

Over the last few weeks, we've begun to plumb the depths of the eighth chapter of Romans—maybe the greatest chapter in all the Bible. What makes it so great, I think is that it is rich, deep theology, but it's connected to aches and pains and tangible *stuff* of real life.

Each of you has come here this morning with suffering. You come with suffering in your past, present, and future. Some of you are carrying burdens of very particular suffering in this morning. Unfulfilled hopes. Past hurts that linger in mental anguish. Anxious worries that preoccupy every seeming second of your mind. You have it, I have it.

Each of us could rehash the worst moments of our lives—maybe you're living it right now—the moments when it seems like everything you've tried to build your life around and toward has collapsed, the moments when you are drowning in the pit of grief and depression, and all you want is to wake up the next day and not feel miserable, but you can't just make yourself not feel miserable. And some days you might even be tempted to think: Is it all worth it?

Romans 8 was written for those moments.

And I want to be clear. I'm not just talking about the moments of suicidal thoughts. Physical death is not the worst thing that can happen to you. Spiritual death is the worst thing that can happen to you. Romans 8 wasn't written just to keep you from doing something rash in a single moment of suffering, it was written to keep you a Christian through a lifetime of suffering. The worst question you can ask in the moment of suffering is not "Is life worth living?" It's "Is God worth worshipping? Is Jesus worth trusting?" Those are the real life and death questions you will face—if you haven't faced them already.

So, my burden this morning, is to do what I think Paul is trying to do here and equip you with a vision of God and his purposes that is big enough, strong enough, to endure a lifetime of suffering. That's my hope.

So, the main point here, brothers and sisters, is that *Jesus is worth it*. Or, to put it another way: *In Christ, we can endure all suffering*. That's the sentence at the beginning of this passage. That's the point of Paul's entire paragraph here.

And to unpack that, we're asking two questions:

1. *Why* must we endure? Why does this suffering exist?
2. *What* are we waiting for? What is at the end of all this enduring?

But before we dive any deeper on, let's pray.

## 1. Why must we endure suffering?

Remember, Paul ended last week's passage saying: You are going to inherit everything with Christ—everything worth having, you will get in Jesus, **“provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”**

And what Pastor Ethan highlighted last week was that that suffering is not a payment for glory. Paul isn't saying: Hey, if you suffer enough, if you self-flagellate enough, God will see your sacrifice and reward you with eternal payment. That's not what Paul is saying. What Paul is saying is that the path to glory is *filled* with suffering—and if you don't endure, you won't make it.

But my question is: Why do we have to suffer? Why is that a part of the equation? And there are three answers to this question, I think, in Paul's writing here.

First, *all creation suffers*. All creation suffers.

Look at what Paul says in verse 19: **“The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility...”**

Paul says it's not just you, but all of creation is waiting, looking forward to, anticipating, the glory that is to come. And the reason the creation (the rocks, the birds, the trees, the sky, the moon, the wind)—the reason *all* creation is waiting eagerly is because everything in this world is subject to futility: Frustration, suffering, death, decay. Creation is in bondage to corruption, Paul says, that it is groaning.

And if you pay attention to the world around you for two seconds, you know this is the case.

This week, I was walking out by Island Lake, and it was a gorgeous day. It was 70 degrees, perfect temperature, not a cloud in the sky, just the right breeze in the air. I saw a family of ducks swimming by, a family of geese swam right next to the dock where I was sitting with about a dozen little goslings—it was awesome. It was a kind of day where you just burst into praise: God, you are good! This is what you mean when you say that you saw your creation and it was *very good!*

And as I was walking by the lake, looking out, I suddenly heard a wheeze, like a gust of air was suddenly rushing out of a balloon. And I looked down, and I had stepped on the body of a little tiny baby goose. It looked like it hadn't even hatched. Something must have happened, it wasn't fully developed, no feathers, just basically an embryo, sprawled out on the ground. It was horrible.

And that's the world we live in. It is simultaneously wonderful and good—and horrible, subjected to futility. So much frustration, so much suffering. Babies die, marriages end, earthquakes destroy, wars rage, bodies get cancer, hopes are crushed, all the earth is suffering!

And when Christians, infused with the Holy Spirit and redeemed in Christ, might be tempted to say: Not us! We won't suffer! The Holy Spirit will heal every ailment! We're empowered to transform our city, our state, our nation and turn it into our little Christian utopia! To that, Paul says, in verse 23: **“And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, grown inwardly as we wait...”**. If all of creation is groaning, then of course we should expect to groan along with it in this frustrated world.

Sometimes, when we suffer, we know why. We know that we have dug our own grave. But sometimes, we don't know. We don't know why bad things happen to good people, we don't know why a little goose embryo was sucked out of her egg before she could develop feathers and muscles. We don't know why a fire started yesterday afternoon in northern California and by this morning had burned 11,000 acres. We don't know why coronaviruses exist and why somebody dies of cancer every 3 seconds. In the time it takes me to preach this sermon, 760 people around the world will have died of cancer. So, all we can do—along with all of creation—is groan, and our groanings are saying: **“IT'S NOT SUPPOSED TO BE THIS WAY!”**

But, that doesn't, by itself, answer this question. Yes, all of creation suffers, but why?

And that's the second answer that Paul gives here: *All of creation suffers because God has subjected it to futility*. Look at verse 20 with me: **“For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope...”**

Now, we're going to get to that hope in just a minute, but before you can see the good news in the suffering, you have to see that it is ultimately under God's control. Cancer, heart attacks, landslides, war—they all exist because God subjected all the earth to a curse. Don't you remember that part of Genesis 3?

**“Cursed is the ground because of you,” God said to Adam. “In pain shall you eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you”** (Gen. 3:17-18).

**“Creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it.”**

Him who subjected it is God! Only God had the authority as Creator over his creation to subject it to futility. Adam couldn't do that Only God could do so purposefully, with *hope* in a goal in mind. Satan couldn't do that. God subjected it.

The question is why. Why did God bring about futility and frustration and suffering and death in response to sin? What is the purpose there?

And, that's a big question. It's a huge question with more than one answer. But a piece of it is this: God subjected the creation to frustration and suffering to give us *a tangible picture of the horror of sin*.

We don't really understand the gravity of our sin against God. We don't. When's the last time that your offending God, your preference of sin and pleasure—instead of preferring God and pleasing God—kept you up at night? It should keep you up every night! It's the most profound

wrong in the universe and millions of people are engaging in God-dishonoring treason every second!

But we don't think like that. We don't. We are a blind people, a spiritually numb people. And so, one of the ways that God wakes us up to the horror of vertical evil is by allowing us to taste the horror of horizontal evil.

This is what C.S. Lewis is talking about with his famous quote: "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, pain and suffering and futility shout to us: "IT IS NOT SUPPOSED TO BE THIS WAY!—pointing us to the reality that this physical brokenness is a signpost to the real issue in the world: the spiritual brokenness between us and God because of our dishonoring of him. It's not supposed to be this way. The ugliness of every second of physical suffering is just a tiny taste of the ugliness of our sin. It's shouting: It's not supposed to be this way."[\[2\]](#)

But there is one more piece of this that is crucial, if you're going to understand the character of God and the joy this passage is meant to bring you in understanding the pain of the world. And that's the last part of verse 21. Let's start in verse 20 again:

**"For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."**

God did not merely subject creation to suffer—he did so in hope. In hope that the suffering would one day end as creation was set free. So the suffering isn't permanent. It was always intended to be a temporary reality leading to something new.

And here's the thing.

How was that freedom going to be accomplished? How was the corruption going to be overcome? What was the intended solution from the very beginning?

**Genesis 3:15 – "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."**

**Acts 2:22-23 – "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst... this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."**

**1 Peter 1:18-20 – "You were ransomed... with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world..."**

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*.

John uses that phrase in Revelation 13 as well, saying, that there is a book—a book in which the name of every believer was written in “before the foundation of the world.” And the name of that book is the Book of life of the Lamb who was slain.

Jesus Christ is the Lamb who was slain since before the foundation of the world. It was God’s plan to slay him, to slaughter him, to crush him, to pierce him, to curse him, to give him up from before the foundation of the world. God subjected this world to physical suffering knowing that he was going to send his son down in a physical body to endure every drop of that suffering.

John Piper once described it like this: “the reason there’s terror is so that Christ could be terrorized. The reason there is trouble is so that Christ could be troubled. The reason there is pain is so that Christ could feel pain. This world became what it is, so that the Son of God could enter it and feel all of it. Therefore, you should never feel that God is somehow out there, distant, far away, toying with this creation. He made the horrors to enter the horrors.”

Every drop of physical, relational, mental, emotional, and any other kind of suffering that God has permitted to exist, he took upon himself as his Son died on the cross in order to free his creation from corruption.

Our suffering exists because God subjected all of creation to futility, both to display the horror of sin, and so that his Son would have a place to die in order to redeem us of that same sin. And that is glorious news. And yet, it’s incomplete news. Because the suffering still exists, and as it does—like Paul says—we groan. And we wait.

So, the second point: What are we waiting for? What are we looking ahead to as we endure?

## **2. What are we waiting for now?**

Paul gives several answers to this question, here in our passage today. He says creation is waiting for something, and we, Christians, are waiting for something.

Let’s start with the latter. What are we waiting for?

Look at verse 23: “... **we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.**”

We are waiting for “adoption as sons.” Now, this is a little confusing, isn’t it? Because last week, Pastor Ethan preached on the previous paragraph here in Romans, where Paul said that we have already received the Spirit of adoption as sons (v. 15). He said we already are the sons of God (v. 14), that the Spirit assures our spirits that we *are* children of God (v. 16).

So, are we adopted, or aren’t we?

Imagine if you were a little boy, living in an orphanage. You don't have any family. You're totally alone. And you've been waiting your whole life to get adopted. And one day, a perfect, wonderful, joyful, couple walks in, comes and talks to you and says, we want to adopt you. Let's call them the Millers. And your heart leaps! Somebody loves you! Somebody wants you! You are going to have a home! But then they leave. Because, there is a whole process to adoption. You can't just walk in off the street and bring a child home like you're buying a jug of milk from the store.

So the process goes on and on and on, and eventually, the judge signs the adoption papers, and the orphanage gets a phone call: It's final! You're a Miller! You're somebody's son! You're adopted! And they are on their way to the orphanage right now to pick you up and take you home! And you're talking to them on the phone and you can hear in their voice how much they love you, and you're filled with the most wonderful, at-peace sense of belonging. And they're telling you all about your new home, and what they like to do as a family, and you're both giddy and nervous, not sure if you'll be able to live up to being a Miller. And all the while, you're sitting in the orphanage office, in your ratty old orphanage clothes, and you're adopted! You really are! It's legal, the papers are signed! But, you're waiting. You're waiting eagerly, in a sense, for your adoption.

Because to be adopted legally but to still be in the orphanage is a strange in-between. Yes, you feel different, you feel excited and nervous and you have butterflies. Yes, you know that you have a new mom and dad, you can hear their voice on the phone, you can tell that they feel a certain type of way about you—a way that you've never really known anybody to feel about you before.

But this isn't it! This isn't *really* what you've been looking forward to! You're ready for a home! You're ready for new clothes and breakfasts with your family, and family traditions, to feel as if you are really a Miller! You're adopted, but you're still waiting to be picked up and taken home—to be really, finally, adopted.

Brothers and sisters, we're really adopted. The Spirit testifies with our spirits that we are children of God. Jesus Christ has signed the papers with his blood. It's accomplished! But it's not fully here, not yet. This, this life in this mortal body in this suffering world, where God often seems distant and sin seems so embedded into us, this is not the end goal. This is not the hope in which we were saved!

We are hoping for, waiting for, so much more! For a home! For the redemption of our bodies! God adopted you not to leave you in your old clothes, this body of death, in your old home, in this world of suffering. He's adopted you for more! For a heart that never is tempted toward lesser joys, but is totally satisfied in God and glorifies him perfectly with every laugh, every bite of food, every grateful breath that fills our lungs! That's what we are waiting for. Yes, we are adopted, but we are waiting for our *adoption!*

And that's what creation is waiting for too. This is fascinating:

Verse 20: Creation is waiting **“with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.”**

In verse 21, Paul says that the hope for creation is that creation would be **“set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”**

Now, why would creation be waiting for us? It would seem to be the other way around, wouldn't it? Isn't that often how we think about it? We are waiting for creation to be redeemed, so we can have a better home! But Paul says, actually, Creation is waiting for you! The rocks and the trees and the birds and the sky and the clouds and the dogs and the monkeys and the cats and the little tiny goslings—they're all like little children at a parade, looking down the road with bated breath, waiting, waiting, for the fire truck to appear.

Now, why would that be the case? Why is creation waiting for us?

Well, do you remember, way back in Genesis 1, what God said when he created humanity? Remember, God created the earth and the sky and the seas and the plants and the stars and the birds and the fish and the animals—and as the crowning moment of creation, he created humanity.

Genesis 1:27-28 – **“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and have dominion over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”**

There's a trend, in many of the stories we tell ourselves—at least in our culture—a trend that tends to paint an adversarial relationship between humans and nature. There is this underlying assumption in many stories—movies, books, tales—that all humans do is mess up nature. That if humans would just get out of the way, nature would flourish! All we do is mess things up and destroy. The best way to get a natural earth-friendly utopia, the way this world was meant to be, would really be to just get all the people off of this planet.

That's not the perspective of the Bible. Yes, the Bible would agree, humans muck things up. They do negatively affect the world around them. Creation does *suffer* because of humans. Species go extinct, landscapes get ravaged. But, *it's not supposed to be this way*.

According to Genesis 1, creation needs humanity here, because humanity is meant to be the living, breathing presence of God in his creation! We are meant to be his vice-regents, ruling over his world in such a way that leads to its flourishing as we bear his image and display his glory!

And so, creation is waiting, with eager longing, for the revealing of the sons of God—for Jesus Christ and the adopted sons and daughters who are conformed to his image to appear and take their rightful place as rulers over all creation. What creation is waiting for is the glory of Jesus Christ—reflected in his disciples—and seen and felt and rejoiced in over every inch of creation.

Only then will all creation be free from corruption and futility; free to enjoy the glory of the children of God.

So, what has to happen in order for that vision to become reality? Why hasn't God done it yet? Why are we still stuck in this in-between?

Two reasons, I think.

1. The full number of the sons of God are not yet saved.

Jesus said, in John 10:16, **"I have other sheep who are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice."**

In Acts 18, Paul was preaching the gospel in Corinth, and he was encountering a lot of resistance, and surely he was tempted to move on to another place—and God came to him in a dream and said: **"Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people."**

In his infinite wisdom, God knows exactly who his people are. He has a perfect number of saints of every tribe and every tongue who will dwell in the new heavens and new earth. He will leave no child of his in the orphanage. There are more disciples to be made.

2. We are being fitted for the role.

Our suffering is doing something in us.

**Romans 5:3 – "... we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame"**

**James 1:2-4 - "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you face trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."**

Your suffering is doing something in you. It is fitting you for the role of enjoying God forever and serving as his perfected, fire-forged, conformed to the image of Christ, vice-regent. You are being fitted for your new clothes in the home of God!

So, in other words, the reason we are still waiting, suffering as we wait for Christ to return and make all things new—is because God is still busy making more and deeper disciples. This is the purpose of God in the waiting, it's the purpose of Union Church for as long as he gives us life.

And this totally transforms our suffering.

Last thing, last image, and we'll be done today.



It's fascinating, I think, that Paul uses this analogy in verse 22: **“For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth.”**

Brothers and sisters, as you hurt, in this world of hurting. You are allowed to groan. You're allowed to weep. We must, in fact, weep. Having the hope of Jesus does not mean that we become stoic, blindly ignoring the pain of the world—quite the opposite. We groan—and where we can, we seek to alleviate one another's suffering as best we can—all while knowing only Jesus will make all things new. But we groan. We groan in the meantime.

But the groaning of a delivery room is so much different than the groaning of a morbid battlefield.

Walk through an army's medical tent after battle, you'll hear groaning, you'll hear screaming, you'll hear weeping—and it's terrible. Even just hearing about it from some veteran accounts is horrifying.

If you walk through a labor and delivery floor, you'll hear groaning, you'll hear screaming, you'll hear weeping—and it's wonderful! Babies are being born!

I remember last year, after our daughter was born, Ashley and I were sitting in the hospital room, and they left us on the labor and delivery floor, in the big room, because they didn't need it. And several hours after Nora was born, and we were all kind of settled, exhausted, but blissful, we heard the woman in the room next to us groaning, in agony.

And we just looked at each other and kind of smiled, sympathetically. And Ashley said, “You got it! Keep going!”

How we go through the groaning, how we witness one another's suffering—totally changes if you know what's on the other side of the suffering. Brothers and sisters, your suffering is not meaningless. It is not eternal. It is temporary, it is light and momentary, not worth comparing to the glory to come—and it is doing something in you. It is birthing life.

And so, we can weep with one another. We can groan with each other, giving hugs and not exactly knowing what to say. But in the back of our minds, in the depths of our souls, we can say: “Keep going! Keep going!” Jesus is on the other side! Glory is on the other side! And we can hope.