

Having a right perspective on our sufferings

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon
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¹⁸I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³Not 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. ²⁴For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (Romans 8.18 – 25)

Introduction

This passage of Scripture is a very important passage, because it tells us how, as believers, we can handle suffering. The challenge we face as Christians, as we live our lives in this fallen world, is this: how can we handle our sufferings? How can we manage not to become self-pitying? How can we manage not to sink into the depression that can threaten to sweep over us when we suffer? How can we overcome the doubts that assail us: doubts that tempt us question God's love, or his goodness, or his power?

The answer, Paul tells us, is to see our present sufferings in the perspective of eternity. When we forget the glory that is coming to us, our problems and sufferings can seem overwhelming. But when we remember the glory towards which we are heading, it helps us to see that our present sufferings are, relatively speaking, quite minor. This is not to belittle our sufferings, or to pretend that they are not painful. Our

sufferings are real. But when we see them in the context of the glory that will be ours in eternity, we realise that, actually, they are very minor.

I can guarantee that this passage is relevant for every person who is gathered here today. Each one of us is either suffering at the present time, or will suffer in the future. Each one of us, when we suffer, is liable to be tempted to lose heart or backslide. So I would urge you to listen carefully, and seek to apply the lessons of this passage to your life. Even if your life at the present time is a very happy and carefree one, you need to take note of this passage, because I can guarantee that you will need to know what this passage teaches at some point in the future. You need to be strengthened in your understanding now, so that when that period of suffering comes in future, you will have the equipment you need for handling that suffering. As the saying goes, "To be forewarned is to be forearmed"

Today our main focus will be on the first verse of this passage, although we will refer to other later verses as well. Verse 18 says, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." There are three things that I want to point out from this verse.

1. In this present age we suffer.
2. The sufferings of this life are miniscule in comparison with the glory which we shall experience at the resurrection.
3. We need to deliberately think about the glory that is to come.

1. In the present age we suffer

The apostle says, "I consider that our **present sufferings** are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

The apostle speaks about the "present sufferings" that we experience. This verse is linked with the previous verse, verse 17, where the apostle said, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." We were thinking about this verse three weeks ago, and we learned the wonderful truth that because we who believe are sons of God we are also heirs of God, and co-heirs with Christ. We are going to inherit the glory of God. But, in order to prepare us for his glory, God in his perfect wisdom leads us through suffering in this life.

The verse that we are thinking about today, verse 18, in the original Greek has the word “for” at beginning. This is a pointer to tell us that in verses 18 to 25 the apostle is expanding on, and giving the basis for, what he has said in verse 17.

So, he says, at the present time we do suffer. Suffering is part and parcel of this present life.

As Christians we are not exempt from the suffering that our bodies experience as a result of Adam’s sin. Our bodies suffer physical weakness and ill health. We get tired. We experience pain. Christians get cancer and other life threatening diseases, just like non-Christians do. Some parents get seriously ill very at an early age, and then die, leaving young children behind. Some suffer the dreadful grief of seeing their young children getting very ill, and, in some cases, dying. Christians also suffer in road accidents and have terrible life-changing injuries, just as non-Christians do. We are sometimes the victims of crime, just like non-Christians. Some Christians suffer from mental health problems. Many believers, as they grow old, suffer from memory loss, and quite a large proportion of these go on to experience full blown senile dementia. Many believers also suffer from financial hardship. Virtually all believers have family problems and concerns. Many experience problems with personal relationships. Some experience marital breakdown. Others wish they could marry but never meet someone suitable. All of us suffer bereavement as family and friends die. We ourselves will have to go through death, unless the Lord returns before we die.

Some Christians mistakenly believe that we can expect, in this life, to be free from the physical results of sin, as long as we claim this by faith. Their argument goes like this: “Jesus came to save us from sin and all its results. Sickness is the result of sin. So, if we are saved by Jesus, we can expect to be healed of our diseases.” Those who take this approach will often point to what Isaiah says, when he prophesies, in chapter 53 verse 5, “By his wounds we are healed.” They say, on the basis of this verse, “Healing is freely available for all believers, through the Cross. Just as we can trust the Lord for the forgiveness of our sins, so we can and should trust him for the healing of our diseases.”

This passage teaches us that that such a view is mistaken. It teaches us that, whereas we are spiritually redeemed the moment we believe in Christ, our bodies have not yet been redeemed. They are still living with the results of sin. Look at the subsequent verses, verses 19 to 25, and see how, three times, the apostle uses the word verb “to wait”.

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

Do you get the point? The glory that is ours as children of God has not yet been revealed. It is hidden. Our bodies have not yet been redeemed from the effects of sin upon them. The redemption of our bodies is only going to take place when Christ comes again. When he comes, the bodies of those who are still alive will be instantly transformed into glorious new bodies, and the bodies of those who have already died will be raised as resurrection bodies. Only then will we be free from the effects of Adam's sin on our bodies. We are saved, says the apostle, in hope. What is hope, in Biblical terms? It is the sure and certain expectancy of good things in the future. The apostle says, "Who hopes for what he already has?" The answer is, no-one. The implication of this is that we do not yet have freedom from the results of the fall. So we have to wait for it patiently. Yes, ultimately, we shall be healed of all our diseases, through what Christ did on the Cross, when our bodies are raised from the dead. But, in the meantime, we have to wait.

But, someone might say, what are we to make of the fact that God does, sometimes, heal in answer to prayer? The answer is that God, in his great goodness, does sometimes hear prayers for healing, just like he hears other prayers. But these healings that God gives are the exception. They do not mean that our bodies have yet been redeemed, and we cannot expect to have a life that is free from suffering.

At this point I need to mention also a false teaching which goes under the name of the so-called "Christian Science" movement, which was started by Mary Eder Baker in the nineteenth century. What this teaching says is that pain is illusory. It is all in the mind. It says that we can overcome pain by believing ourselves to be better. As we believe ourselves to be better, we will stop feeling pain. This teaching has come into the so-called "Word of faith" movement. This movement says

that you should make positive affirmations about yourself and your health. It says that although you might feel ill, these are just symptoms. Teachers in this movement encourage you to “I am well”. The promise that, as you do so, your illness will disappear. There is only one thing to say about this teaching: it is nonsense. If you follow this practice you are only a short step away from losing your mental health, and losing touch with reality.

No. The Bible is absolutely plain. Suffering as a result of living in a fallen world is a fact. Illness is a real experience. It is genuine and not imaginary. It is truly painful.

In addition to the bodily suffering that we experience as a result of Adam’s sin, which we experience in common with all men, as Christians we also experience additional suffering which comes to us directly as a result of being Christians. We experience people distancing themselves from us and being unpleasant to us. Some Christians experience harassment at work, and face the prospect of losing their jobs because their employers require them to do things that are against their consciences. All of us are at risk from extremists who may take it upon themselves to attack or murder us because of our Christian beliefs. The time may well come when we face state persecution in the form of fines, or imprisonment, torture or death if we follow Christ, as has happened at many times in the history of Christianity, and happens at the present time in other parts of the world.

We also, as Christians, face the struggle to put God’s Word into practice. It is much easier to “go along with the flow” and sin in the way we used to before we were converted, but as Christians we know we cannot do this. This involves us in a struggle within our own selves as we battle with temptation, and also a struggle with the world, as we come under pressure to conform to the way of life of unbelievers.

Furthermore, we may, as Christians, come under direct spiritual attack. The devil or his demons might assail us with terrible thoughts or other strange experiences.

In addition we live day by day with the pain of the thought of our neighbours, friends and, in many cases, beloved family members, being far from God and on the brink of eternal destruction in hell. We try to speak with them and warn them, but they often refuse to hear.

So we see that suffering is to be expected in this age that we live in. We should not be surprised by suffering. Peter says in his first letter, chapter 4 and verses 12 and 13, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at

the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”

Jesus said, as recorded in John’s Gospel, chapter John 16 and verse 33, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

So here is the first thing to see from this verse: that in this present age we will suffer.

2. Our present sufferings, are tiny in comparison with the glory that we shall have

Hear again what the apostle says, “I consider that our present sufferings are **not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.**”

The apostle says that our present sufferings, real and grievous though they are, are *relatively speaking* very minor in comparison with the glory that will be revealed in us.

When he says that they are “not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” he is not saying that we should not make that comparison. On the contrary, he is deliberately drawing the comparison. What he is saying is that our present sufferings are virtually negligible in comparison with the glory that will be revealed in us.

There is a similar saying in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 4 and verse 17, where he says that our “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

Paul was no stranger to suffering. In chapter 12 of 2 Corinthians, in verses 24 to 28, he lists the many ways in which he suffered.

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without

sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

Yet, he says, even such suffering is “light” in comparison with the weight of the glory that he will know at the resurrection.

Think of what it will be like to be live in a body which is totally free of pain and illness and which is dazzlingly splendid; to be living with others who are perfectly loving and kind, and with whom you get on perfectly; to be absolutely free from temptation and sin; to experience the delights of the new world that God is going to make, with its beautiful trees, plants, and animals. Think, above all, of what it will be like to see God in all his glory and beauty, without any fear and to relate with him directly. After just a few moments in heaven the Christian will be saying to himself, “Those things that I suffered on earth were nothing in comparison with this.” He will also say, “I am glad I suffered what I did, because it helps me all the more to appreciate the glory and wonder of what I have now.”

Not only are our present sufferings “light”, they are also temporary. When we are in the midst of some grievous trial, it can seem to be unending. But it is not. It will soon come to an end. Most trials that we go through do not last the whole of our lives. But even if your particular trial does last the rest of your earthly life, how much longer, realistically, do you have on this earth? Five years? Ten years? Perhaps, if you are young, you have another 100 years on earth. But what is that in comparison with the millions upon millions of years, for ever and ever, that you will enjoy the glory to come, if you are a true Christian?

So this is our second point: that the sufferings of this age are, relatively speaking, negligible in comparison with the glory that will be revealed in us.

3. We need to deliberately think about the glory that we are going to enjoy

Paul says, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

The word that is translated “I consider” is the same word that is used by the apostle in chapter 4 to speak about the way in which God imputes to us the righteousness of Christ. God thinks of us as being righteous, because he has imputed to us the righteousness of Christ, even though

we are in reality at the present time wicked in our behaviour. The apostle also uses the same word in chapter 6 and verse 11, where he says, “count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

Here in the verse we are considering today, Paul says that he considers that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. He thus lets us into the secret of how he is so joyful, even though he suffers so much. The key is that he makes it his habit to view his present sufferings against the backdrop of eternity. He constantly reminds himself of how great will be the glory that he will enjoy at the resurrection. This helps him to see how relatively small his sufferings are.

We have an English expression for someone who makes much of relatively small troubles. We say that this person “turns a mole-hill into a mountain”. When we see our troubles in the light of eternity, we do the opposite. We turn our mountains into mole-hills.

The apostle speaks in Colossians chapter 3 and verses 1 to 4 of the duty that we have to think about the glory that is ours in Christ.

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

This is the key to having a right attitude to our sufferings. We need to learn the art of being heavenly minded. Our world has a saying, that a person can be “so heavenly minded that he is no earthly use.” Actually, it is the other way round. A person can be so earthly minded that he is no heavenly use. And when we are no heavenly use, we are no earthly use either. In order to be properly useful to God, learn the discipline of seeing everything that happens to you in the light of eternity. This will make your sufferings much easier to bear, and will also help you to be a far more pleasant person to live with.

Conclusion

We have been thinking about Romans 8 verse 18, where the apostle Paul says, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

We have seen from this verse that we do have real sufferings in this age that we live in. But we have also seen that, in comparison with what glory will be like, these sufferings are lightweight and temporary. We have also seen that we need to deliberately focus on the glory that is to come, and that as we do so, we will be better able to handle the troubles of this life.

As we come to a close, I must repeat what I have said previously, that this comfort is for those who are true Christians, who have been saved from their sins by Christ, and only for them. Those who have been saved can be assured that they will inherit God's glory, and therefore have wonderful comfort in this life. But those who have not been saved have no such comfort. For them, the sufferings of this world are but a foretaste of the terrible suffering and torment which will come upon them after they die.

So I must ask you, are you a true Christian? If you have any doubt at all about your salvation, I urge you to come to Christ, confess your sins to him, and ask him to save you, so that you also may know the comfort that is spoken of in this verse.

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