

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: Romans 8:18-30

Sermon Title: "Called from Suffering to Glory" (A Journey through Romans)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

July 17, 2016

**{SLIDE 1}** Everybody suffers. One part of being a human being on earth is that we are going to suffer. Friedrich Nietzsche once said, "To live is to suffer..." Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian novelist and professor said, "When suffering knocks at your door and you say there is no seat for him, he tells you not to worry because he has brought his own stool."<sup>1</sup>

We all suffer from something. If it isn't from physical pain, we suffer from some mental pain, some mental anguish. We concern ourselves with life and how we are going to live it. We may think, "How long to I stay at that job, or how long will that job stay with me?" We may ponder, "I need to make some big decisions in the coming weeks, but I don't know if I will make the right decisions."

Our mental suffering leads to emotional suffering. We may be fine with whatever we are doing at home or school or work, and then a mental image enters our minds that trouble us, and now we are really angry or deeply sad. We weren't angry or sad before, but now we are, and we are emotional wrecks. We cannot

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/suffering\\_2.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/suffering_2.html)

focus on anything else. It occupies our time and work. That mental thought may turn us into emotional goo. We are paralyzed. We cannot think straight or speak coherently. We are too focus on the problem that all we can do is spiral down toward some bottomless abyss.

We suffer from worrying about our children, and when they go off to college. We suffer from worrying about our parents and going off to the care facility. We suffer from not having enough in the bank. About 52% of Americans don't have \$400 in the bank to cover an emergency, if any ever arose.<sup>2</sup> The car breaks down, need new tires, kid gets sick, the gas bill was too high: most people cannot afford these unforeseen expenses without borrowing the money. You name it – we suffer from it. Life is not free from suffering of some kind. Your suffering might not be my suffering, but we both suffer from something.

**{SLIDE 2}** Paul knew a thing or two about suffering. Everywhere he went – every town and city he visited in order to peach the good news of Jesus Christ – Paul suffered some kind of misfortune that would leave him bloodied and bruised, and he'd have to leave that town or city for the next one. In his

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<sup>2</sup> <http://personalliberty.com/half-americans-cant-come-400-emergency-cash-unless-borrow/>.

second letter to the Corinthians,<sup>3</sup> Paul lists what he has gone through: “in labors more abundantly, in prisons more abundantly, in stripes above measure, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day have I been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of rivers, in perils of robbers, in perils from my countrymen, in perils from the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in labor and travail, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.” How’s that for ministry, danger around every corner.

In Acts 9, when Jesus confronts Paul on his way to Damascus, and Paul is knocked off his horse and blinded for three days, a man named Ananias is called to help Paul recover. Ananias is not too surer about helping Paul, because Paul at the time was interested in finding Christians and persecuting them for their faith. God says to Ananias, “Go, for [Paul] is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Dear Mr. Trump, Paul’s letter is called ‘Second Corinthians’ and not ‘Two Corinthians’.”

<sup>4</sup> Acts 9:15.

Now, Paul suffered many things during his time as a disciple, and he could have seen it as God's way of getting back at him for persecuting so many Christians. He could have viewed it as God's punishment for overseeing Stephen's death, which Paul did back in Acts 7.<sup>5</sup> Or what he could do, and he does, is attach his suffering to God's glory. Where there is suffering, there is always God's glory outweighing it.

{SLIDE 3} "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us."<sup>6</sup> Yes, we suffer from much, but we have God's glory to fall into. Our sufferings are little compared to God's glory, which is huge. We might go through a rough patch for a day, a week, or even a year, but God's glory last forever and is never removed. In Peter's first letter, he will tell the people that they suffer for a little while, but God has called us to his eternal glory by his abundant grace.<sup>7</sup> Paul can look back at all the things he had to suffer through and he can say, "Forget about it! I got a God who is great, and God has great things for me, which I don't know about yet."

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time

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<sup>5</sup> And the first verse of Chapter 8.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:18.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Peter 5:10. Also John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, cf. 237.

are not worth comparing... For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it.”<sup>8</sup> Even creation is suffering from all the sin that tortures it.

{SLIDE 4} Every living creature and plant, the air that we breathe and the smells that enter our noses: all of creation suffers and longs for a time not to suffer. It is interesting that Paul would stick creation in the middle of the argument. Aren't we talking about ourselves and how we suffer many things? What does creation have to do with it? What do the ducks down at the pond behind our church and the pets we keeping in our homes and all the trees and grass and flowers we see have to do with it? Paul mentions all of creation, possibly, because he wants to tell us that we are not alone in our suffering. Even creation suffers. Animals suffer. Plants suffer. The earth suffers from sin. Earthquakes and landslides, hurricanes and tornados, global warming and unusual temperatures: all of creation suffers.

But Paul tells us about creation not just to say that we are not alone in our suffering, but mainly to say that it is God's intention for all of creation, including ourselves, to be healed, restored, saved. We

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 8:19-20.

are not the only one who benefit from God's salvation plan. Creation is being restored, too. Creation will be set free from the bonds of sin at an appropriate time. Right now it groans and complains about the way things are now, but like us it will be rescued from its pain and will suffer no more. All the decay and decomposition and death in creation will be gone. All creation, even we, will be placed in perfect balance, nothing to cause our decline again. A former member of our church once described heaven to me, and he said that in heaven nothing is dead. There are no dead leaves, no dead trees, no dead bugs in the grass, no decaying logs, no foul rivers or ponds. Terrible smells and sights are gone. Everything is alive. All of creation lives and glories in God's presence.

**{SLIDE 5}** Let's go back to talking about our sufferings (like we would want to do such a thing). But let us talk about suffering in light of God's glory. Paul mentions the Holy Spirit. He says that we who are in the Spirit groan with creation, looking forward to the day that we all could be free from sin and suffering. Then he says that the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know how to communicate with God at times, because we are suffering too much. We cannot think straight – we cannot form the words to cry out for help. Yet the Spirit gives us the words,

whether we understand them or not. The Spirit places us in communion with God, and we communicate our sufferings to God as we do, and God understands perfectly. Sometimes all we can do is raise our arms to God in desperation. We cannot scream “Help!” or utter any word, but God understands. God knows what arms lifted to him means. God has seen such a gesture before in all of Scripture and with every “saint,” and Paul calls them, who calls out to God. God comforts us in our sufferings.

Or, maybe all we can do is cry. All we can do is wail in pain. Or, maybe all we can do is roll up into balls and hug ourselves. Bring our legs up to our chests and hug them with all our might. Or, maybe we just lay in bed with the pillow over our eyes, trying to block out the world and all its sufferings. God understands and hears our voices, even though we do not speak. God understands, because God has seen such a gesture before in all of Scripture and with every saint who calls out to God. God comforts us in our sufferings. The Holy Spirit within us communicates our pain. The Spirit is like a machine that can read our minds and place them on a screen for someone to read. The only One reading our complaining and cries is God, and God has called us to a glory that is greater than our pain.

{SLIDE 6} And then to solidify his argument, to

cement in our minds that God’s glory far outweighs our suffering, Paul tells us that God has a plan for us. “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”<sup>9</sup> This was one of the first verses I learned when I was young. My grandfather taught it to me. I really didn’t know what it meant until I got older, until I suffered through a few things with family and schooling and just generally growing-up. God’s got a plan for us. No matter what we face in life – no matter where we go or what we experience – God is right there with us, achieving his plan. God is working in us to lessen our suffering. God is working in us to make us stronger through our suffering. God is working in us to see us through our suffering to the greater glory that God call us toward.

Remember what God said to the exiled Israelites back in Jeremiah 29. They were living miserable lives in a foreign territory, wonder what will become of them, and God told them that he has plans for them. “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”<sup>10</sup> Whatever we suffer through may be painful and disconcerting, but God plans not to harm us in any way, as he calls us to walk with

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<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:28.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah 29:11.

him. Whatever we suffer through may feel like there is no end, but God plans for us a glorious future, and he speaks us that future to us as we walk with him. “God is at work for the good of his people,... God work for the good of all thing [for all of creation],... God works in all things for the good of those who love him.”<sup>11</sup>

**{SLIDE 7}** There is no end to the plans God has for us. God planned for our salvation before we knew the word *salvation*. God set his plan in motion for us, and God works to make it complete. With more grace and more holiest placed on us, we move through our lives. We move through every suffering, no matter how large or small... with God we move through them to the greater glory that God has in store for us.

God will not stop working in us until the plans are fulfilled. God’s plans do not end until we cross the finish line of life and are standing with God in all glory. We may look back on our suffering and wish we needn’t have gone through them. We look back at our suffering and realize God was there all the time. God’s love never lessened. God’s presence never failed.

“We do not always understand what God is doing, let alone welcome it. Nor are we told that [God] is at work for our comfort. But we know [as Paul knew and

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<sup>11</sup> John Stott, *Romans*, 247.

the Roman Christians were getting to know] that in all things [God] is working towards our supreme good.”<sup>12</sup>

We all have suffering, yes. But we also have the love of God. When suffering knocks at our doors and presents a stool to sit on next to us, God pulls up a chair and sits on the other side. God doesn't leave our presence. God outlasts the suffering on its rickety stool. God liberates us from our suffering, and we are filled with joy and life.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 248.

## **Assurance of Pardon:**

Hear the Good News from Psalm 103: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of the benefits of the One who pardons all your guilt, and heals all your sufferings, who redeems your life from the grave and surrounds you with steadfast love and tender affection." God fully blesses us. We may trust Jesus' mercy and patience. We receive life from the Holy Spirit, and are made new. Brothers and sisters, believe and accept forgiveness from God! Amen.