



The Spirit and Our Suffering

Lesson 11 | Romans 8:18-39

As believers we face two primary threats to our faith. The first is the *internal* threat – our own sin. There is a real possibility that by giving into the temptations from within we fail our Lord by caving to the sin He hates, doing untold damage to the cause of Christ in the process. But there is also the *external* threat – our suffering. Here we run the risk of caving to the trials outside us so that we give up and once again bring great shame to Christ’s name. These are the two enemies of the believer as they seek to follow God – temptations and trials.

How are trials/suffering and temptations/sin related? How are they different?

In the first half of chapter 8, Paul details how the Spirit helps us in our temptations. There we learn that the Spirit can help us overcome the flesh and sin. Now he considers the problem of trials. As believers, we often deeply feel the sorrow of living in a broken world. We face loss, sorrow, pain, misery, and discouragement. All our problems can ultimately be traced back to Adam’s sin, the source of all suffering, but not every problem can be traced directly to a specific sin. Cancer, the passing of a loved one, a lost job, natural disasters, none of these things necessarily mean that someone has sinned. They are simply part of the suffering we face living in a broken world. And some problems that we face are not the result of our own sin, but the sin of others. Persecution, betrayal, slander, or abuse, all of these are forms of suffering in which we might have not done anything wrong. In both cases, we might be tempted to doubt God’s goodness and love, and give up on following and living for Him. Sadly, trials of suffering can often turn into temptations to sin, either by indulging the flesh or becoming angry and filled with unbelief.

But God does not leave us without hope as we face suffering. He opens the second half of Romans 8 with the powerful claim “that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (8:18). This statement is hard to believe for some. People go through intense periods of suffering, and yet Paul doesn’t say that suffering isn’t that bad. He says that no matter how bad suffering gets, the glory awaiting us will be greater still.

What do you think Paul has in mind when he talks about the glory which will be revealed in us?

In the verses we are looking at today we will see 1) that the suffering of the world is so great that even creation itself is groaning, 2) that this groaning is very personal yet God has given us what we need to make it, and 3) that God’s love for us in both our sin and suffering is firm and unchangeable.

Creation's Groaning (8:18-22)

The suffering that we feel is part of a much bigger problem than our own personal loss and sorrow. The entire universe has been subjected to death, decay, pain, and misery because of man's sin. Here Paul describes the effect of the curse on the whole creation¹ to help us better understand how we are affected by the results of sin.

The effect of sin on creation (8:18-20)

When Adam fell it didn't just impact humanity. His sin transformed the entire creation, so that death and decay were now a normal part of life. In this section Paul describes the creation like a person who is eagerly awaiting the day when he too will be freed from the curse. The current situation for the world is that it is subject to "vanity." This Greek word (*mataiotes*) can also mean emptiness or frustration. It is the same word used in the Greek translation of Ecclesiastes to translate the word "vanity" (Hebrew *hebel*) when Solomon discusses the fact that life is frustrating, short, and often disappointing.

In what ways does the curse impact the world around us? What would be different today if there were no curse?

We often ignore just how serious sin is. We view it as "a little slip" or a "mistake." But sin is a hideous evil, and it's more hideous than we even realize. Sin not only affects us, but it is ultimately responsible for the current sad situation in the creation. Rebellion against the Creator by the ones He tasked with caring for the planet has led to disastrous results. Sadly, we often don't see such rebellion for what it truly is.

How can seeing the effect of sin on the world help us think rightly about our sin?

The freedom from sin for the creation (8:21-22)

But the curse is not the final fate for the creation. Paul here says that all of creation is eagerly awaiting the day that it is set free from its bondage to corruption, that is, its captivity to death and decay. When Christ returns and sets up His kingdom, all will be set right. The prophets describe a time where the wolf will lay down with the lamb (cf Isaiah 11:6; 62:25), and during this golden era the pain and suffering and misery that characterizes the world will be put away and Christ will reign over all.

Why do you think the fate of the physical world is so closely tied to the fate of humanity?

How does the world around us think of the relationships between man and the planet, and how is this different from the Bible's perspective?

Our Groaning (8:23-30)

After beginning with the big picture of what is going on in the world generally, Paul next focuses on believers specifically. The groaning of the world is not just something happening around us. We also find ourselves struggling with the emptiness and suffering of life in a sin-cursed world. In Romans 5:2-5 Paul had explained that because we are justified we can have hope in tribulations. In this section he builds on

¹ Throughout this section, the word translated by the KJV translators as "creature" and "creation" is the same Greek word (*κτίσις, ktisis*).

that idea by sharing the ultimate hope we have – glorification – as well as the present help we have – the help of the Spirit and an understanding of God’s purpose for our suffering.

The hope in our suffering (8:23-25)

Our suffering always has a goal in mind. We hope with confidence for the day when we receive our full sonship, which Paul explains will happen when our bodies are redeemed. When Christ returns, we will get new bodies and will become full sons of God for all to see. Paul is here continuing the theme of adoption he began earlier. As we saw last time, adoption in the biblical world was often focused on the rights and privileges of the one being adopted. This is why in Scripture the adoption of believers appears is connected with our inheritance (Romans 8:14-30; Galatians 4:5-7; Ephesians 1:5, 11, 14). This inheritance will be ours when Christ returns to set up a kingdom and we are given new bodies and share in ruling the world with Him (Daniel 7:27). As believers, we look forward to the day when God will set all things right and will end suffering once and for all. Our hope through suffering is that God will end suffering and that the glory at the end of life will be far greater the suffering we face now.

Why do we as believers not look forward to the day of our future redemption more often?

How would thinking about our coming inheritance give us hope through the suffering we face on earth?

The help in our suffering (8:26-27)

But God does not just leave us alone to suffer until the day He rescues us in dramatic fashion. While we must go through suffering now, we are not forced to go through that suffering alone. There’s a fascinating progression that happens in this chapter. First, we see that all of creation is groaning under the burden and suffering of the curse (8:22). But not only the creation, we believers find ourselves groaning under that burden as well (8:23). And then finally we read that the Spirit Himself is interceding for us with groanings which cannot be uttered (8:26). The Spirit of God feels deeply the pain and misery that we experience, and He goes before God the Father and prays on our behalf according to the Father’s will. You and I might pray for the wrong things (even Paul prayed that the thorn in his flesh would be removed, which was not God’s will), but the Spirit never does! Which means the Spirit knows what you need, prays for you, and always has His prayers answered.

What difference does it make in suffering to know that the Spirit is praying for us?

How should we respond when it seems like God is absent in our suffering?

The purpose of our suffering (8:28-30)

So what do we do while we wait? It’s one thing to know that God has a plan that will end with our being glorified. It’s wonderful to know that God’s Spirit helps us when we so desperately need it. But what about the suffering we face today? Is there anything to be done about it? Why do we have to go through suffering at all? Is it just a waste? Here Paul shows us that God is sovereign in and through the terrible things that happen to us, and that God has a plan for us. Not everything that happens to us is good. Paul never says that. But he does say that all things that happen can be used by God *for* our good!

What is the difference between saying “everything is good” and “God works all things for good”?

Can you think of biblical or personal experiences when God used something bad for good?

God doesn't waste our pain. He has a good purpose and plan for it, but that good may not always be what we are expecting or hoping for. Paul goes on to define "good" in 8:29-30 – the good here is that we look like Jesus. God is concerned first and foremost with His own glory, and He desires that Christ be the firstborn among *many* brethren. In other words, He wants a host of men and women who act, talk, and think like Jesus. And God is willing to use the suffering in our lives to help make us more like Christ progressively until the day we are glorified and the process is complete.

How does suffering help make us more like Christ?

How does knowing that God's plan for suffering is greater Christlikeness for His glory impact how we think about going through suffering?

God's Love (8:31-39)

The sufferings and battles with sin that we face must be placed against the background of God's great, infinite love. This section begins with the question, "What shall we say to these things?" The "these things" here probably refers to what Paul has been talking about in chapter 8 specifically, but at the same time it could also refer generally to the whole letter so far. How should we think about the incredible blessings of God that come to us when we are in Christ?

Summary of God's love in the gospel (8:31-32)

Paul makes a startling claim here "if God be for us, who can be against us?" It's a simple statement, yet the powerful truth that Paul assumes from everything he has been talking about so far is that **God is for us!** The Almighty Creator God of the universe is for His children. He wants to see their ultimate success more than they do. This truth is so explosive that we have a hard time believing it. If we're honest, we often find ourselves uneasy and unsure of what God *really* thinks about us. Yes, He loves us and all that, but is He really, truly *for us*?

Why would we be tempted to doubt that God is for us?

What is Paul's answer to those who find themselves struggling to believe that God is truly for them?

Paul knows the truth that God is for us will be hard to accept, so he argues for it. How can I know that God truly is for me? By looking to the cross. The most expensive, extravagant, jaw-dropping gift that's ever been given in the history of the world was when God gave His Son. If God is willing to do that for you, what could possibly separate you from His love?

Confidence based on God's love in the gospel (8:33-39)

This leads to the great climax of this chapter. There are two primary reasons why people doubt God's love for them: their sin and their suffering. Some worry "God can't love me because of all I've done" while others wonder "How could God love me after all He's allowed?" Paul has just shown the work of the Spirit to help believers in both cases, but to make sure we haven't forgotten the basis for all of this he points us back to the cross one more time. God gave His only Son as an offering for our sin, and if God spared not His own Son, what could possibly hold Him back from giving us everything? Believers battling with the guilt of past sins can confidently say, "I have been forgiven. God does not condemn me, who are you to condemn me?" Believers battling with unimaginable suffering can confidently say, "No matter how bad

what I'm going through right now might be (and it might be bad), God has made the most dramatic move possible to show me that He loves me, and I don't have to doubt that love."

What would you say to someone who feared that such bold truths could be used as an excuse by some Christians to continue living in sin?

How should believers respond if they don't feel like they are loved by God despite everything written in these verses?

"The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell." This simple hymn verse encapsulates everything we have been studying so far. God's love is unbelievable. The hope He gives is unending. The Spirit helps us when we battle sin and when we feel crushed by suffering. Nothing can separate us from God's love!

But if you were an original reader of this letter, there would likely be one nagging question sticking in the back of your mind. One issue that Paul's nice, neat presentation of the gospel hadn't fully addressed. What about Israel? Hadn't God made incredible promises to them, too? And now with only a few exceptions they had rejected their Messiah. If God's promises to Israel failed, how can the church trust the promises He is making now? Paul knows this is coming, and He's ready for it. Next time we'll see Paul launch into three powerful chapters explaining God's faithfulness to Israel despite their hardness to the gospel, the role that the nations play, and God's ultimate plan for the whole world.