Suffering in a Fallen World

Romans 8:18-27

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. 27 And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

You live in a fallen world. You wouldn’t think I’d have to defend that statement. After all, the evidence confronts you every day. Aches and pains, illnesses and accidents, disasters and death serve as constant reminders of the fallenness of our world. Yet, so many people seem to be in denial about this. They act surprised, even shocked, at the brokenness of creation. They imagine that things should be getting better, as our civilization progresses in science and technology. They complain that there’s some great injustice about the struggles of life in a world that’s out to get them. In today’s Epistle, Paul gives you a clear view of the world in which you live. It’s a fallen world, a world eagerly waiting for something better, a world hanging its hopes on what God will do in you.

In His infinite wisdom, God has chosen to connect the condition of creation to the condition of mankind. When God created the universe, everything was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). However, when Adam rebelled against God and fell into sin, God pronounced a curse, not only against Adam, but also against creation: “Cursed is the ground for your sake,” He said (Gen. 3:17). Man, who was created in the image of God, had been appointed lord over creation (Gen. 1:26), and when its appointed lord fell, creation fell with him. How could it be otherwise? Would it be just
and right for rebellious, sinful man to live in a perfect paradise? Of course not. And so this creation suffers on account of our sin, and thus serves as a constant reminder of our own fallenness before God.

The Apostle Paul uses strong language to describe the fallenness of this creation. He says that creation was subjected to futility (v. 20), that it’s in bondage, slavery, to corruption and decay (v.21), that all creation groans and labors with birth pangs. You mothers know the intensity of birth pangs; that’s your part of the curse. Creation shares in that intense, wracking travail. Every hollow log and every rotting corpse is a testimony to creation’s slavery to corruption. And the futility, the emptiness, and vanity to which this creation is subjected is evident in every destructive calamity, every dashed hope, every crippled child, and every untimely death you see.

I can tell you live in a fallen world just by looking at you. You all have the symptoms of fallenness in your lives. You get sick. You have aches and pains. Every day you struggle against the fallenness of your life. From the stiffness of your body when you wake up, to the stubbing of your toe or the paper cut on your finger – even to the constant creeping of old age and death in your body, you experience first-hand the curse against creation. Belovéd, you live in a fallen world.

And you might have cause to complain about this . . . if you were sinless. But you’re not, are you. The fact is, you’re sinful. For this reason you deserve every ache, every pain, every cut, every sign of death in your body. More than this, you deserve eternal punishment. And every time you complain about the brokenness of your life, as if God were being unfair to you, you demonstrate that you don’t think your sins deserve punishment. But they do; and so do you. If you insist on complaining, complain about your sinful self, and thank God that He doesn’t punish you like you deserve.

And that’s true. He doesn’t punish you as you deserve. Instead, He’s punished His own Son in your place. Jesus took upon Himself all your sin, all your rebellion against the good order of God. He took your brokenness into His own Body. He suffered the fallenness of this creation – the sickness, the pain, the suffering, and even the death – in His own flesh.

More than that, He suffered the wrath of God against sin, as His Father forsook Him to die on the cross. In this way, He absorbed into Himself all the brokenness of this creation. He paid the penalty of your sin, so that you are free – you’re released from the impending sentence of doom that was against you. Instead of punishment, God has given you glorious freedom and made you His adopted child.
Sadly, you still suffer. God in Christ has set you free from eternal suffering and death, but He has not taken you out of this fallen world. In spite of what the glory preachers peddle in books and on TV, the life of a Christian includes suffering. Having faith in Jesus doesn’t exempt you from pain. Putting money in the offering plate won’t buy you an easy life. And it doesn’t take us long to figure out that Christians die. Surrounded by this fallen world and encased in this corrupted flesh, it’s easy to lose sight of the reality that awaits you. But once your corruptible flesh has put on incorruption, once your body is planted into the ground in dishonor and weakness and has been raised up in glory and power (1 Cor. 15:53, 43), then death will be swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:54) and the full and glorious liberty of the sons of God will be revealed.

You see, in Christ, the nature of suffering in this fallen world has radically changed. Instead of suffering purely as punishment, creation is now subjected in hope (v. 20). A mother in labor suffers, but with an eye toward the beautiful child soon to be revealed. In her expectant hope, she pushes through the pain. Paul describes the groans and labors of redeemed creation in the same way. Creation groans, but it groans with an eye toward the beautiful sons of God to be revealed. With every quaking of the earth, every burning fire, every thunderous storm, there’s the hope and reminder of that great and glorious day when the children of God shall be revealed.

Until that day, you will have suffering. But, in Christ, the nature of your suffering has radically changed as well. Your suffering is no longer received as punishment, for your punishment has been paid by Christ. Rather, in your suffering you have fellowship with Christ’s suffering (Phil. 3:10), and you “Rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings,” Peter writes, “that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy” (1 Pet. 4:13). You know that as partakers of His sufferings, you also partake of His consolation, as Paul says elsewhere (2 Cor. 1:7). With every ache and pain, with every moan and groan, with every sickness and death, you look forward in expectant hope for the fulfillment of the promise of God to reveal you as His child.

That’s the difference, you see, between life in this fallen world and eternal life in the new creation. Now God’s power is hidden; then it’ll be fully revealed. Now God’s forgiveness is hidden, hidden behind the absolution pronounced by this fallen man, yet received by you through faith. Now God’s presence is hidden behind bread and wine, yet distributed to you at this altar. Now God’s adoption of you as His child is hidden behind the water poured on your head when you were baptized, yet there God made you His own and bestowed His name on you. In the same way, your true identity as a child of God is hidden behind the fallenness and sinfulness of your powerless flesh, yet inwardly groaning for that day when your body will be redeemed incorruptible, and your divine sonship made manifest to all creation.
In the meantime, yes, you suffer. But you suffer as one connected to Christ. In fact, you can’t be connected to Christ without being connected to His suffering. And thanks be to God for that! For through your baptism you’re connected to Christ in all His works. Through baptism, you’re connected to Christ in His suffering and death, which paid the penalty of your sins. Through baptism, you’re connected to Christ in His burial and resurrection, so that you, too, can expect to be buried and resurrected. And, as one connected to Christ in everything, you’re also connected to Christ in His Sonship and glory, which will soon be revealed, even in you. As Paul said in our text last week: “We are children of God, and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified with Him” (v. 16-17).

Of course, “no [suffering] seems joyful for the present, but painful” (Heb. 12:11). Shall this pain separate you from the love of Christ? “Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” No! For, “In all these things [you] are more than conquerors through Him who loved [you]” (Rom. 8:35, 37). You see, Paul draws your attention away from your present pain and points you toward your future glory: “The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in [you]” (v. 18). Do you suffer? It’s not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in you. Do you have pain? It’s not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in you. Do you have troubles, worries, fears, problems, and deaths? They’re not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in you. For in Christ you suffer. In Christ you die. In Christ you’re raised up. In Christ you’re glorified. Nothing in this fallen world can compare to the glory that’ll be revealed in you. For in Christ you’re a child of God.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen