

We now turn to Romans 8 this morning. This last month we spent time together walking through 1 Corinthians 15 looking at the importance and the reality and the effect of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul teaches that the resurrection of Jesus Christ, after his death and victory over sin, that that resurrection with a real body that is now seated at the right hand of God is also a foretaste of the promise that all who believe in Jesus Christ will, too, in the future, be resurrected with real, renewed bodies that are enfleshed, not soulless, not just bodiless souls, but rather enfleshed souls living in a renewed heaven and a new earth that will be experienced with these kinds of hands, with flesh and blood, but they will be bodies that will be glorified anew. Even though the bodies that we have here this morning are glorious and beautiful--they are made in God's image--they are nonetheless in the midst of decay. And that decay means that these bodies that we have as a result of sin and death in the world--these bodies, though bearing the image of God, will be replaced and renewed, and that is our hope. But we are left with this life. When Christ was raised from the dead he spent forty days with his disciples, and in that time with his disciples he promised that he would not leave them as orphans, as Pastor Flora led us through Jesus's teaching in the gospel of John. And they didn't fully understand, but he said, where I'm going you cannot go with me, but when I go I will leave you with the Spirit, I will not leave you as orphans. I will leave you with my Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

May I note: not the third thing of the Trinity, but the third person. The Holy Spirit, God's empowering presence, he said, I will leave with my children--not just leave with, but give you, in you, to be with you. That is a glorious promise. On Sunday, May 19, we'll be reminded of it--it is the Sunday of Pentecost, when we remember that at Jesus's ascension his Holy Spirit came. And that means, then, that for the Christian there is Jesus Christ who was raised from the dead, who now stands as the King and the Head of a new humanity, and all who believe and profess faith in Jesus Christ are brought into Jesus Christ and are made his people, for he is the new Adam. He is the King of a new humanity. We become part--as professing believers, we become part of that new humanity who now await. So there's something that is already started, but we await for that which will happen in the future--Jesus's return. And whether you are alive at his return or your bodies are laid in the grave, in that day and on that moment there will be a resurrection. But now we wait.

So how do we live, right? We're going to spend this month talking about the Holy Spirit and the life of the Christian--how the Holy Spirit helps us to live in this present situation, in the radical middle. For Paul, that was prayer. So he teaches us about the Holy Spirit and prayer from Romans 8. Let's look at verses 18 to 27, but I'll only be focusing on verses 22 through 27. Hear now God's word.

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. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God.

So I'll just tell you that I have a reduced time to preach, but also with that idea, I have a slight warning for you. Every time that a pastor preaches a sermon--to some degree in his preparation--for that sermon, I think, to be useful to the people that hear it and for God who would choose to use it, I believe he means for me to live it. And so some of what you will hear today is my opening the door of my life and telling you exactly what the Holy Spirit is teaching me about the nature of prayer and his Spirit. I tell you this not as one who has arrived, but as one who deeply struggles. I struggle with busyness, I struggle with distraction, I struggle with where I left you last week—cynicism. And I recognize that many of you are probably sometimes, and where I am at times--I have a whole host of theological training and belief, but so oftentimes I see an enormous chasm between what I say I believe and how I live. This passage brings me back again and again, by God's power and grace, to close that chasm. So let's look at this together.

This Present Situation. The present situation that Paul points us to is the radical middle. That radical middle is given to us in verses 22-25. Notice what he says. He says to these Christians who are experiencing persecution and weakness and suffering, he pastorally says that 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in pains of childbirth right up to the present time.' You know what's he's saying? He's saying that not just those who believe in Jesus Christ are longing for Jesus to return, but he actually tells us something remarkable about creation that the Old Testament and the New Testament remind us of. The creation itself is groaning and waiting for Christ to be revealed again, for Christ to come in his reigning glory, victorious King over heaven and earth. In fact it tells us that even the trees and the rocks cry out in praise of the glory of God. Let me tell you personally from my own experience, I wonder when I'm out riding, or if I'm out on the back porch, or I'm doing yard work, and I see the flowers and I hear the birds and I see God's beautiful creation that is Maryland--I wonder as I see—and I don't mind telling you---when I see my own dog, as I see the deer running through my yard in the middle of the night, or I see squirrels. I often wonder, Lord, how are they longing for your return? Your word tells us that the creation groans for that revelation. And Paul says that if the creation is in the middle of that radical middle between Christ's resurrection and his final revelation--where all things will be set new and a new heavens and a new earth--then he says how much more will those who are human beings called by his name, who believe in him, not also groan inwardly.

What in the world does he mean by 'groan.' He says, "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." That groaning that he's telling us about, I think, is a Spirit divine, inwardly-worked groaning. That if the creation longs for Christ to be revealed in all of his glory and to make all things new, then that means that those who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ also groan. And that groaning means a desire, a longing, and--may I say it--a passion for the return, the revelation, the glory of Christ being [made] again to make all things right, for his justice to be revealed, and for salvation to be known, and to know it eternally.

He says of the Spirit, verse 23, "Not only so, but we ourselves who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly." I believe what he's referring to there is that it is the Spirit who enables us, by God's design--that it is the Spirit working in us to long for Christ to be revealed. So therefore in our day--and I believe it to be the case--many have written that sometimes the church has let go of a doctrine of hell. I would agree with that. That by and large, we no longer really talk about—I'm talking about generally and deeply within the evangelical world--that when Christ comes again, not only will his salvation be known to those who believe, but also will his judgment be known for those who do not. And that hell is--if it is anything as we see it described in the Bible--it is most principally a perfect knowledge of who Jesus is, but the inability for all eternity to ever know his presence and his grace. And the Bible tells us that is nothing short of eternal discipline and judgment.

I want to say that I believe we've often forgotten that truth, but I think we've also forgotten the doctrine of heaven. Have we stopped longing for Christ to return? Have cynicism and our thinking that nothing really ever changes kept us from longing, then, for the only thing that will bring everlasting change, and that is the return of Christ? Some people believe that we can be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. I sometimes think that the opposite is true. That if I think that Jesus Christ is coming again to reveal himself to make all things new, then how much more should I be actively living and breathing and working out what God has given me to do, so that I become a part of his restoring purposes.

I think we have not only oftentimes forgotten that Jesus is coming again to judge the living and the dead and that there will be hell for those who do not know him, I think also we have forgotten to long for heaven. Because look around us, there's so much to be thankful for: thankful for our clothes, thankful for tables full of food, thankful for beautiful churches to worship in. And thanks be to God, all of these things are glorious and good. But this passage tells us that we can have a thankfulness for what we have, but we can't hope for what we already have. These things pale in comparison to what Jesus is getting ready to do. This earth, as beautiful as it is, can't compare to the glory of a renewed earth. Knowing Jesus in his grace, powerfully and intimately now, pales in comparison to what it will be like looking at him face-to-face, to know him just as clearly as he knows me. And he says here that in this radical middle the Spirit is at work working out that longing and that groaning.

I will tell you that I think one of the reasons why we don't often long for his return in the midst of this life, this radical middle, is because we become blinded by weakness, and I mean blinded by weakness in a bad way. Because he tells us here in verse 26, that "in the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness." What does Paul mean by weakness here? There've been many folks, many pastors, even many commentators who equate the word here, 'weakness,' with sin, and they have lead people to believe that, in fact, if you're experiencing weakness, it is often the result of your own personal evil or your personal lack of faith. But I must tell you that while weakness certainly encompasses the weakness because of evil, that suffering is oftentimes the result of very direct evil, that difficulty can sometimes be the direct result of evil and sin on my part—that that is not all that weakness is. Weakness is simply the present situation. Our enfleshed bodies are in the midst of decay. We must reject the idea that all the weakness that we experience here is just the direct result of a personal sin or a lack of faith. That must be rejected because I believe that weakness--how Paul means it here--is actually not dishonoring to God.

Let me explain what I mean. In the letter to the Corinthians--the second letter that Paul writes--he writes of a very profound situation, of how the weakness that he was experiencing in this life was showing itself in his relationship with the Lord Jesus. He tells us "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" He is saying this is how weakness has expressed itself in his life. That's personal to Paul. We don't know what that weakness was, we don't know what that thorn was. But we know that it wasn't sin because he says here, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why for Christ's sake, I delight in weakness." If his weakness was sin, then how could Paul say, 'I delighted in my sin.' You see for Paul, weakness was something that actually could be boasted in. Now while that's how it showed itself in Paul's life, I think he means to tell us that in Romans 8, when he says 'in our weakness,' he means that weakness becomes God's playground for his grace. It becomes the place where in my weakness I begin to see how much I need, how much I thirst, and how Jesus Christ is the only one who can satisfy that thirst.

Which is why he would say, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

For Paul this present situation is marked by living in this radical middle that is characterized by 'I hope.' I cannot be satisfied here, but only will be satisfied at Christ's return in the future. Our life now is often marked by weaknesses of various sorts because of our bodies, and it will only be satisfied when I recognize that in my weakness Christ is made known. Let me illustrate. As a part of having a human body that is given to decay, I physically have thirst right now. I could totally drink this cup of water over here if I really needed it. Now, does my thirst mean I am guilty of a particular sin? No, it's the nature of having bodies that decay. Yes, our bodies are decaying because of a sinful nature. Yes, absolutely. My thirst is often times literal, but that literal thirst, I believe, is also used by the Lord Jesus to point to not just physical thirst, but also to how my physical thirst is actually a reflection of my relational thirst and my spiritual thirst. Now watch how Jesus takes the human weakness of thirst and transforms it for us to see his power. He went to the woman at the well who wanted water, and he says to her--you're familiar with what he says, but let me repeat it: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (Which I think, by the way, points to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, but I don't have time for that today.) But the woman says, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." She doesn't get it, but she gets it. She is physically thirsty, but he's saying look at your physical thirst--your physical weakness, you need to see, is a picture of your spiritual weakness. And he is able to show her that her spiritual, her relational weakness and thirst is pictured by her physical thirst. He uses it all to say, guess what, I'm the only one who can give you living water. Come to me. Do you notice she doesn't invite him in, he invites her in. She wants at first, won't you give me that water and enter into my life. He says no, no, if you want my water, you've got to come into mine. And he invites her.

Why would Jesus do that? Why is it important for our weakness to be the playground for God's grace? It's because we believe that God the Son, with perfectly divine body and divine person, came and took on a human nature, and in so doing experienced physical thirst like you and me. But he would not only experience physical human thirst, he would also experience the thirst that all of us deserve. You see, our spiritual thirst, our relational thirst is just speaking to our distance from God the Father. We deserve to be eternally separated from him. And yet it is Jesus, of whom the Psalm writer in Psalm 22 proclaims these words, "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all the bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them, and cast lots for my clothing." Do you see who the psalmist is pointing to? It is Jesus. Jesus came to experience our human weakness. He experienced physical thirst, but he would go all the way and experience the ultimate thirst and separation from the Father by going to the cross for our real thirst. And because he was willing to be thirsty, and because he was willing to be separated from the Father, he is the King we need. And therefore my weaknesses are not something that dishonor God. Praise be to God. It's the place where I really see Jesus for who he is, the only one who can give you and me living water that will never dry up. That is this present situation.

And here's the truth: In the midst of my weakness as a pastor who's been trained, who's been given a lot of money to go to school and get all this great education, tested, preached hundreds of sermons--I still, at the end of the day, come to my weakness, and I still feel the need to try to cover up my weakness. So in this present situation I need this word. I need him to tell me that it's in my weakness that your grace is made perfect and strong. And I need for God's grace and gospel to come into this chasm between what I say I believe and how I live, and shine a bright light on that gap. But praise be to God in the gap I see the grace. Do you see it this morning? Ladies and gentlemen, let us give up the playing around that we're not weak, or the covering it up, or that our theological acumen equals a life that's got it in order, and let's lay down at the cross and say, Jesus, you are the water!

And it's there that we see This Present Power, you see. Because this present power is exactly in that weakness, he tells us. Listen to the words again, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." He gives us the praying Spirit. That praying Spirit is God's empowering presence in my enfleshed weakness in the meantime between the resurrection and the glory to come. And in that place the word tells me that the Spirit is doing two things. He's praying because I often don't know what to pray, even though I'm still doing it. But at the same time he is also teaching me to pray, because in my groaning that he divinely designs, verse 23, I'm learning that my praying is really just longing for Christ and bringing all that I have right up to Jesus in prayer. And that means that the Holy Spirit intercedes, he testifies, and he directs in the midst of our weakness.

Here's where I take off my jacket, and I've got to tell you the truth. So here's the deal. It's because I am just a man who wears the suit, who has 'Reverend' by his name, and I will tell you that I have a problem with prayer. The reason why I have a problem with prayer is because I fail to see what the Bible teaches me regarding prayer. I'm so thankful for Pastor Paul Miller because he says this: "The problem with prayer is that in so many ways in our Christian churches we have built prayer up to be this lofty spiritual mountain to climb." And then he says, "And then pastors unwittingly [myself included] berate Christians for not climbing that mountain. So not only does the task of praying feel impossible, but you feel ashamed for not doing it." Let me tell you a dirty little secret about being a pastor. The reason why you ever hear any pastor berate is because he's been berating himself. I will tell you it's because I, too, in my walk with Christ, in my riding my bike, or in my walking, or in my driving, as I think about prayer---right alongside my desire to pray I am constructing my own spiritual mountain. And every time I pray I have to remind myself, Randy, you don't have to perform for the Lord. But what seeps in is, 'Why haven't you prayed more often, Randy?' You see, those are the accusations I hear. So I begin to feel guilty for not praying. But here's the truth. Paul Miller has said, do you know that less than ten percent of Christians who were polled have an effective prayer life, by their own definition. The other ninety percent said they feel frustrated and guilty, because frankly, we all talk about prayer, but often we don't pray, and then it becomes this big thing. But here's where I'm thankful for Paul Miller. He drew me right back to the Spirit, where Paul brings us right back. And what he tells me is what I need to do. I need to finally just sit down with me and my life, forget the Reverend, forget being a pastor. I'm just a son of the living God, and all God wants me to do is to bring my life and all that it is right to him. No performance necessary. Because I will never be able to persevere enough, I will never be able to pray enough, I will never be able to grovel enough for the Lord to say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' Because that title is only worthy of the One, and only by my union with him can I ever hear those words. Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters in Christ, I invite you into my angst. We need to be praying more. But my problem is I think we've mis-defined prayer. It's a learned desperation, not a performance for the Lord. It's not a theological dissertation where we create this spiritual avatar that we don't really recognize. We use these big words. No, just turn to the Psalms and what does it say? I cry out to you, O Lord. And maybe what I need to cry out to the Lord for, when I invite you to cry out with me, is Lord, forgive me for my cynicism. Forgive me for my unbelief. Forgive me for believing I could ever perform for you when all you ever wanted for me is to just say I'm helpless and run to Thee for grace.

So I invite you, friends, to know this: That when we begin to build prayer up to be a spiritual mountain where we sit before its shadow and feel guilty and frustrated because we're not climbing it, it's because we believe that some where, shape, or form, God is impressed with our knowledge of him. But what this word tells me is that where prayer comes from and what the Spirit is doing comes not by way of my knowledge, but his knowledge of us. Isn't that what he says? "And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will." Do you see what incredible freedom that brings? I can just bring my life and all that it is right to the Lord, and the Spirit is there praying on my behalf in accordance with God's will. And I, through Christ's grace, can just come boldly before the throne of grace, because it's not about me

trying to wrap my brain about who God is. It's the comfort that it is the Lord who knows your weakness and mine, he knows your sin and mine, he knows your challenges and mine, and the comfort is he knows us.

Think of the difference between someone you haven't seen for a long time, but is a very close friend, and they ask you how you're doing. You just sort of 'Blleeeehh.' [Blurt out your troubles.] But contrast that with somebody else you haven't seen for a while, but they're not close friends, and they ask you how you're doing. What do you say? 'I'm fine.' Why we do that? Because when somebody knows us and they've shown themselves to be faithful, we can take it all off, right? How much more, then, a Heavenly Father who knitted you together in your mother's womb, who says you are fearfully and wonderfully made, who sent his Son to die for you---how much more, then, does that Father invite you, and it says, "I know. Just give it to me." And he, according to his will, not mine, will work it out. There's freedom there, and that's why I needed this sermon for me so that I can better pray for you. And I pray that you, too, along with me, along with Pastor Flora, along with Pastor Halley, along with Ronnie Pennington, along with your elders and your deacons.....all of us---Lord, by your Spirit, in our weakness, show us your strength. Amen?

Let's pray. Father, have mercy on us, but in our weakness make your strength perfect. And I pray, may the floodgates of prayer open up across this congregation, led by your Spirit, your Spirit interceding for us, that we would know the radical nature of the grace that you offer to make us a praying church--not out of performance, but out of weakness and thanksgiving. Lord, thank you for knowing us. Thank you for your Son dying for us. And thank you for your Spirit to empower us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.