressure. In Acts 14:22, when Paul is finished with his first missionary journey, Luke records that he and Barnabus went through the area strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

There are so many quotations. We could fill the whole hour with just quotations from the New Testament on this subject. One other that I'll mention is 1 Peter 1:6: "Now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials." There are really two kinds of suffering that are involved for the believer.

I. The first kind of suffering is the suffering which the believer experiences because of his linkage or his identity with Jesus Christ.

Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:12: "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted."

Sometimes the persecution or the suffering takes very subtle forms—such as ridicule and misunderstanding of motivation and the like. I think of a modern, glaring example of Christians suffering for identification with the cause of Christ is Anita Bryant, for example, whose faithfulness to the gospel has exposed her to a heap of ridicule in the modern press and the secular setting and the like. When one takes his stand as a Christian in direct contrast with the values and mores of the world, the educational system of the world—a person comes along in the university setting and says, for example, "I believe in creation"—to say that in many settings is to be ridiculed. It's kind of the Athenian way of dealing with someone we don't like. We don't throw stones at them like they do in some more primitive cultures. We just laugh them out of

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existence and say, “Don’t tell me someone’s still clinging to those Neanderthal types of views.”

So there is suffering as part of being a Christian.

When you’re in business and you decide not to cut corners, but to shoot straight and play fair.

And when you’re going through the grocery market checkout stand and find that they have misread your bill and it came out to your good. And to be honest at that point and also take your stand on the side of suffering for Christ’s sake. It can be a very great suffering physically. It can lead to martyrdom. But it can also be something very small. But it’s suffering because we are associated with Christ.

There is, however, a second kind of suffering.

II. That suffering comes because of our association or linkage with the human race.

This is the suffering which involves us, for example, in wars, in crime, in accidents, in genetic defects, in sickness, in death—all of which Christians, from time to time, experience. The rain falls on the just and the unjust. A friend of mine said after a severe car wreck a number of years ago, “We have found out that Christians are not exempt from car wrecks simply because they are Christians.” The difference between the Christian and the non-Christian in an automobile accident is that Christ is with the Christian in that time.

Christ, in His own experience of suffering, did experience suffering from both of these sources—His linkage with God and His linkage with humanity. His linkage with God resulted in His crucifixion. But His linkage with humanity, the fact that He became flesh, also exposed Him to the sufferings of poverty, to the suffering itself of physical death. In regard to this whole matter, therefore, of suffering—whether it’s suffering we’re experiencing because we’re linked with Christ, or whether it’s suffering we experience simply because we’re mortal and must pass through death and from time to time must pass through catastrophe or illness or accidents or the

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like—how do we face into this kind of thing as the bride of Jesus Christ and as the children of God?

The rest of chapter 8, from verse 18 on, is concerned with giving pastoral counsel to believers. The great Apostle Paul, the mighty theologian coming in on this pastoral level of concern, says, “Here is a handle by which you can get understanding, get strength, as you go through the times of suffering.” He says four things. We’re just going to look at one of them today. The first thing he says in regard to suffering is there is a disproportion now between our suffering and the glory to come. That’s 18 through 25. I’ll quickly look at the three other things he’s going to say. Then we’ll look at today’s passage.

The second thing he’s going to say about suffering is that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness, verses 26 through 27. The third thing he’s going to say, in verses 28 through 30, is that God is working all things for good. The fourth thing he will say about suffering is, in verses 31 through 39, nothing can separate us from God.

First he’s saying in these verses today there is a disproportion between the suffering we experience now and the glory which is to come. In verse 18, he states the principle. Often you’ll find two kinds of logic or argumentation when you’re advancing something. One is called inductive, where you build all the elements of your case and you finally reach the conclusion. The other is deductive, where you reach the conclusion and then tell how you got to the conclusion. Here Paul is stating his conclusion first—verse 18—that the sufferings now at the present time are not worth comparing to the glory which is to come. Then he provides the illustrations as to what he means.

So, first the principle. He says we have ahead of us the glory. Indeed, according to 8:30, whom God justified, He also glorified. We’re on the road. We’re not yet all that God has for us. Isn’t that a wonderful thought? That alone can make the day!

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How do we understand this word “glory”? What is waiting for us when we say that Christians are going to go through an experience of glory. We’re going to be glorified. Does this mean that we grab hold of a wire coming out of us, and we plug it into a socket, and we light up and have luminescence? Maybe part of that might be involved. Remember Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration—what happened to Him? Peter says, “We beheld His glory.” What happened? His countenance became radiant as the sun. His garments became dazzling white, and there was an electrification of beauty of Christ that was incredible as He was glorified in the presence of His disciples.

But there is more involved in this than that. We see glory on a human level. For example, I enjoy it when people think well of me, and you do, too. We’re looking for compliments. We’re looking for assurance. We’re looking for people to say to us—to reaffirm us—to say, “You’re doing a good job!” We seek glory. And we do it partly innately because we know, somehow as human beings, without even rationalizing it, that we were meant for approval. We were destined for glory, to receive honor of some kind. Jesus very clearly says in John 5 that the only way this quest for glory can be fulfilled is to receive it from God. It can never be received from man. So to be glorified is to be, in the doctrinal sense, fully and entirely free from sin and evil and all of its effects in our body, our spirit, our soul. It is to be eternal. It is to be in a state of arrested, perfect development. That is, I am not now in a state of arrested development. I am on a degenerative scale, and so are you. I’ve said this many times, and I’m living proof that it’s going on. Arrested development means that we are put into a position of perfection—physically, spiritually, intellectually—and that is a radiance, a glory. We become like Christ in His resurrected body. When you look at one another, you are not looking at each other as you will yet be. When you see me, you haven’t seen anything yet. As 1 John 3:2 says, “Beloved, now we are sons of God.” Right now, we are sons of God. “But it does not yet appear what we shall be.”

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Along with this great theme of glorification—we are headed toward a point of glory—is the inescapable linkage that is always made with suffering. Glory and suffering, as they're presented in the Scripture, appear to be inseparable. Whenever the Scripture talks about glory, in the next breath the person who is writing the Scripture is talking about suffering.

Someone has said the Scripture always links together hurts and hallelujahs. And we have seen this already in Romans. For example, Romans 5:2: "We rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God." Then, in the next beat, verse 3: "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings." In verse 17 we have seen, "If we are heirs with Christ, in order to be glorified with Him we must also suffer with Him." And again in verse 18: "The sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing to the glory which is to come." Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17: "For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."

Literally, what he's saying is, "For the momentary lightness of tribulation is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory." The momentary lightness of tribulation. Remember, that's coming from a person who was stoned five times, shipwrecked three times, in trials, in dangers, and the like.

And he's saying, "this slight momentary tribulation is not worth comparing to the glory to come." It's his way of restating what's here in Romans 8—that when you compare the suffering you have now to the glory which is to come, it is a very light thing. Yet here, it seems so very heavy.

If you told me, for example, to go pick up a 200-pound object, that would be, I think, impossible for me. Some of you, no. But for me, yes. That would be extremely heavy. But if there were some big scale in the room and this 200-pound object were put on the scale and nothing was on the other side, then naturally the 200-pound object would floor that side of the scale. But if you were to put a 10,000-pound object on the other side of the scale, what would happen? Of course,

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the 200-pound object, by comparison with the weight on the other side, would be exceedingly light.

This is what Paul is saying. You have no idea, he says, as you face suffering, of the comparison that there is between what you're going through. He's not ridiculing what a person is going through in suffering. He's not ridiculing martyrdom. He's not ridiculing death and disease and terminal illness and the suffering of accidents and the like. But he's simply saying, "If you will look at it from the development of the gospel—if you will look at it through the eyes of the open and empty tomb of the risen Christ—you will see that this momentary affliction, when compared to the weight of glory, is indeed very, very slight." Therefore, a doctrinal encouragement to us as we pass through suffering—as indeed we will. However heavy your load is, as a believer, it is nothing to compare to the weight of glory that waits for you as a child of God.

Paul goes on to illustrate the principle in verse 18—that the present suffering is not worth comparing to the glory which is to come—in two ways. The first way he illustrates the principle is by saying something about creation.

A. The suffering of creation itself is nothing compared to the glory that's coming to creation.

Then he uses us as an illustration again. We, the firstfruit of the Spirit, also groan for the adoption, the redemption, of our bodies.

1. So first, the illustration of creation. Verses 19-22 speak of this illustration that creation sufferings are nothing to be compared to the glory which is coming to the created world. To really get at this theme of creation, if we just watch the verbs, there are four verb passages. They tell us a great deal of what Paul is developing. First of all, he says of creation that it waits with eager longing for the revealing, the apocalypse, the manifestation of the sons of God. That's us. Creation is out there waiting with eager longing for our unveiling. God is kind of like a great Artist, a Sculptor, who's working on us, and He doesn't want to show His work yet because He's

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not done with it. There are some who would like to get a peek behind the veil or behind the canvas and see what God's working on. Because whatever God is working on is going to be great when it's unveiled. There's something out there—creation—that's waiting for our unveiling. And not just something simply waiting passively, but waiting with eager longing. It is literally, the verb is "watching with outstretched head." Sort of like a turtle coming out of its shell, looking around. This is sort of what Paul is saying about creation looking at us. It is craning the neck, or standing on tiptoes. The first idea is creation. Notice the personification of creation. It's almost treated as if it were human. It's more than just an inanimate kind of world. Creation waits with eager longing.

2. Then the second thing that Paul says about creation is that it was subjected to futility. That is, it's waited with longing because it was subjected to futility. Nature has not been able itself to attain the glory that it knows it's capable of. It wants that glory, but it lost its glory and it became futile. Of course, we here deal with basic scriptural passages like Genesis 3:17, where man and woman fell away from relationship with God and nature itself became cursed because of man and woman. Something happened to the environment. The environment is inevitably linked up with man. And of course we know this with the ecological crisis today, don't we? We know that the environment has something to do with man.

And we find in Revelation 22:3: "There shall be nothing anymore accursed in the new heavens and the new earth." The curse will be lifted and nature will not be subjected to futility. I think Peter put the futility very well in the passage that says, "The grass withers and the flowers fall" (1 Peter 2:24, NIV). Futility. The beautiful flower, coming out for only a few days, and then dying. The animal life, the survival of the fittest. The struggle. And yet, the lack of meaning. Dogs on the way to the pound to be gassed. The futility within nature. Waiting for something to happen that will break the cycle of decay and bondage to disease and the like. It was subjected to

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futility in the hope. In the hope. God knew Jesus Christ was going to come into the world and bring about new humanity, and when that new humanity is finally unveiled creation itself will be the ideal environment. It was when the first man was created. That is clearly what is being said in verse 21: “will be set free.” Nature itself will be set free.

We get an idea here by looking, for example, at the prophet Isaiah: “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain” (Isaiah 11:6-9, NIV).

Another beautiful passage, which speaks of this rejuvenation of nature: “The water shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. Burning sand shall become a pool and thirsty ground springs of water” (Isaiah 35:6-7).

And another passage from Isaiah 55:12: “For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace, and the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth in sighing. The trees of the field shall clap their hands.”

3. What’s going on? Nature is being liberated so it can fulfill all the tremendous, creative, beautiful functions designed for it by God. Its freedom is linked to us. Every year at springtime, creation tries to come alive. Creation tries to escape the futility of death and winter that it’s been subject to. Spring is to nature like New Year’s resolutions are to us. Every year it’s going to be different. My New Year’s resolutions months ago lay in shambles. Few of them are doing well. But at least I set the goals. If you don’t make some of them, ok. But at least you tried. You will make some of them. But spring is kind of like that New Year’s resolution. It’s trying, but it can’t quite escape its cycle of decay and bondage. Even as our fate is linked to the fate of Christ’s

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nature, creation's fate is linked to ours. Through mankind, nature was cursed. And through mankind, through us, nature will be delivered.

One writer has said, I think very beautifully and poetically: "Nature, the whole created order—plants and animals and all—nature resembles a bride who at the very moment when she was fully attired for marriage, saw the bridegroom [Adam] die. She stands yet in her aging bridal dress, her eyes full of tears, waiting for something to happen."

4. Paul says, fourthly, that nature is groaning in travail. Groaning. There's a deep upheaval within it. The word for travail is literally "birth pangs." It's something which one goes through about the time when a child is being delivered. Paul here, when using the word "groaning," is perhaps thinking of animals. The weak devoured by the strong. The ruthless destruction of plant life. Natural catastrophes of all kinds. He listens to the crying of the wind and the sea. He takes a metaphor from childbirth. Like a woman in labor, the whole world is groaning for release in agony, but it does so with hope. That is the reason that creation is groaning. It's not that it's going to die and pass away and be annihilated and obliterated. But it is groaning in the sense of being in travail because something better is about to be born.

And there's certainly a whole lot of difference between a cry of going down to death and a cry which is going to produce a birth. So the pain which creation is experiencing is to be swallowed up in joy. There is a liberation which is to happen to the whole created order, and the liberation is linked up to the revealing—the manifestation—of us as the sons of God in our resurrected and glorified bodies. We're going to have, along with our glorified bodies, a tremendous environment in which to function: a new heavens and a new earth.

So that's the first illustration that Paul has of this matter of suffering. Creation is suffering, but it's going to be liberated and its current suffering is not to be compared with the glory, which is to come.

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B. The second illustration which he uses is us. He says, “Not only creation is groaning, but we ourselves who have the firstfruits of the Spirit groan inwardly as we wait for the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23).

Remember, Paul has used this word “adoption” back in verse 15. You’ve received the Spirit of adoption. We indicated that, from God’s eyes, it’s like we’re now in the orphanage, the legal papers have all been signed, we’re truly the sons and daughters of God by belief in Jesus Christ. But the day is coming when the Parent is going to pick this child up—which is His legally—and take him to be with Him. Therefore, we are adopted, and we shall be adopted. Both kinds of adoption are spoken of here. But in the meantime, we have the firstfruits of the Spirit groaning for the redemption of our bodies. We have the firstfruits.

We shouldn’t just skip over scriptural words—there’s a tremendous meaning in terms. This word “firstfruits” is one such word—especially since we haven’t lived, most of us, in a farming kind of an area. So what firstfruits are may be the first apples you buy when you go to the store. The firstfruits has its rootage in a scriptural feast (Leviticus 23:10–14). It was the feast which took place immediately after Passover. In fact, it occurred the Sunday after Passover Sabbath. As it worked itself out in Jewish history, what would happen was—and this was going on at the time of Christ—on that first Sunday after Passover Sabbath, the chief priests would go out to a pre-selected parcel of ground and there reap the first spring harvest of grain. It was the law of Leviticus that no one in the country could eat from the spring harvest until this firstfruit had been offered to God. When the firstfruit had been offered to God, then everybody else themselves could begin partaking in the benefits of the harvest. And the spring harvest would go on until it was completed at Pentecost some fifty days later—or forty-nine days after Firstfruits.

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The word “firstfruits,” therefore, was used symbolically to speak of the fact that in the agricultural harvest, no one could partake of the benefit of that harvest until God had first been given the glory and the fruit. This term firstfruits is used of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says that Christ is the Firstfruit of those asleep. What does this mean? That no one could partake of the resurrection life, none of us could partake of the resurrection life—we couldn’t eat it, we couldn’t grab it—until the firstfruit had been offered to God. And who was the Firstfruit? None other than Christ himself. Since there is the beginning of the harvest, the harvest from death to resurrection has already started. It started in Christ. And it’s going to go on until the age is consummated. And at the end of the age, we shall all join so that the harvest is completed.

Now we who have the firstfruits of the Spirit—that is, the blessings of the Spirit—are to describe the age to come when there is no more bondage, no more disease, no more suffering of any kind. Already into our lives the Spirit has been given as an earnest, or a real estate payment which insures that the sale is going to be consummated. He’s the down payment of our inheritance, this residence of the Spirit within us.

We who have the Spirit of God also groan. This, to me, is the surprising paradox. You’d think Paul would say we who have the Spirit of God, while waiting for the redemption of our bodies, do nothing but sing, rejoice, enjoy, and deny that anything hurtful exists. But we also, who have the firstfruit of the Spirit, groan.

God has not called us to be charismatic Christian Scientists. To say, “Ignore suffering. By the confession of your mouth, you can wipe it out of existence. So if you’re sick, don’t say you’re sick. If you’re suffering, don’t say you’re suffering. It’s not real. What’s real is your confession of faith.” And as always, there is a measure of truth in what is being said, but it does not escape this fact that here even Paul is saying of spiritual believers, “We also groan.” And why are we

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groaning? Because we are linked with suffering. What kind of suffering are we linked with? We are linked with suffering because of our identity with Christ, and we're linked with suffering because of our identity as human beings. So we groan.

But it is not the death groan. It is the groan which, after the groaning is completed, leads to the birth of something new—and in this case, something better. Therefore, Paul says by way of exhortation that as we groan inwardly, we are to have hope and we are to have patience. Hope, he says, is something you cannot see. Therefore, the necessity is that you not lose faith in the midst of this. For if you have it, then you wouldn't hope for it. For hope to exist, something must not yet be at hand. And it is a definite hope, not a wish. The Christian hope is not saying, "I hope in the by-and-by, things will be better." That is not hope. That is a wish. Hope is certain. It's just an event in the future, which has not yet occurred, but it is going to take place.

I ran across in my reading this week a story that Martin Lloyd-Jones told. He was an English preacher, and he's written three 450-page books on Romans 8 alone. It's kind of been a feast to get into him a little bit and not just stand up and copy him, which I've sought to avoid. He had an old friend of his who had died about the time that he said was a young minister, an elderly Welsh minister who died in 1929. He relates a story that this minister friend of his had told when he was a younger man. He said that after his mother had died, he was looking through her papers and belongings. In a very old book, he came across a little sheet of paper on which he found that one of his sisters had written certain words. She was between ten and twelve years of age when she wrote these words. Their father had died, and on the day of his death this little girl had written these words on a piece of paper and had put it in the little book. She said, "Today Da-da has left us. He has gone into the glorious liberty of the children of God." A girl of twelve in the sixties of the last century could write like that. Why? She understood what Paul was saying—that the present suffering was not worthy to be compared to what was coming, and that the creation waits

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to enjoy the liberty which is to be enjoyed by the children of God. Just as with the word “glory” we have the word “suffering,” so when we have the word “hope” we have the word “patience.” It is the counterbalance point. And patience here is not something which is passive, a sitting down and saying, “Whatever will be will be; whatever is going to come to pass is going to come to pass.” But the idea of patience is an active, enduring kind of a spirit—which balances eagerness and passivity—which is a great word that means “to endure in the midst of pressure and be strong.”

So Paul is saying to us in our sufferings as believers, “Have you considered—that is, have you reckoned it intellectually with your mind, have you considered—that the sufferings of the present are not worth comparing to the glory which is coming?” This kind of an answer, a positive answer could only be made by a believer. For it is the believer in Jesus Christ who holds the key of what God is going to do in the future.

A real contrast is a little paragraph I read on Woody Allen which sharply sets this in relief. The writer of this article, who is talking about life after death said, “The man who makes us laugh, Woody Allen, has publicly disclosed his morbid preoccupation with death. As an atheist, he does not believe in human survival after death. In philosophical moments, he soars to language like this, ‘The fundamental thing behind all motivation and all activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and against death. It’s absolutely stupefying in its terror, and it renders anyone’s accomplishments meaningless. As Camus wrote, “It’s not only that man dies, but that he struggles to do a work of art that lasts and then realizes that the universe itself is not going to exist after a period of time.”’” Since the interviewer was seeking to comfort Allen, he asked, “But aren’t you happy that you will achieve immortality through your achievements?” Gloom prevailed in Wood’s retort. “Who cares about achieving immortality through achievements? I’m interested in achieving immortality through not dying.”

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And what an open invitation for the gospel that statement presents. Because it is this that Jesus came to speak to, to the humor of Woody Allen, to the pathos of a person going through suffering. Christ is saying that when we are linked with Him, whatever we go through here is not going to be lost. It's just not worthy of being compared to the glory which is coming.

Closing Prayer

Our heavenly Father, as we approach the time of communion now we remember the Scripture that says to us that You, who for the joy that was set before You, endured the cross. So what we have been teaching today from Your inspired Word, we can say with confidence, has already been modeled by You. That You do not suffer in despair. That You counted the moments in Gethsemane, the moments at Calvary, as unworthy to compare to the glory which would be manifested and come upon You. We also think, Lord, of words like, "No cross, no crown." How we are called to be linked with You in Your suffering. And that just as surely today as we sit in this room and share communion together and recollect—even while we sit here—some of the pains and the agonies we're going through in our mortal existence as Christians, we know, because we have this hope in us, that there will come a day when we will sit around a table which is perfect in its setting, and we will partake together. And the banquet of eternity will be ushered in, and the glory which is there will swallow up anything we ever experienced here. And for ages unending, we will finally find the words to say what our spirit has often wanted to say and has never been able to articulate, because language cannot express what we feel. But finally, glory will be given to us in a completed form. And we who wait for that moment give thanks to You that You have already sent the Spirit into our hearts to bring testimony with our spirit that we are the children of God—and giving us the liberty at these moments to say to You, "Daddy." In Jesus' Name. Amen.