

Playing the Long Game
Romans 8:18–30
Sunday, August 8, 2021

Last week we started our 3-week look at the eighth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans – one of the most theologically rich chapters in the Bible. We started by looking at verses 1–17 and talking about grace; the grace that God has poured out upon *us* and how we can share that same grace with others, especially those with whom we disagree. How can we love the people around us, when sometimes the people around us are very hard to love? Next week we will look at forgiveness – how we can let go of the things that we have done and the things that have been done *to us*. But this week we are going to be looking at verses 18–30 and thinking about suffering; where is God when we experience suffering, and how can we remain faithful to God in the midst of suffering. So I want to invite you now to hear the word of the Lord.

(READ ROMANS 8:18–30)

It’s funny, I have preached on these verses *a lot* over the years, especially when something *happens*; when there is some kind of crisis moment in the congregation or in the world around us that we are struggling to process. In my previous church, I preached on this text after the suicide of a longtime church member and a car accident that took the life of a fifteen-year-old boy and multiple other tragic deaths in the small town where we lived. I preached on it here after we lost Oliver Feldman to cancer two and a half years ago. It’s kind of been my go-to text when something goes wrong.

And so there was a part of me that was really happy to preach on it today when nothing had *happened*. That we could talk about these verses apart from any grief or pain or heightened emotions. And then I thought, “Wait a minute. We have spent the past *year and a half* in grief

and pain and heightened emotions. And just when we thought we were starting to come back *out* of it, it starts getting bad again.” I don’t know about you, but this past week has been surprisingly *hard* for me. This pandemic hit me this past week in a way that it *hadn’t* in a while. We’ve been watching the rise in care numbers, and school is looming just a few weeks away for our unvaccinated children. But what topped it off for me was that I had tickets for a concert on Monday night that I had been looking forward to for about two months. I bought them back when things were really looking better. It was going to be my reentry to the world of live music, something that I love so much, and I was so excited for it.

But when I woke up last Sunday morning, I had this certain feeling of, “I should not go to this. There are going to be *way* too many people there, and who knows how many of them are vaccinated or if they’ll be wearing masks, and I have an immunocompromised daughter at home.” So I didn’t go. And as simple and stupid as this sounds, it really affected me. It was this feeling of, “It’s been a year and a half, and we’re still not out of this.” But I knew that I had to sacrifice my immediate happiness for the long-term health and safety of my family. I had to play the long game, thinking not about what I want *right now* in the short-term, but about what’s good in the long-term. We’ve all had to do that over this past year – wearing masks and distancing and giving up certain things in the short-term in order to reach the long-term goal of health and safety. We’ve had to play the long game.

Thinking about it in that way can help us understand the way that Paul is talking about suffering here. Because *God* plays the *long game*. Paul writes that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” It’s easy to hear that as, “Things are bad now, but they’re going to get better soon. You’re suffering *now*, but something good is coming that will make you forget about all this.” But that’s not quite what Paul is saying here.

The *glory* that Paul is referring to that is about to be revealed to us is an *eschatological* glory; that's a theological term referring to the end of times or the end of this age, when Christ comes again to establish God's kingdom on earth. The *glory* that is about to be revealed is the glory of Christ and his kingdom where, as it says in the book of Revelation, "The home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples...he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away," and God is making all things new.

Paul does not say here that things will get better tomorrow or next week or next month or next year. He is saying that suffering is a part of this world and this life. And this is an important thing to note if we're asking this question of *why* there is suffering; *why* bad things happen in this world. Paul says that creation was "subjected to futility" and is being held in "bondage to decay," essentially that God's creation is being *held captive* by the powers of sin and death.

We live in a world that is broken and does not work the way God intended for it to work. A world in which there is cancer and Alzheimer's. A world in which there are pandemics and car crashes. A world in which our bodies can get sick and broken and die. And none of that is the way that God created it to be or *wants* it to be. In Jesus Christ, God began the process of redeeming creation, and while we are already assured of the outcome and God's ultimate victory over the powers of sin and death in Christ's resurrection, we are not yet there. We are still waiting, as Paul says, for the redemption of our bodies. But for now, as long as we live in this world with these bodies, we are subject to sin and sickness and suffering.

Nowhere does Christ promise us that life will be free from suffering; that if we follow him and devote our lives to him, this will all be a piece of cake. In fact, Christ promises us just the

opposite. He says over and over again that those who follow him are taking up a cross (the instrument of his suffering and death), and we will experience suffering and pain and loss. A life of faith is not about our ability to *avoid* suffering. It is about our ability to *remain faithful* when suffering comes; to *trust God* in the *midst* of suffering. We are called to trust that God is *with us*, even in our suffering, and that God is working toward something greater, toward the redemption of creation.

The problem is, we can't always see *proof* of that. Sometimes we look at our lives and at the world around us, and we see exactly the opposite. It doesn't look like things are getting *better*, it looks like things are getting *worse*. But, Paul says, that is where *hope* comes in. Because we don't hope for what we can *see*. If we could already *see* it, we wouldn't *need* to hope for it, because we would *have* it. But, Paul says, if we hope for what we *cannot* see, for something *more* than we can see – if we truly hold on to this promise of what God is doing and is *able* to do – then we wait for it with patience. We play the long game.

Paul compares it to a woman giving birth. She has to endure pain and suffering in the short term, but she is able to *do* that because she knows that something greater is coming in the long term. In that same way, God is working toward something here, and even though we may have to endure pain and suffering in the present, we can *do* that because we know that something greater is coming. Paul says, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God’s purpose.” This doesn’t mean that everything *is* good or that God *causes* everything that happens or even that everything works out in this life. It means that God can *take* the bad things that happen – the pain and suffering of life – and God can *use* those things to fulfill God’s ultimate purpose for us.

I always compare it to taking a car trip across the country. You start here in Devon, and you're driving to California. You have the trip all planned out, programmed into your GPS. You start off, and everything's going fine, but then you get into Ohio, and there's construction or a detour, and you have to find another way. You're still going to get to your ultimate destination. There are just a lot of different ways to get there.

God has an ultimate destination for us, for creation. A purpose. A big picture plan for where God wants all of this to end up. But along the way, there are mistakes and detours and pandemics and pain and suffering and all kinds of things that get us off track. Those things *aren't* a part of God's plan, God's *purpose* for us, but God keeps rerouting, so that eventually we will get to the goal that God has for us. It's like Joseph says to his brothers in the book of Genesis after they sell him into slavery and cause him all kinds of suffering, but he ends up in this unimaginable place where he is able to *help* his brothers later. And he says to them, "What you intended for evil, *God* intended for *good*." The suffering of this present time, God can *use* it to do something *good*.

Fifteen years ago tomorrow was simultaneously the *best* and *worst* day of my life. Around 2:00 in the morning, Jen went into labor with our first child. So we got up and rushed down to the hospital. We were *so* excited. This moment we had been anticipating for nine months (and even *longer*) was finally here. We got settled into the hospital room, going through everything we needed to do, and everything was progressing, getting closer and closer. But then around 1:00 in the afternoon, things *stopped* progressing. The doctors tried a number of things, but by 5:00 they said, "Something's not quite right. We could keep waiting, or we could just go in and take this baby out now."

So we went into the operating room, and at 6 PM our daughter Madelyn was born. And the room was totally silent. They rushed her over to the exam table, and I tried to stand up from my stool to go over there, but I only got about halfway up before a nurse pushed me back down. That's when we knew that something was very, very wrong. It turned out that she had been born with a very rare chromosomal abnormality that was virtually undetectable in utero, so we had no idea. She lived for 14 hours before dying in our arms the next morning. I don't have to tell you how that affected us. The death of a child is the worst thing that any parent will ever have to endure. The next few years were pretty rough. What I want to tell you about is what happened *after* that.

There was a family in the church I was pastoring that was expecting their third child. Victor and Joan already had two boys, and now they were going to have a little girl. But when she was born, something went wrong, and their daughter Victoria didn't survive. I got a call and went to the hospital to be with them. Because of what I had experienced in the loss of *our* daughter, I was able to walk with them through their loss in the days and weeks and years that followed in a way that I would not have been able to if we *hadn't* lost Maddie. And I can't tell you how many *other* times that has happened; how many *other* parents I have been able to walk with through the loss of a child, no matter how old that child is. And it's not like God *made* us lose Maddy so that that could happen. God took this unbearably awful thing and *used* it to do something good. I can look back now and *see* that, see the good that has come out of it.

It would be great if the story ended there. But at the end of June, we got a call that Joan was in the hospital with Covid. And two weeks ago, we got the call that she had died. There is a part of me that *just doesn't understand* why someone who had already been through so much would

have to die like that. It doesn't seem *fair*, and nothing about it makes *sense*. And, honestly, it's hard to see how God is working anything for *good* in this.

We can't always see beyond the immediacy of our suffering. But when we *can't*, Paul says, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. When we don't know how to *pray*, when we don't know what to say to God, when we can't feel God's presence in any of this, when all we can do is groan under the weight of the suffering of this world, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. How many times over this past year and a half have you heard news that made you just *sigh*? When that's all we've got we can trust, even then, that God is with us, because God speaks the language of the sigh.

We can't always see beyond the immediacy of our suffering. But God is playing the long game, working to redeem this world and our fragile, broken bodies and use *all* of it to do something *good* that helps fulfill God's ultimate purpose for creation. We are called to *trust* in that promise and *hope* for that, even when we can't see any proof of it. And the Holy Spirit helps us when we can't.