

In This Hope

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on January 16, 2022.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 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. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 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. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Rom. 8:18–25).¹

I think one of the problems with suffering is that it shouts loudest in adversity, often overpowering any voice but its own. All we hear is the noise of our pain. Often the blinding light of our trials and tribulations leads to a myopic perspective of everything. All we see is the glare of our struggles.

To use a limited example, I recently had a toothache following a dental procedure. At one point, the pain was so severe that I struggled to eat and sleep and work. To read, write, and think deeply (essential aspects of my job) required painkillers that numbed but did not remedy the problem. Prior to God's gracious gift of a root canal, I struggled to think of anything but the pain. It was, in that moment, all-consuming.

In a sense, such is the case with our suffering in this life. We can become so focused on the problems in and of our own world that we lose perspective. The trials we encounter can so captivate us that we think of little else. Of course, nothing good can come from such obsession, but knowing this doesn't stop our suffering nor eliminate the pain. Suffering is part of the fallen human condition and will continue, 'til death do us part. But it is not without purpose, especially for the child of God, who endures not as a vulnerable victim but as a suffering saint.

Suffering Saints

As children of God, we do not suffer more or less, nor are we masochists, but we do understand that there is purpose in it. Pointless suffering is insufferable, but in a world under the sovereign care of our Creator, is there really anything pointless? We who can cry out, "Abba! Father!" (8:15) trust our heavenly Father's purpose in our suffering. The Apostle James' counsel on this is well known: "My brothers and sisters, consider it nothing but joy when you fall into all sorts of trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect effect, so that you will be perfect and complete, not deficient in anything" (James 1:2-4 NET). Of course, this perfection and completeness is the Holy Spirit's work in our sanctification, conforming us to the perfect image of Christ (8:29) on to the completion of glory.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

But it is this joyful perspective that considers the sanctifying purpose in “the suffering of this time,” producing God-glorifying endurance.

Surely this endurance is akin to the patience with which we wait in hope for the fulfillment of our redemption (8:24), encouraging not only a perspective of purpose but of comparison. The Apostle Paul considers “the sufferings of this present time . . . not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (8:18). The trials and tribulations of this life are real and even painful, but what are they compared with what awaits us? As one commentator put it, “The present and visible can be understood only in the light of the future and invisible.”² The world says pessimistically, “Live for today, because there is no hope of tomorrow!” Or, the world says optimistically, “Live for today in hope there is a tomorrow!” But God’s Word teaches us to live in light of eternity today, because he who has given us his Word is sovereign over today and tomorrow.

Though we be persecuted, though we be ill, though we be bereaved and lonely, though we be hungry and thirsty, even in the agony of death, we are suffering with purpose in Christ, awaiting the glory “which is in store for us” (8:18 NEB). This comparison of suffering and glory is to guide our perspective to the extent that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing” (8:18). We are to desire heaven with such vigor that suffering’s shouting is muted by a holy passion for what we are promised.

The world derides us for such hope, as religious escapism, “opium of the people,” as Marx put it.³ But we are not intoxicated by an illusion but filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18) who “bears witness with our spirit” (8:16), and through whom we “groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (8:27). But not just *our* spirits but creation too, confirming that indeed that neither our groaning nor our hope is in vain.

Confirmed by Creation

Unlike the rest of creation, man was made in God’s image (Gen. 1:27), and thus the pinnacle of creation. As creation was created “good” (e.g. Gen. 1:25), creation became “very good” with the inclusion of man. (Gen. 1:31). Unlike the rest of creation, man was unique, distinct from, “non-rational creation, animate and inanimate,” as John Murray puts it.⁴ Yet, we remain connected to God’s “very good” creation. When Adam fell into sin and was punished so also the rest of creation with him. The bountiful garden became fallow ground of “thorns and thistles,” as Adam would strive with the earth and labor for its yield, ultimately yielding himself to the ground, a graveyard for the dust of mortal man (Gen. 3:16-19).

This, however, does not mean that creation is utterly depraved. The psalmist sings of God’s glory revealed in “the heavens” (Ps. 19:1), covering himself “with light as with a garment, stretching

² Franz J. Leenhardt quoted Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 511.

³ David R. Papke, “Karl Marx On Religion,” Marquette University Law School Faculty Blog, January 20, 2015, <https://law.marquette.edu/facultyblog/2015/01/karl-marx-on-religion/comment-page-1/>.

⁴ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 301.

In This Hope

out the heavens like a tent. He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters; he makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind; he makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire” (Ps. 104:2-4). The psalmist goes on to describe God’s active and intricate involvement in and through creation: From the mountain peaks to the rivers of the valleys, from birds who “sing among the branches” (Ps. 104:12) to the lions who “roar for their prey” (Ps. 104:21), creation in its extraordinary diversity reveals the glory of God. Gerard Manly Hopkins helps us see this pied beauty when he writes,

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.⁵

Indeed, we do; indeed, we must, as God’s “invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:20).

And yet, as glorious as creation is, it has been “subjected to futility” (8:20) by virtue of the futile Fall. Creation is not what it was in the beginning, but it is also not what it will be in the end. There will be a day when the curse of the Fall will be lifted, as creation is refined by fire (2 Pet. 3:10) and restored to its Edenic perfection, a new heaven and earth, “world without end.”⁶ My imagination runs wild contemplating what such a glorious creation one day will be, but creation knows and groans with unified pangs, a “symphony of sighs,”⁷ with “ever longing” to “be set free from its bondage to corruption, anticipating the glory to be revealed” (8:20-21).

And with it, we “groan inwardly” too. For, while we have been justified as righteous, our sanctification continues. While we have been legally and eternally adopted as God’s children, our conformity “to the image of his Son” (8:29) is not yet complete. The final revelation of our adoption is the transformation of our bodies, from mortal dust to immortal glory, the completion of our redemption. It is this final redemption that creation awaits and for which our hearts yearn, hoping in hope, waiting with patience.

⁵ Gerard Manly Hopkins, “Pied Beauty,” Poetry Foundation, accessed January 13, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44399/pied-beauty>.

⁶ “Gloria Patri” in *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 734.

⁷ Phillips quoted in Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 518.

Waiting with Patience

Because what we already are in Christ has not yet been revealed, we await the consummation of our salvation, not in despair but hope. Like creation, we are not yet what we will be, but what we will be is certain. Indeed, we have received “the first fruits” of it in the Holy Spirit, but the completion of our adoption in the redemption of our glorified bodies awaits us. The Holy Spirit guarantees it.

Our hope then is in what God has done in the past, predestining and accomplishing our salvation, in the present, conforming us to the image of Christ, but also the future, what we will be in glory, teaching us not to look to the world for our hope but to him who created it. As D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains,

Hope is the measure of true Christianity, which is through and through other-worldly. Pseudo-Christianity always look chiefly at this world. Popular Christianity is entirely this-worldly and is not interested in the other world. But true Christianity has its eye mainly on the world which is to come.⁸

For this reason, Paul could confidently confess, “For I consider that our present sufferings cannot even be compared to the coming glory that will be revealed to us” (8:18 NET). And, he could encourage the church in Corinth saying, “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17-18). So-called hope then that is visible is not eternal hope, so we hope for what we do not see (8:24-25).

Christian, do you have a sense of hopelessness? Perhaps it is because you have fixed your gaze upon the visible and transient rather than setting your heart and mind upon the invisible and eternal. Easier said than done, I know, but consider your perspective on life: Do you see things through the lens of eternity or today? And, how are you encouraging this perspective? Are you scrolling your way into a hopeless panic, watching your way into worldly worry, all the more susceptible to the conspiracies of the age than the realities of eternity? Have you become a confident and hopeful child of God or an anxiety-ridden mess? Do you really think that’s what God desires? Do you really think that’s what Christ commands? Do you really think that’s what the Holy Spirit empowers?

Or, do you feel overwhelmed by the momentary suffering of this present time? Have you allowed, even encouraged, the suffering and struggles, the trials and tribulations, of this age to be your waking and sleeping meditation? Have you considered God’s purpose in all these sufferings? And how do they compare to “the eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17)? They do not; they cannot.

We hope then for what we do not (yet) see, which rests on the bedrock of certainty that “since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through

⁸ Quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *The Reign of Grace: Romans 5-8* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 2:884.

In This Hope

him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:1-2). Indeed, “those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30). From dust to glory is our destiny, a hope-filled truth to which we look with patient fortitude.⁹ For, we know who promised, who delivered, and who sustains us, and he is our hope and salvation.

⁹ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 552.