

# “SUFFERING IN CONTEXT”

## Romans 8.18-22

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Romans 1.1-17 is almost universally recognized as the boundaries within which falls the introduction to the Apostle Paul’s most important New Testament letter, wherein he identified himself in verses 1-6, he addressed himself in verses 7-12, and he expressed himself in verses 13-17. It was in Paul’s expression of himself, in verses 13-17, that he set the tone for the entire letter. From Romans 1.13, we see that he desired to visit Rome. Verse 14 then revealed to us that his debt was a moral obligation he felt compelled to discharge to every man, whether Greek or Barbarian, whether wise or unwise.

In verse 15, he stated his duty, whereby he fulfilled his moral obligation and discharged his debt to every human being, by doing his best to preach the Gospel to every creature. And how determined was Paul to discharge his debt by doing his duty? We see this in verses 16 and 17, where he explains to his readers both the *nature* of the Gospel’s preaching (the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth) and its *purpose* (it reveals the righteousness of God).

After such an intense introduction to a letter such as this, you wonder how Paul expected to hold the reader’s interest for the rest of the letter, which is thought by some to be the largest in Greek known to have been written in that era. But he does hold interest. In Romans 1.18-3.20, he addressed an issue that any spiritually sensitive person would give a listen to; the need of individuals to be justified in the sight of God, Who is real.

Though some people in Paul’s day, and undoubtedly many in our day, deny the need of individuals to be justified in the sight of God, falsely thinking they already have or do not need standing before God, Paul provided two convincing evidences of every individual’s *need* to be justified in the sight of God: The *problem* that a person, that every person, possesses, is sinfulness, and the *prosecution* that every person faces. And what is every person’s prosecution? There’s a host of them. One’s conscience, the Law, the truth, and the Righteous Judge Himself.

Having secured the reader’s attention, Paul moved from the need *for* justification to the nature *of* justification. Why was Paul so careful to describe the nature of justification? He did it to make sure that his readers were not comparing apples with oranges. Remember, what separates Roman Catholicism from Biblical Christianity, what separates false religions of every stripe and persuasion from Biblical Christianity, is the essential nature of this concept called justification, whereby a sinner is established with good standing before our holy and righteous God.

To establish the nature of justification, Paul *first* explained what faith is, which is the instrumental means of justification. This was done in Romans 3.21-31. *Next*, he gave us an example of justification by faith, using the patriarch Abraham as a timeless example of how God has always and how God will always provide justification for a sinner. This takes up all of chapter 4. The *third* thing Paul addressed in his explanation of the nature of justification is justification itself. In Romans 5.1-11, Paul detailed to his readers the justified person’s possessions, the justified person’s proof that he is justified, the justified person’s prospect, and he closed with the justified person’s praise.

Let me interject at this point that justification is where the great Latin father, Augustine, went so terribly wrong. Augustine was a notable figure who became a towering influence in Latin Christianity, which is to say Western Christianity, where the Latin language predominated before the spread of Islam. Along with his

tremendous success in standing against the heresy of a contemporary named Pelagius, Augustine is also known for several catastrophic failures.

The single issue that I want to bring to your attention at this time is the tragic mistake he made concerning justification, the issue that is central to Paul's letter to the Romans. I read an articulate summary:

“Unfortunately, Augustine spoke with great authority without having any facility in the original languages. His native tongue was Latin. The Koine Greek of the NT had been out of vogue for more than a century. When he tried to explain the meaning of the Greek verb *dikaioo*, he said it meant ‘to make righteous.’ This understanding was incorporated into the doctrine of the RCC. The basic understanding was that justification was an act whereby God ‘infused’ the character of Christ into the sinner at water baptism. However, the act was not completed at that point. ‘We are justified, but righteousness itself grows as we go forward.’”<sup>1</sup>

There were three terrible consequences produced from Augustine's failure to understand that the Greek word *δικαίωω* *does not* mean “to make righteous,” but instead was consistently used by the Greeks to refer to a verdict,<sup>2</sup> to refer to a declaration that someone was in the right.<sup>3</sup> Hence, a pronouncement. *First*, Augustine thought, and therefore the Roman Catholic Church erroneously came to believe, that when a sinner was justified by faith in Christ, he was *made* righteous rather than *declared* righteous. *Second*, Augustine viewed, and the Roman Catholic Church erroneously subsequently viewed, justification as a process over time rather than an event. The Bible teaches that conviction takes time, while justification is an event, followed by sanctification, growth over time experienced by someone who has been justified. *Third*, great confusion was introduced, preventing clarity regarding salvation and sanctification. This confusion stemmed from the misunderstanding of the Greek word for justification, leading to significant errors about the means of salvation and the subsequent growth of the Christian.

The reason justification is a verdict, a pronouncement, and an event rather than a process is that justification is predicated on Jesus Christ doing *everything* that needed to be done to secure the sinner's salvation. Hence, the justified person does no work, but uses the faith given to him to lay hold of Christ. The Lord Jesus satisfied God's righteousness demands, with the sinner coming to enjoy the status of righteousness in the sight of God through faith in Christ, because through faith the sinner enjoys the benefits of Jesus Christ's imputed righteousness.

Thus, justification by faith *does not* result in the sinner being infused with anything that makes him good enough to go to heaven, but grants to the sinner who comes to Christ by faith the *status* of righteousness conferred upon him as a free gift. No sinner goes to heaven because he is good enough, but because Christ is good enough. Sanctification, which necessarily follows, is rightly understood to be God's work in the now justified Christian's life to produce greater Christ likeness over time. Oh, the problems caused by Augustine and perpetuated by the Roman Catholic Church, which knows nothing about the Gospel.

Away from Augustine and back to the apostle. Knowing that he was dealing with some thoughtful and reflective people who were very serious about their relationship with Christ, Paul dealt with three other concepts that affect our understanding of the nature of justification and bring us to our text. In Romans 5.12-21, the idea

<sup>1</sup> David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, (Grace Theology Press, Revised Edition edited by James S. Reitman, 2012), page 96.

<sup>2</sup> Bauer, Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), page 249.

<sup>3</sup> Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key To The Greek New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, 1980), page 359.

of headship is dealt with. We cannot overestimate the importance of headship in the Bible. The Christians among us will remember when the Holy Spirit convicted them of sin before they trusted Christ. At that point, they discovered themselves to be sinners in the sight of God because our head, Adam, personally committed an act of sin.

Then, after conversion, the child of God discovers himself to be on good terms with God because his head, now Jesus Christ, personally committed an act of obedience that provided the satisfaction for his salvation. To state the matter concisely, one becomes a sinner because of what your head (Adam) did, and you become a saint because of what your new Head (Christ) did. When Adam was your head, you were condemned. When Jesus Christ became your head, you were delivered.

Are you catching on to why I am such a stickler for male leadership in marriage, the husband being his wife's head? If momma is the boss and daddy is functionally little more than his wife's oldest child, neither one of them, even if they are believers in Christ, can approach a good understanding of headship and what we have in Christ. This is why male leadership is profoundly crucial in every congregation, to set an example for new believers to follow.

This idea of headship spins off to another question. What is the present relationship of the saved person to sin? *Can* the saved person commit acts of sin? *Can* we live lifestyles of sinfulness? If God's grace counters personal sin, should I commit more sin to get more grace?

Paul's answers to such questions as these, as well as his strong assertion that who you serve indicates who your real master is, are found in Romans chapter 6. Romans chapter 7 deals with the Law of Moses. And in that chapter, Paul explained the relationship of the Law to the Jewish person who knew Jesus Christ as his personal Savior, verses 1-6 of chapter 7, and the relationship of the Law to the nation of Israel in a very complex and highly controversial passage that runs from Romans 7.7 through the end of the chapter.

With Romans chapter 8, we have reached the top of the mountain and we can see to the other side. In this chapter, which deals with glory, Paul relates to us the Holy Spirit's deliverance of the believer from sin, verses 1-13, and the Holy Spirit's declaration of our sonship, "whereby we cry Abba, Father," verses 14-17.

The passage we approach today, the Holy Spirit's delivery of the justified person through suffering, begins in Romans 8.18. Take a breather and pause for just a moment. After reviewing all that great stuff about sin and salvation and grace and deliverance and sonship, it has still been observed by some Christians that believers are experiencing suffering.

Your suffering has been my particular motivation for bringing this message to you. My mother's suffering hurt me. Rosa's suffering hurt me. Archie and Shirley's suffering hurt me. Dali's suffering hurt me. Larry's suffering hurt me. Men and women here (and not here) today are suffering, and I hurt for you.

Crucial for us to remember is that our Lord Jesus Christ suffered on His way to glory. And it's the same for you and me. In the passage we are about to study, Paul starts by asserting something outlandish to anyone who does not live by faith. He recognized suffering (remember he suffered more than a bit himself), but accounts suffering to be insignificant when compared to our prospective glory.

Listen, beloved. My words are carefully considered, and I speak them to help you. Your suffering and mine is really no big deal ... in comparison to what God has in store for us. Note that Paul made no attempt to explain *why* that is so in our text. He sought only to declare that suffering is what is to be experienced on the way to glory, and that suffering here is no indication that glory there is not going to be realized.

If you have arrived at Romans 8.18, I invite you to stand and read along silently while I read aloud through verse 22:

- <sup>18</sup> For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time *are* not worthy *to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

- 19 For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.
- 20 For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected *the same* in hope,
- 21 Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.
- 22 For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.

We see here the first of two examples of the expectation that is appropriate amidst suffering, the groaning of creation. And in a few minutes, you will see why my message is entitled “Suffering In Context.” The word “creature” in the passage just read refers to all of God’s subhuman creation. That is, all of nature, excluding, of course, human beings and supernatural beings, is referred to in this context by the words “creature” and “creation.”

Ever wonder why Christians never make good “Green Peace” activists, and why “Green Peace” activists seldom make good Christians? It’s not because we see nature differently, really. We both see nature suffering terribly. But the “Green Peace” people are such terrible pessimists, because they see only ruination and blight at the end.

Environmentalists are right when they attribute all of nature’s ills to humanity. But their understanding is profoundly limited. It doesn’t go far enough. Christians know from the Word of God that nature’s ills, the suffering, the groaning of creation, if you will, are because of humanity. But we know why, and the “Greens” don’t know why. They think they know why. But they don’t, really.

In Romans 8.18-22, we see Paul addressing the reality of creation groaning, as well as the reason for the groaning. Attend to me to learn how your suffering fits in with God’s plan:

### **First, THE REALITY OF CREATION’S GROANING**

- 18 For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time *are* not worthy *to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

I suppose it comes as a shock to many people that nature is actually said to be suffering. But it really is no surprise to the contemplative and meditative Bible student. Whether we look through our telescopes at the twinkling stars burning themselves out or through our microscopes at one-celled animals devouring each other, whether the painter on the Golden Gate Bridge trying to offset the corrosive effects of rust or the farmer doing his best to minimize the damage of pests and parasites, we see God’s creation suffering.

Mountains are not beautiful. Oh, I like the look of them, and so do you. But are they not scars and eruptions on the complexion of a once-perfect planetary surface? What about the radiant sunset? Is it not really the end of a full day of exposure to nuclear radiation that can result in skin cancer, premature aging of the skin, and a myriad of other health problems? Yes, I know about vitamin D.

And yet our human values, both yours and mine, are so perverse that most people think such pimples as we call mountains and such scars as the Grand Canyon are considered to be beautiful. Do not millions of people every week strip themselves down to near nudity, void their minds of anything productive, and expose themselves to as much of that harmful radiation as they can while blocking out as much of the radiation as they can with sunscreen?

Environmentalists recognize that something is wrong. They realize that thousands of species are now extinct. The World Wildlife Federation once estimated that between 200 and 2,000 different species become ex-

tinct every year.<sup>4</sup> But they still don't see the big picture, not for want of trying, but for want of perspective. The picture is simply too big to grasp from a human perspective. So, Paul informed his readers of what was going on from a cosmic perspective.

Yes, creation is suffering terrible agony, if we can pick up on Paul's personification of God's subhuman creation. But with insight only the Holy Spirit of God can provide through an inspired pen, the true nature of the suffering, including your suffering, is interpreted for us. Let's read Romans 8.19:

“For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.”

Two things:

“Earnest expectation” translates a single Greek word, a compound word, that conveys a great picture. Those of you old enough to remember air travel bliss before TSA can imagine yourself at the airport waiting for a loved one to come out the loading tube that reaches from the terminal to the door of the airplane. What do you do if you aren't standing right in front? You “stretch your neck” to see that loved one as soon as you can. That's what “earnest expectation,” ἀποκαρδοκία, means.<sup>5</sup> God's creation isn't “stretching the neck” to see a loved one get off the plane, but to see something else. What else? Remembering that Paul is using poetic license to give inanimate matter and unintelligent life a personality trait, it doesn't really have, to convey an idea to his readers, what creation earnestly expects to see, eagerly anticipating?

The “manifestation of the sons of God.” With the word “manifestation” meaning “revelation” and “apocalypse” meaning to unveil, we see that creation is waiting to see the unveiling of the sons of God. That is, nature itself is waiting, expectantly, for the unveiling of believers, for your unveiling and mine, Christian friend. Does this mean creation is waiting to see what it's going to be like, or who it's going to be? Neither one, actually.

The point to see here, Christian, is this: Scripture recognizes the suffering of God's creation, her groaning if you will. But the label placed on that suffering, the reason for it, the end of it, is entirely different than that which the unsaved community places on that suffering, that groaning.

## Next, THE REASONS FOR CREATION'S GROANING

There are three reasons why creation is “suffering” the extinction of many species, the loss of its energy, and the confusion of its order:

First, there is the Fall because of Adam, Romans 8.20:

“For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected *the same* in hope.”

Four things I'd like to point out in this verse:

*First*, the word “creature.” Remember, this is the subhuman creation that God brought into existence that Paul refers to here, lower forms of life, and also nonlife.

*Second*, the creation “was made subject to vanity.” “Vanity” refers to “aimlessness, the inability to reach a goal or achieve results.”<sup>6</sup> This is nature presently existing in a fashion not originally intended. “Was made subject” translates a single verb that we call a divine passive. Though unstated, it is understood that God subjected

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<sup>4</sup> [http://wwf.panda.org/about\\_our\\_earth/biodiversity/biodiversity/](http://wwf.panda.org/about_our_earth/biodiversity/biodiversity/) 5/4/18

<sup>5</sup> Rienecker, page 366.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

His creation to vanity, to aimlessness. It is God Who allows the gradual decline of the universe that scientists have labeled entropy. It is why iron rusts and paint peels.

“Not willingly.” Again, Paul personifies the inanimate and the unintelligent. But he does so to point out that the creation is involved in something it has nothing to do with. Nature “suffers” through no fault of its own. Such is never suggested in God’s Word about the human race. We *have* caused our problems.

“But by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope.” Again, a divine passive. It was God, for it could have been no other, Who has the power to subject the entire physical universe to what we refer to in the Bible as the curse. This is the direct result of Adam’s Fall into the dark abyss of sin by willful choice. But notice, when God subjected the creation to the curse, He did it in hope.

Here is where the environmentalists become despondent, and the Christians who embrace Bible truth become so hopeful. It was God acting to address a man’s sin that caused this mess. And indeed, humanity is making things worse. But it is crucial to understand that God’s curse is not perpetual and continual. Even when God cursed the ground, there was hope. The verse ends with the words “in hope,” with hope referring to the confident expectation of future blessing based upon the promises of God.

Second, there is the future because of God, verse 21:

“Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.”

This verse at once answers two questions: Why does creation earnestly expect the manifestation of the sons of God? Why is nature portrayed as waiting for our unveiling as the sons of God? And second, what is the hope mentioned in the previous verse? To put it plain and straightforward, creation eagerly awaits our glorification, our unveiling, our manifestation as sons of God, because when that happens, creation will also be delivered from the “bondage of corruption.”

“Bondage of corruption” is the slavery to decay and deterioration that our rusting, carnivorous, violent universe presently exhibits. But it was not always that way. And it will not always be that way. When believers are someday delivered from our suffering, creation will be delivered from its suffering, as well. And if you think things out there are beautiful now, imagine the glory of it all when the curse is removed.

Politics won’t bring that about. Communism, socialism, environmentalism, and all the other isms cannot accomplish any of this. Only God will bring it about when He’s finished with His offer of a free salvation to sinners and the last invitation to trust Christ is extended.

Finally, there are the facts because of reality, verse 22: Though too many Christians behave otherwise, we of all people have nothing to fear from facts, from truth, and from science that is unbiased by the false religion of atheistic humanism. The facts are evident that the whole creation is suffering. But the dispute between the believers and the unbelievers centers around what the suffering means. Does it mean the end of it all? Or does it just mean the end of one phase and the beginning of another? Let’s read:

“For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.”

Paul describes the suffering of the subhuman creation as groaning and travail. And it is occurring right up to this very moment. But what does the groaning mean? The word “travail” tells us. It’s a word that means “to suffer birth pains together.”<sup>7</sup> Do the birth pangs of a mother portend tragedy? Does a mother’s suffering in labor spell the end ... or a beginning? Paul would have us see the suffering of creation as an indication of a bright future ... for the child of God.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Look at what Paul has shown us. A sinner comes to know Christ as his Savior. As a result of that, the Bible shows him that he will not suffer the eternal torment of the lake of fire that every lost person must endure forever. But after the initial excitement of your new life, it dawns on you that you still have problems to face, obstacles to overcome, and fences to hurdle. You still commit sins. You still do foolish things. And although, all told, you really are a new person in Jesus Christ, you still suffer. Oh, how you suffer.

You suffer from physical ailments caused by diseases, injuries, or age. You suffer the consequences of financial foolishness, from time to time or continuously, as the individual case may be. You may even suffer through a lousy marriage or feel stuck with a terrible mom or dad. And you indeed suffer persecution for your stand for Christ. Added together, this can produce discouragement and tempt you to feel sorry for yourself, just as I am all too frequently tempted to feel sorry for myself.

When I look to the Word of God for pity, Paul, who was an experienced veteran of suffering, wrote something to the effect of, "Your suffering is really unimportant compared to what great things await you." What? I didn't want to hear that. I wanted comfort and consolation, not the truth. But think about it for a moment. When we have a hard time reconciling our suffering with the fact that we are victorious Christians, what Paul is saying is that your various sufferings are the potholes in the pavement of the street you *must* travel on to reach glory.

Just as the Savior traveled through suffering to reach glory, and just as the entire universe, excluding humanity and angels, travels through suffering to reach its glory, so there will be an excellent place for us to dwell when we reach our glory. It is the same with each and every one of us.

Can you handle that? Only if you are assured that glory is just the other side of, just beyond, suffering. But glory is just beyond suffering, only if you really do know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior.

Mind you, we haven't, in this text, been told *why* it must be this way, only that it *must* be this way. And that it is this way even for creation. That means you *must* take this by faith, just like Christ *must* be taken by faith.

Believe in Christ, and there is glory on the other side of your suffering. Remain in your unbelief, and there is an eternity of suffering on the other side of your normal span of human lifetime suffering.

Am I arguing against tenderness and compassion for someone who is suffering? Heavens, no! I am showing that, while God puts us in places of suffering where He shows Himself to be the God of all comfort, and uses believers to minister to believers, we *never* feel sorry for each other.

We who know Christ are *not* losers. We who know Christ are victors, and our sufferings are the potholes in the pavement we travel on our way to glory.