

Sermon for Sunday, May 2, 2010
Dr. Dan Doriani

MISERY AND GLORY
Romans 8:18-27

If we read Romans 8:18-27, the main themes emerge if we simply observe the terms that appear repeatedly: groan, hope, and wait. But the first verse states the theme: "Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed" (8:18).

1. We groan in misery, but... (8:18, 22, 23, 27)

In a short passage, Paul mentions suffering, futility, and especially groaning five times. In 8:22-23 he says, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." He continues, "The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (8:27).

So: what makes you groan or sigh? What makes air rasp your throat as it leaves your lungs? We groan when we eat too much. When the stomach forces its way into territory previously claimed by other organs, we groan. We groan when we sit in a plush reading chair too long and the body resists change. People groan if their sports hero drops a ball or swings and misses in any sport that involves balls or swinging.

We groan in the morning when an alarm goes off and we didn't sleep enough. We groan the day after we exercise too much. We groan when a baby cries too much. We groan when we miss a turn, mistake the time, or misspeak. But groaning can be much more personal and serious.

- We groan when disappointment, distress and disorientation defy description. We groan when hopes are dashed - again.
- We groan when we see the doctor's report, the repair bill, the dismissal notice.
- We groan when our body hurts for no reason.
- We groan when we will what is good but feel we cannot do it.
- We groan when we don't know what to do or say in the face of grief.

This is personal groaning, but more. We cry out for people we love, when they are in distress. Romans teaches us to groan for the world. Remember: Jesus came to save his people one by one, but he also came to create a kingdom, to form a new nation, gathered from every nation and people. He came to renew all things (Matthew 19:28)!

Therefore, we should groan for the world. Last week I groaned when I read about a train that runs from Dar es Salaam, the commercial capital of Tanzania in east Africa to Zambia's copper belt in the heart of southern Africa. The line was built in the early 1970s, at great cost. At the time it was one of the great projects of Africa. The distance is 1,150 miles. At first, the trip took two days. Today it takes four to seven. There aren't enough working locomotives or wagons. There is no money for maintenance. All too often, when a car derailed, it is simply pulled off the track and left to rust. What went wrong? Why are there no industries beside the track? Why are there no farmers working the moist, black soil? Groan for Tanzania and Zambia where the systems of commerce are broken.

Groan for Haiti. This church has fed children and taught Christian leaders there for thirty-five years. We groan that they aren't more self-sustaining. We groan that an earthquake killed 200,000 and shattered a society already on the brink of collapse. We're sending a team to construct better buildings, but we groan as we pray.

There is reason to groan. A plane full of Polish leaders goes down – as they travel to honor other Poles who died decades ago. Consider farms. The good earth lies unused in some places. In others, crops are superabundant. There is hunger in much of Africa and Asia yet excess consumption in parts of Europe and America.

The capitalist system brings us science, transportation and marketing. But the system almost works too well. To increase sales and profits, firms leaven their products with corn syrup (so cheap) and salts that entice us until we can hardly resist eating too much.

When the system is broken, the people groan. When it works too well, we groan too, because we have too much. Most times there is no one to blame. So many of the stake-holders mean well, but things keep getting worse. What is wrong with this world? Is there any hope?

2. Future glory far surpasses present suffering (8:18)

Paul answers, "The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed to us" (8:18). These statements are a compressed version of the grand narrative of the Christian life. It says:

In the beginning, the world was immature and undeveloped, but good. God ordained that humanity should govern his creation – this world, this earth. In Psalm 8, David asks God a question – a good question for a king to ask:

"What is man that you are mindful of him... that you care for him?" He sings the answer to the Lord: "You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet" (Psalm 8:4-6).

God is king: we're his governors. We ruled *under* His authority yet *with* His authority. Sadly, it didn't last long. The first humans decided not to trust God, to rebel. Soon, we were giving full vent to envy, deceit, vengeance, pride and brutality. The result was every kind of disorder, even murder. On the earth, thorns thrive and parasites proliferate. We are sad rulers of a fallen world.

But in His compassion and empathy for mankind, God was unwilling to leave him in ruin. He chose to work organically, first with Abraham and Sarah, then their descendants. He declared his love, entered a relationship, offered forgiveness, gave wise laws, and appointed leaders. Israel largely failed to return God's love or to obey Him. Instead of cutting His losses, God doubled His investment. He sent us His Son, the only begotten God (John 1:18). He restated God's promises, deepened the law, and appointed new leaders. More than that, he atoned for sin and forgave it. He died in the prime of manhood and rose again, with a new body. This proved he is stronger than death and can give us life after we die.

One day Jesus will return: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." Then He said, "I am making everything new! He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be His God and He will be my son" (Revelation 21:4-8).

We wait for that day but we live in tension as we wait. Switzerland lived in tense neutrality in World War II. A Swiss theologian, Oscar Cullmann, who lived through World War II, said Christians today are like Europeans living in the final year of that war. D-Day is past and it's clear who will win, but the battle will rage and disappointments abound until the final victory.

So we groan. Yet we know our physical, emotional and mental suffering cannot rightly be compared to the coming glory. All humans have longings that cannot be satisfied in the created order. When we gaze at a scene of natural beauty – even the green grass and blue skies of a fine spring day - a part of us wants to keep the beauty before our eyes forever.

When a child of three or five years is achingly sweet and beautiful we say, "I want this child to stay this age forever." But no, we do not mean that, and what a tragedy it would be for us and for the child.

We long for unconditional love: Accept my quirky habits, my imperfect hair, my silly thoughts. But total approval isn't possible. What I call "quirky," others call annoying, even sinful. We need correction in this life. Only God can give perfect approval.

But first He must forgive and perfect us. Then we will taste glory – substance brightness, splendor, luminosity. We'll see Jesus, the Morning Star, and we will shine like him. Jesus said, "The righteous will shine like the sun"(Matthew 13:43). We will be as perfect in our voluntary obedience as the planets, rocks and trees are in their involuntary obedience. We long for this and we will be satisfied. But first suffering, then glory.

3. Suffering and glory in creation (8:19-22)

We live in the season of groaning. There is a tragedy, yet it follows God's current plan. This is God's world - His creation. It's not "nature." It is not the cosmos. Astronomer Carl Sagan defined it: "The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be." That is, when you see Hubble's photographs of the stars, that's all there is. We say, "No, there is a creator who has something better for us.

But today we groan because things are not the way they're supposed to be. This world was better and will be better, but today we groan because creation has been subjected to frustration. That is, God subjected the world of minerals, plants, animals, to "mataiovt", futility or frustration. It's the word for "vanity, meaninglessness" in Ecclesiastes. Our solar system is running down as the sun spews its energy into space. Locally, roads fall apart. Bodies fall apart, too. Vanity!

Picture a cartoon. Two cave men sit on the ground, cross-legged, looking serious. One says: "Something's just not right – our air is clean, our water pure, we all get plenty of exercise, everything we eat is organic and free range, and yet nobody lives past thirty."

Creation is in bondage to decay (8:22-23). God subjected creation to frustration because of Adam's sin. God cursed creation, so that it frustrates mankind by bearing thorns and weeds. Why? It's better that men be frustrated and know something is wrong, than to live in bliss for decades, then plunge into the abyss. God scrambled human languages at the tower of Babel for the same reason: Better that mankind be scattered than that we be united, godlessly.

And yet, "Creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay" (8:21). Paul says God did this "in hope" that he would reverse the curse, through His Son, Jesus. This isn't mere hope, it's strong hope, resting in the promise of God. Renewal is coming. Creation is waiting. It will be liberated from its bondage.

This will happen when the sons of God are revealed – that is, when God redeems our bodies (8:23). They'll be like our old bodies, but better. Creation waits to rejoin us. Our glory will be their liberation.

The suffering and glory of creation belong together

Suffering and glory is a principle woven into creation as we know it. This is common knowledge. Anyone who wants to learn to play the piano, flute or banjo must be willing to suffer. The same is true in engineering or research or financial analysis. Since the fall, this is the principle: suffering precedes glory. It applies above all to Jesus and his mission.

On the first Easter Sunday, when Jesus explained the resurrection to his disciples, he asked a rhetorical question: "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (Luke 24:26). Hebrews agrees. Jesus is "now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death... By the grace of God, he [tasted] death for everyone." (Hebrews 2:9).

Peter says to, "rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:13-14). If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

Earlier, in Romans 8:17, Paul says we are God's children and heirs "if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

Our suffering can be great, but it can't be compared to the glory God will reveal. This is revealed to us, but more than that, in us. All creation eagerly awaits the day of our restoration and glory with Christ. But now, today, creation is subject to futility and this by the will of God.

Consider a tiny circular worm, about the size of a pencil point. It lives ten days. By day seven or eight signs of muscular flabbiness and organ decay appear. Do you think this early onset of necrosis upsets the worms? Are they thinking, "I'm only a week old and I'm falling apart"? No, but humans see and we do lament our decay.

Consider hookworms. They look disgusting – jagged "teeth" in their mouth, no eyes. They live in contaminated soil and bore through bare human feet. They get into the blood stream and travel to the lung. When they arrive we cough and cough and cough them into our mouths. We swallow the lucky few. From thence they travel to the intestine, where females pump out ten to twenty thousand eggs per day for up to ten years. But wait!

Where hookworm infestation is high, allergies and asthma are virtually unknown. Something in hookworms seems to correct autoimmune disorders. From our perspective, do hookworms exist to cure allergies? Is that why God created hookworms? But think again: God could have created a world with no autoimmune diseases. It doesn't seem right to prevent disease via parasitic infection. This is not the way it's supposed to be.

In the beginning, there was no disease. No parasites or death. No hatred, selfishness, suspicion or rivalry. No aching joints or aching minds or depression. One day all these evils will end, disappear. Jesus says the world will be reborn, renewed (Matthew 19:28). Peter and Paul promise "the restoration of all things" (Acts 3:19-21, Ephesians 1:10). Isaiah describes it this way:

The wolf will live with the lamb, and a little child will lead them.
The cow will feed with the bear; the infant will play by the hole of the cobra,
They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the
knowledge of the LORD. (Isaiah 11:6-9).
The wilderness will rejoice and blossom...
The eyes of the blind will see [and] the lame will leap like a deer (Isaiah 35:1, 5-6).

This is how God wants us to see the world - our world view. First, expect hardship, disappointment. Don't let it surprise you, depress you. Be a realist.

Second, don't hope in this creation. Our final hope does not rest with nature, which will not give us life, nor with medicine or human invention. Put your hope in Jesus. He created all this and will restore it one day.

Therefore, teach yourself to look beyond this material world, full of blessings as it is. If you look beyond this world, you can endure hardship, temptation, persecution, physical suffering. You know it will end. In Romans 8:18, Paul says, "Consider this" - make rational assessments, draw conclusions from this: "our present suffering" does not deserve to be compared to the glory to come.

4. Suffering and glory among God's children (8:23-27)

We have the first fruits of the Spirit (8:23)

The presence of the Spirit in our lives is like the beginning of a harvest – the first first-fruits – like the first cherries or tomatoes. It's like the down payment on a house. In Romans 8, Paul has stated five things the Spirit does for us:

- He enables us to fulfill his law, for he sets our minds on things of God (8:2-8).
- He subdues our fallen nature and gives life to our mortal bodies (8:9-13).
- He adopts us into God's family, and teaches us to call Him "Father" (8:14-17).
- He prays for us when we don't know how to pray for ourselves (8:26-27).

The first three are familiar. Now Paul adds that the presence of the Spirit is our first taste of our final inheritance. In 8:24, Paul says, "in this hope, we were saved." Notice the contrast: we were saved, yet we wait, hope for more.

The presence of the Spirit links the two: we have been saved because Christ accomplished salvation and we trusted him. Yet we wait, "with anticipation and assurance, for the culmination of God's plan for us and the world". Romans 1 said Jesus was named, designated the Son of God with power at his resurrection. We will be conformed to Christ so it seems that we too will be declared sons of God, with power, at the resurrection. While we wait, we have the Spirit.

We wait eagerly yet patiently...

...for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (8:23). Creation waits in eager expectation – it's craning its neck, stretching forward. That's the idea of ajpokaradokiva. Why? Because creation will never fulfill its true purpose until mankind makes its contribution – offering his good and rational government. Now we wait eagerly, too. We wait for the "redemption" or transformation of our bodies.

On that day we will be like the Son in our character, in our actions, in our bodies, in our assurance that we belong to God – we are adopted as His sons and daughters. Thus we are "saved." The Lamb of God offered himself once and for all time on the Cross. Nothing more remains to be done. Now God's wrath cannot touch us. Today fear is gone – even though personal sin continues.

But we haven't yet tasted the fullness of our new life. We live between the ages. We are full of hope, yet we groan. We groan when our family and friends suffer. We groan for ourselves, for our pain and suffering. Bodies fail, friends forget us and strangers malign us.

So we hope eagerly, and yet, Paul says later, patiently, too (8:25). We live in hope. Salvation is secured, but incomplete. Paul uses hope in both senses: Our subjective attitude is hopeful. Yet we have a hope – an object. That, Paul says, is unseen. What we now see is temporary – we know this. Every flower will fade, every worm, every human will die. But what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:18). We hope for that. Meanwhile, how do we live?

The Spirit groans for us, prays with us

In the meantime, life is painful, but baffling, too. Most days, there is at least a moment when I don't even know how to pray. So it is with you. Then the Spirit groans for us, prays with us.

Think of this: When we pray, the triune God is engaged. We pray to the Father, who listens and answers. Jesus intercedes on our behalf "in the court of heaven." But 8:26 says the Spirit helps us "in the theatre of [our] own hearts." When we don't know what to say, when words fail, "the Spirit intercedes for the saints" (8:27).

What shall we say? This passage teaches us how to see, feel God's world. We are not pessimists. Something better is coming. Neither are we triumphalists [over-realized eschatology]. The renewal isn't here yet. History continues, so there are no simple antidotes for our distress. We cannot "confess and possess" – confess what we want and possess it if we but have faith. We cannot name what we want and seize it. We hope and we groan. We suffer but we know it doesn't compare to the glory to be revealed. If we share Jesus' suffering, then we will share his glory. That is the shape of our lives. What then?

First, live fearlessly. If this world is transitory, live accordingly. Don't live to hold onto your power, your wealth, your reputation. They aren't the things that last. Give your money away – use mammon to make friends. Give some away. Money doesn't last forever, people do.

Don't hold your reputation constantly asking, "What do people think?" What does God think? He says a good name is a good thing but take a risk and use your reputation to tell the truth to people who will listen. What God thinks of you is most important. This world is passing away. Glory is coming.

Don't hold onto power keeping it till it's safe to use it. Why cling to power? It's part of creation which is in bondage to decay. Use power before it spoils.

Finally, Jesus never asks us to suffer in the abstract, we suffer with him on the way to glory. That makes a difference. He is with us always, to the end of the age. Groaning with us one day, celebrating the next, always offering strength to serve, and mercy when we falter.