

**Title:** Present Sufferings  
**Text:** Romans 8: 18-25  
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**Preacher:** Rev Stu Cameron

Everybody hurts. Everybody has suffered, will suffer or is right now suffering. Nietzsche said that to live is to suffer.

Woody Allen put it this way:

Life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering – and it's all over much too soon.  
(Woody Allen)

Phillip Yancey speaks about the universality of suffering when he said:

The kingdom of suffering is a democracy, and we all stand in it or alongside it with nothing but our naked humanity.  
(Philip Yancey)

If you are not suffering right now, if the sky is blue and the birds are singing and all is right with your world, don't worry things will soon change! There's a cheery thought!

Amidst the doom and gloom – the pain and suffering that is endemic in this world – is the good news of the gospel that Paul articulates in Romans. What I hope to illustrate today with Paul's help is that in our suffering, God meets us, transforms us and delivers us.

The Apostle Paul's sufferings are well documented. In 2 Corinthians he does not hide his sufferings; he boasts in them. Pain and hardship seemed to follow Paul around flogged five times within and inch of his life, stoned once, three times shipwrecked, lost at sea, on the run often and other times going days without food and sleep – and even without clothes. Apart from the physical suffering, Paul endured psychological and spiritual pain as he was betrayed by friends and enemies alike and always anxious for the future of the fledgling churches he had planted.

Scholars estimate that Paul spent at last a quarter of his missionary service in prison. Roman prisons were barbaric. Imprisonment was preceded by being stripped naked and then flogged—a humiliating, painful, and bloody ordeal. The bleeding wounds went untreated as prisoners sat in painful leg or wrist chains. Mutilated, bloodstained clothing was not replaced, even in the cold of winter. Most cells were dark, especially the inner cells of a prison, like the one Paul and Silas inhabited in Philippi. Unbearable cold, lack of water, cramped quarters, and sickening stench from few toilets made sleeping difficult and waking hours miserable. Because of the miserable conditions, many prisoners begged for a speedy death. Others simply committed suicide.

When Paul writes about suffering, it is no academic exercise or dispassionate reflection; it is his lived experience.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children 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 freedom and glory 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 first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, 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 they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.  
(Romans 8:18-25)

Daniel Kahneman is a Nobel Prize winning psychologist. He identified two common ways we respond to suffering, our suffering or the suffering of others. We often respond to suffering by minimizing or moralizing.

First, we minimize. I am a bit of a sook. I find it excruciating to watch someone in pain. Sometimes when watching a movie, I have been known to walk out of the room if there is a scene depicting someone in deep emotional or physical pain. I want to look away; it's too confronting.

Suffering is both hard to endure, and often excruciating to watch. Suffering confronts us on so many levels. It confronts us with the fragility of our lives and the laughably finite limits of our knowledge.

We attempt to avoid the full horror of suffering when we downplay it, attempt to explain it, or rush past it. Minimization involves any attempts to downplay the extent and nature of pain and suffering. We are not immune from minimizing suffering in the church; in fact we just dress it up in religious language.

Larry Crabb shares the story of a man who suffered an enormous loss. The man's friends were concerned and supportive – spending times with him in prayer, emailing him, calling him – sending books on grief and bible verses they thought might be helpful. This is what Crabb writes:

When his friends called or came to visit, the first question after a quick greeting was always, “How are you doing?”

He hated the question the first time he heard it and hated it more and more each time he heard it again. He knew the “right” answer, the one his friends were hoping to hear, the one that had more to do with relieving their concern than expressing his own heart. The hoped-for answer could be expressed in many ways, but its message was always the same. “It's hard, but I'm okay, or at least I'm getting there.”

His words had the intended effect. The questioner smiled with relief and said. “I'm really glad. Not surprised though. Lots of us have been praying.” As the struggling man listened to his friend, he felt a tidal wave of intense loneliness sweep over him. He returned the smile but his soul shrivelled behind a familiar wall that left him lifeless, more desperate and alone than before.

The best gift we can often to those who are in pain is simply to shut up and enter into their suffering. More often than not words are not necessary; but empathy always is. Later in Romans, Paul tells us:

Rejoice with those rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.  
(Romans 12:15)

We minimize suffering when we avoid it – looking the other way, force ourselves or others to rush through it or try to explain it away.

Another response to suffering is to moralise. We are haunted by the thought that there must be a reason for our suffering. Suffering is bad enough, but meaningless suffering is too much to contemplate. And so we look for the cause that has led to the effect of our pain. Have you ever found yourself crying out, ‘What have I done to deserve this?’

The religious leaders presented to Jesus a man who had been born blind and asked him the question, ‘Who sinned, this man or his parents – that he was born blind?’ It was an obvious question; what was the moral cause that led the effect of his blindness. Who and what was to blame? Jesus refuses to play their moralizing game and answers that neither had sinned, and that there was a deeper mystery at work beyond some point-scoring, blame game.

Suffering is the awful mark of our fallen world. When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, sin entered our world, with suffering and death chasing closely behind. God said to Adam:

Dust you are and to dust you will return.  
(Genesis 3:19)

That first sin had consequences not just for us, but for the whole creation. Again, God said to Adam:

Cursed is the ground because of you...it will produce thorn and thistles for you.  
(Genesis 3:17-18)

Suffering is truly universal in scope. Paul says the creation is 'frustrated', in 'bondage to decay' and is 'groaning as in the pains of childbirth.' Suffering and pain and death mark our present reality.

One of the most confronting stories in the Bible is that of Job. Job had it all; a loving wife and family, health and wealth, power and privilege – and it was all stripped away from him. In place of all he lost he received unimaginable suffering and unanswerable questions. Why was he suffering, what was its purpose, where was justice – where was God? Four well meaning friends attempt to soothe Job in the midst of his pain. They begin well; they sit in silence with Job for seven days. After Job speaks, his friends begin their moralising as they attempt to help Job answer the 'Why' his suffering. They refuse to believe that there is not some deep, dark, unconfessed sin in Job's life that has caused such awful suffering. He must have done something wrong. For Job's friends, suffering is all about retribution with no room for divine mystery.

Then God speaks. Instead of answering the 'why' question, God asserts his sovereignty. God is not subject to our questions, our demand for answers. Tullian Tchividjian puts it this way:

Job was refused his Why so that he might recognise the Who.  
(Tullian Tchividjian)

Job responds to God's words with repentance, and says:

Before my ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you.  
(Job 42:6)

Far better than an explanation for his suffering, Job has a profound encounter with God in midst of his suffering. In the midst of unimaginable pain and loss, Job comes to a deeper understanding and experience of God.

As it was for Job, so it can be for us; in the midst of suffering we can meet God.

### **In our suffering, God meets us.**

At the heart of the Christian gospel, radically different to all other major religions, is the belief that it is in the midst of suffering we can encounter God. In our suffering God isn't absent; rather he is especially present.

Joni Ericson Tada has been a quadriplegic for 46 years following a diving accident as a teenager, in July 1967. Joni had grown up in a loving Christian home and had accepted Jesus as her Lord and Saviour. After the accident Joni's life fell apart. All her plans were shattered. Her faith was shaken to its core. She would lie awake at night in her hospital room wondering 'What are you doing, God?' She knew her bible well enough to know of that James 1 was telling her to welcome this trial as a friend, and Romans 5 to 'Rejoice in suffering'. She said she gagged on these and other bible verses and was ready to throw in the towel on faith altogether.

Late one night she was in her six bed hospital ward feeling miserable. She wanted to cry, but held back because there was no one there to wipe her nose, and she knew there was only one thing worse than being a quadriplegic, and that was being a messy quadriplegic. Just then she turned her head on her pillow and saw a silhouetted figure in the doorway of her ward. The figure got down on their hands and knees, and wordlessly started crawling towards Joni's bed. It's only when the person gets right up to Joni's bed and peers through the guard rail that she realises; it's Jackie – her high school buddy. This was the girl that Joni had shared milk shakes and hockey sticks and boyfriends with.

Without saying a word, Jackie lowered the guard rail of the bed and climbed up – lying down next to Joni. Jackie took Joni's lifeless arm and raised it up in the air as they lay next to each other. Then Jackie turned towards Joni and sang almost in a whisper into her ear:

Man of Sorrows, what a name  
For the Son of God who came  
Ruined sinners to reclaim  
Hallelujah! What a Saviour.

Joni said that in that moment something changed in her. She did not get answers to her questions. But she was reminded then, and later of the God who was intimately acquainted with her suffering. Rather than abandoning her to suffering, in Jesus Christ and his Cross, God had entered into it. Isaiah prophesied this of the Messiah:

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.  
(Isaiah 53:3)

Sixteen hundred years ago, Augustine made this radical observation:

God had one son on earth without sin, but never one without suffering.  
(Augustine)

Gods are not meant to suffer. Gods are meant to rise above and be beyond suffering. The radical heart of the Gospel that God does not shy from our suffering, but willingly enters into it. John Stott is one of my heroes in the faith. Decades ago he wrote this:

I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I turn to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me. He set aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death.

If you are suffering this morning, for whatever reason, here the good news of the gospel – God has not abandoned you; in fact God is close –closer than you think. If, like Joni did, you feel like you are hanging on to faith by a thread, Tullian Tchividjian reminds us that:

The gospel is not an exhortation to hang on to God, but the good news that God is hanging on to us.  
(Tullian Tchividjian)

In our suffering, God meets us. .

### **In our suffering, God transforms us**

Earlier in Romans, Paul makes this over the top statement:

We rejoice in our sufferings...  
(Romans 5:3a)

Is this a case of minimizing? Is this Paul in denial? How can he say this? Is this some form of spiritual masochism? Does Paul enjoy pain in some perverse way? We must read on:

We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.  
(Romans 5:3-4)

Paul has discovered that God does not waste our suffering, but uses it to produce Christ-like transformation in us. We will talk more about this next week, but let me make a couple of observations today.

The word 'character' is translated from the Greek word 'dokimas', which literally translated means:

Someone or something that has been put to the test and has measured up

To this day if you travel in the Middle East, you can find potters who have produced some vessel, and stamped on the bottom of it will be the word. 'Dokimas.' It is like an approval stamp. This means the vessel has been in the kiln, in the furnace and has stood the test – it has been refined - it hasn't cracked, it hasn't broken, but has come out whole and strong. It is a vessel of character.

Suffering will often strip away everything we have come to rely on, or found our identity in, leaving only God. It is the furnace of suffering that God can and will produce the character that will hold us for eternity. Again, Tullian Tchividjian is helpful:

Only when we come to the end of ourselves do we come to the beginning of God...Desperation precedes deliverance. Grief precedes glory. The cross precedes the crown. Powerlessness is the beginning of freedom.  
(Tullian Tchividjian)

Put another way, when suffering strips everything away so that God is all we have, we discover there and then that God is all we need.

This morning I cannot give you definitive answers to the 'why' of suffering. Anyone who says they can are clutching at straws. What I can do without equivocation and with confidence is say that God meets you, and will transform you in your suffering so that his character is formed in you – character that produces hope, which leads me to my last point:

### **In our suffering, God delivers us**

At the beginning of today's passage Paul says:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.  
(Romans 8:18)

For Paul, on the other side of suffering is glory.

Put simply, just as Jesus suffered the agony of the cross, so too those who follow in Jesus' name will suffer. Let me stress this point. Jesus is clear. If we follow him we will suffer. Daily he calls us to take up our cross. Daily he calls us to die to self. Regularly we will be misunderstood, ridiculed, marginalised and dismissed. There is the general suffering that is endured by all who inhabit a world that is polluted by sin. Then there is the particular suffering endured by follower of Jesus for bearing his name. These are the present sufferings Paul speaks of.

If following Jesus is simply a promise to suffer more, why make that decision? Paul reminds us that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. That glory is the redemption of our bodies and our adoption into sonship.

Those who enter into Christ's sufferings, will also receive the resurrection glory that is his. Just as he received a new, glorious body; we too will receive a new resurrected body.

Just as he ascended in glory to heaven and is seated in the place of honour at the right hand of God, as his sisters and brothers, as co-heirs with him adopted into his family – we too will share in his glory. Hallelujah! This is the hope that we wait for, sustains us and which we long for. German Theologian Jurgen Moltman, who lived as a boy through the horrors of World War 2, makes this beautiful statement:

God weeps with us so that we may someday laugh with him.  
(Jurgen Moltman)

Gardner Taylor is an African American preacher who lectured at Harvard Divinity School. Once he was preaching in a black church in rural Louisiana during the Depression. The church had just one little light bulb hanging down from the ceiling to light up the whole sanctuary. He was preaching away at the evening service, and in the middle of his sermon, all of a sudden, the electricity went out. The building went pitch black. Gardner Taylor didn't know what to say. He stumbled around until one of the elderly deacons sitting in the back of the church cried out, "Preach on, preacher! We can still see Jesus in the dark!"

Sometimes a cloud of suffering darkens everything in our life. We struggle to see two inches in front of us, let alone see God. But the hope of the gospel is that even in the dark we can see Jesus, or more to the point, Jesus sees us. The hope of the gospel is that our present sufferings, as dark as they may be, cannot compare the new dawn of resurrection glory that will be revealed in the daughters and sons of God!

In 1991, a car driven by a drunk driver jumped its lane and smashed headfirst into a minivan driven by Jerry Sittser. Sittser and three of his children survived, but Sittser's wife, four-year-old child, and his mother died in the crash. In his book [A Grace Revealed](#), Sittser shares the following story about how his son David responded to the tragic accident.

My son David is—and always has been—quiet and reflective. After the accident, he was the least likely to talk about it; but when he chose to, he usually had something significant to say or ask. I had to be ready to respond to him when he sent cues indicating he was ready to talk. Our best conversations happened in the car. One particular conversation has stayed fresh in my memory. David was eight at the time; we were driving to a soccer match some distance from our home. Typical for these occasions, David was quiet. The car was full of silence—not a heavy silence, but a liquid silence, as if some question was brewing inside him.

"Do you think Mom sees us right now?" he suddenly asked.

I paused to ponder. "I don't know, David. I think maybe she does see us. Why do you ask?"

"I don't see how she could, Dad. I thought Heaven was full of happiness. How could she bear to see us so sad?"  
Could Lynda witness our pain in Heaven? How could that be possible? How could she bear it?

"I think she does see us," I finally said. "But she sees the whole story, including how it all turns out, which is beautiful to her. It's going to be a good story, David."

Sittser added:

I would not hazard to estimate the number of times I have been asked, "How does Christianity address the problem of suffering?" ... The Christian answer to suffering [is] Christ's suffering [and] Christ's resurrection .... God knows pain within himself; God knows joy within himself. He knows the whole story as one, including how it all turns out, which is glorious indeed.

Paul is saying to us – I see, we see the whole story. The cross precedes the resurrection, the darkness of night precedes the brightness of dawn, and suffering will be swallowed up in deliverance. We do not have it yet in full, but for this hope we wait patiently, this hope sustains us in the midst of pain and suffering – this hope is our promise of glory!

In suffering, God meets us, transforms us and delivers us. Hallelujah!