"Suffering with Jesus"
Romans 8:17-27
January 17, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

We can be confident that the Bible always tells us the truth. There are times when these truths delight us, and other times when the truths challenge us. Our passage this morning lies in that second category, because it teaches us that part of our mission is to suffer with Christ. The work God accomplishes through his people feels like weakness to us, because it comes through suffering. This is a hard truth, but a necessary one. If we are not prepared to accept this truth, the result will be the failure to achieve the mission God has given us. Or to word it differently, if we determine to be faithful to the Great Commission, such a path will involve us in some suffering. In the biography of Jack Miller that I've been reading, Jack describes his first trip to Uganda. He said that prior to the trip he cried for two weeks because he really didn't want to go. His wife, Rose Marie, was hesitant too. "I thought I might die there." The mission can only be accomplished through the same pattern by which the mission of Jesus was accomplished. Note the clear and uncompromising language of verse 17, which says that if we are children, then we are also heirs, "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." I note three features in this passage of our mission to suffer with Christ.

I. Suffering with Eager Expectation

Romans 8 is one of those climactic passages in the Bible. If the book of Romans were a fireworks display, this would be the chapter when all the big fireworks go off in rapid succession. It begins by talking about the glorious life in the Spirit and the fact that we are heirs with Christ. It closes with the famous section where God promises that nothing will be able to separate us from God's love. And then right in the middle of it all, it speaks of the reality and inevitability of suffering. And it declares forcefully and clearly that such suffering is part of what it means to belong to Jesus. We are so joined to him that we suffer as he suffered, and we are glorified as he has been glorified. We don't get the option we would all prefer of saying that we'll take the glory but pass on the suffering. To take the glory of Christ will also lead us into suffering.

I know that we have all suffered over the past year, some far more than others. Suffering is hard, but it is possible to suffer with hearts filled with joy and hope. The first part of our passage speaks of this as Paul tells us, **"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us"** (v. 18). Paul would know, wouldn't he? He experienced great suffering in his life, catalogued by him in 2 Corinthians. **"Five**

times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure" (2 Cor. 11:24-27). Paul had also experienced the heights of glory, being once taken up into heaven itself (2 Cor. 12:2), able to see the glory of God. In verse 18, Paul puts the two on the balance scale—his suffering and his taste of glory. And he says that there is no comparison. The glory is so much greater than the suffering that no comparison is adequate to express the difference. Think of the difference between a small atom and the universe, and even this is an inadequate comparison. The glory is so much better than the suffering, and Paul wants us to take that to heart and remember it.

Creation is employed as an illustration of the attitude we are to bring to our suffering. The earth has been suffering ever since the fall of Adam. Paul says that it was "subjected to futility" (v. 20). The futility is due to the fact that the earth hasn't been able to fulfill its purpose of testifying to the glory of God. The psalmist writes of this grand purpose by describing what will happen when God is fully recognized as king of all the earth. **"Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together"** (98:8). But the earth is like a severely out of balance wheel on your car. It is off center and shakes horribly. Paul then uses the analogy of labor and delivery, saying that the earth is currently groaning like a woman in labor. In this analogy there is great hope. A woman in labor knows that there is meaning in her suffering, for a precious baby will be the result of her trial. When will creation be freed from its bondage? It descended into its bondage due to the fall of the human race into sin, and it will be released from its bondage after the sons of Adam are fully redeemed. Creation is waiting **"for the revealing of the sons of God"** (v. 19). This revealing is described in verse 23 as happening when our adoption is completed at the time our bodies are raised at the return of Christ.

Paul's point in this analogy of creation is stated right at the beginning. **"For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God"** (v. 19). His point is that we are to follow the example of creation and be marked by this same eager longing. The Greek word for "eager longing" is derived from the word for head. It means to "wait with the head raised." It is the opposite of hanging your head low, of despairing over your circumstances. Paul is encouraging us here to lift our eyes up and see our glorious future when Christ returns and our bodies are resurrected, when pain, sorrow and death are permanently eliminated from our world and we look forward to everlasting joy. We are to focus our eyes on this glorious future, which will then transform our suffering.

I have mentioned before that Wendy was in labor for 36 hours prior to the delivery of our firstborn. We had planned on natural childbirth, so Wendy endured that entire labor without the aid of an epidural or any other significant relief. Natural childbirth also meant that I was with her as her encourager and coach during this time. I have to confess that I was wishing for the days when fathers were not permitted in the labor and delivery areas but waited outside ready to hand out the cigars. It felt to me that we were just going to be trapped forever in this miserable condition of painful labor and my anemic efforts to help my wife through it. And then something happened that changed everything. Wendy's labor pains began to be more effective, and I looked in the birth canal and saw about a quarter-size piece of our baby's matted, thick black hair. Something happened inside of me at that time. While I knew that there was a real baby growing inside my wife prior to that, it became real to me at that time. The result was to give us both the energy and motivation to push through to the joyful arrival of our son. In a sense, I lifted my head with eager longing for our baby's birth. Paul is telling us here to do the same. We are suffering now, but there is direction in our suffering. It is leading to this joyful full adoption as sons. This brings us to our next point.

II. Suffering with Patient Endurance

As a result of the fact that our suffering is going somewhere, Paul applies this by telling us that now, prior to our full deliverance from suffering, we are to wait for that deliverance with patience. Our hope is for our full adoption and the redemption of our bodies. It's not that we are not fully adopted sons and daughters already, because we certainly are. But the full results of that adoption won't be evident until the resurrection of our bodies. This full revealing of our adoption is still to happen, and Paul tells us that we are to fix our eyes on this and let it fill our hearts with hope. **"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"** (v. 24-25).

Paul is saying that the practical application of our hope is patient endurance. We are to accept the reality of suffering in our lives prior this full unveiling of our adoption as sons and daughters. Our ability to endure difficulties in life depends on accepting this truth of the presence of suffering. Let me give an illustration. As you know, I enjoy riding my bicycle. There are times, such as a couple of weeks ago, when the rides I go on involve a significant amount of climbing. When that happens, my heart rate will increase because of the hard work of climbing. I wear a heartrate monitor when I ride, and on climbs it will register anywhere between 150-185 beats per minute, depending on how fast I want to ascend the climb. If it's a particularly long climb, several miles in length, I have learned that I need to keep my heartrate under 160 so I don't get completely depleted before the end of the ride. So I settle in and pace myself by my heartrate monitor, expecting that it will be around 160 for the duration of the climb. I don't say, "What's wrong with

me? My heart is beating way too fast." Now if I were sitting at my desk, typing out an email, and all of a sudden my heartrate accelerated to 160, I would rightfully be asking, "What's wrong with me?" The difference is the expectation. I don't expect a high heart rate while sitting at my desk, but I do expect it to be high while pedaling up a hill. To expect suffering and to know that it is purposeful will give us patient endurance.

I think this is one of dangers of the health and wealth gospel. It teaches that all suffering can be eradicated in this life if we simply have enough faith. But that is a false expectation. So when suffering comes and stays after praying that God will remove it, it results in a crisis of faith. The person either gets angry at God or angry at themselves for lacking faith. But the truth is that it is part of our mission to suffer.

These first two points provide us with a balanced view of suffering. We are to expect it and endure it with patience, but we are also to be marked by eager expectation of our bright future. In this balance, we avoid both pessimism and unrealistic idealism. As John Stott prays, "God give us a patient eagerness and an eager patience as we wait for his promises to be fulfilled!" But the climax of this passage on suffering is still to come.

III. Suffering with Spirit-Aided Prayer

We are to remember our bright future when we suffer, and we are to endure patiently the suffering we are called to in this life. But the truth is that we are weak men and women. We need help from God if we are to do these things. So God promises to help us in the person of the third member of the trinity, the Holy Spirit. **"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"** (v. 26). Part of our weakness is that we often don't know what to pray for when we suffer. Do we pray for God to deliver us from our suffering or do we pray for strength to endure the suffering? But the Spirit knows all, being the third member of the trinity. And he prays for us in our suffering. Amazingly, the text says that he prays with groanings. This is now the third appearance of groaning in our text. Verse 22 says that creation is groaning like a woman in labor. Verse 23 says that we too groan in our sufferings, and now the Spirit of God groans. God enters into our suffering with this earnest praying on our behalf. God is not detached, but with his creation and his children.

Verse 27 reminds us that we can be confident of the Spirit's prayers being answered. **"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."** The Spirit's prayers are always according to God's will. His goal for us is not our comfort, but our sanctification.

This promise of the Spirit reveals a common problem in the way we respond to suffering. Earlier in the text, we are reminded that we have the Spirit now as the "firstfruits" of our salvation (v. 23). The problem is that we want what we cannot have yet, complete deliverance from suffering, and in the process forget what we already do have, the Holy Spirit. We are like a person picking apples who sees an apple high in the tree that he wants. But he has no ladder and can't reach it. But all the while, there are many apples within easy reach that he ignores. Don't we often do the same when we suffer? We insist on having something we want, relief from suffering, while forgetting the resource that God has chosen to give us now, the Holy Spirit.

A well-known pastor familiar to many of us, Tim Keller, was diagnosed several months ago with pancreatic cancer. A few weeks ago, he gave an interview that was posted to YouTube in which he reported that God has met him in some powerful ways since his diagnosis. He said that he was experiencing an intimacy with God that he had not known prior to his illness. This experience of God's presence was so powerful and precious to him that he said that he didn't want to go back to a time without cancer. Better to be dying of cancer and experience this Spirit-given intimacy than to be of robust health without it. Because of the presence of the Spirit, we don't even have to wait to experience some of the glories of heaven. The message of Romans 8 is not, this life is all suffering, but just endure it now and things will get better in the next life. Rather, it's that suffering now is an opportunity for us to draw near to God by the power of the Spirit.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with a question. What would your life be like if you had no fear of suffering? What joy and boldness would be unleashed if the truths we have looked at from this passage characterized your life? The vision statement of our church says that we want God to make of us a "community of the coming kingdom, bringing hope to a broken world." I don't say this in a condemning way, but I need to say that sometimes it feels like we are more a community of the frightened than a community of the coming kingdom. Some of those fears have been my own. 2020 has been a hard year, and I have battled fears that things are going to deteriorate in our church to the point that our church is significantly diminished. So let's all lift up our heads and remember our God. We can trust the one who loved us enough to die for us.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Romans 8:16-27

1. What has been the greatest difficulty in your life during 2020?

2. What is your natural tendency when you suffer, the one that is just "knee-jerk?"

3. Of the three descriptions of the attitudes we should bring to our sufferings in Romans 8, which one would you most like to see more present in your life? The three are suffering with eager expectation, suffering with patient endurance and suffering with Spirit-aided prayer.

4. To suffer with eager expectation is like a woman in labor. She is suffering with labor pains, but with the expectation of a precious baby to result. The opposite of this kind of suffering is despairing suffering. What promises from God help you not to despair in your suffering, but to be filled instead with an eager expectation?

5. To suffer with patient endurance means to accept the suffering that persists in your life even after you have prayed and asked God to deliver you from it. What has God brought to your life in this category?

6. The taste of heaven that Romans 8 promises to us now, in the midst of our suffering, is the presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul specifically mentions that the Holy Spirit prays for us in accordance with God's will. Have you ever had the experience of not knowing what to pray for? What practical difference does it make to know that the Holy Spirit does know and is praying?

7. We want to be the community of the coming kingdom, not the community of the frightened. What fears are you struggling with in your life right now? Pray for one another about these.