

Sermon #1,143: Romans 8:18-23

5-3-15 (Easter 5, Cantate Sunday), Bethany-Princeton MN

Hymns: 22, 519, 354; communion hymns 310, 353, 397)

## GOD IS HIDDEN IN OUR SUFFERINGS

**The Text, Romans 8:18-23.** <sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. <sup>19</sup> For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; <sup>21</sup> because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. <sup>23</sup> Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Lord, in our sufferings help us to compare them to the glory which shall be revealed in us, and to rejoice in this glory in the midst of all suffering. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ, the Suffering Servant: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

St. Paul begins these verses speaking about **“the sufferings of this present time.”** There is suffering in this life and not in heaven, because there is evil here but not in heaven. There are two kinds of evil, or two kinds of suffering. One is moral evil – coming from people, either from sins you do or someone does to you. That is not what Paul is talking about. The other kind of suffering is “natural” evil, not coming from people but what happens in nature, diseases or disasters. This is the suffering Paul is speaking of with his talk of **“the creation”** – it’s the way creation is since the Fall into sin. *“Change and decay in all around I see.”*

We are talking about the problem of pain, evil being in the world. They are **“the sufferings of this present time”**; the next world won’t have them.

This is at the heart of what Romans 8 is about. For the past two weeks we’ve heard about a struggle between your sinful self and your forgiven self, a struggle to believe there is no condemnation for you, a struggle to believe you

are really God's child and to speak trustingly to Him. One cause of this struggle is: human suffering. It's harder to speak trustingly to Him, harder to believe you are really God's child, harder to believe He isn't punishing you, hard to fight the Old Adam, when you are suffering, if you're in pain or anguish. We know this. We lose our temper and justify it by saying: *"It's because I'm having a bad day."*

What we covered last week ended with these words: *"if indeed we suffer with Him [Christ], that we may also be glorified together."* Continuing on, this week's portion begins: **"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."**

When we hear these words about the sufferings being outweighed by the coming glory, we are ready to skip over the sufferings and dwell on the glory. This is a natural way to deal with suffering, and we do it all the time.

We learn from our world to minimize suffering, to distract ourselves from it, to ignore it or look away. We want to pretend it is not there. So we bury it like compost and just hope it will go away on its own. In our congregation we are certainly vulnerable to this. Four funerals since December! We find ourselves saying, *"No more, Lord! That's enough!"* When the pain doesn't go away easily what do you do? How do you handle it? Some people mistakenly think the Christian way is to have a stiff upper lip, just bear it. We say things like *"it'll get better."* Or we say you have to *"suck it up."* You might think that you have to put on your smile on the outside, that a Christian has to be happy all the time, and so you bury all the pain and suffering on the inside. This is just exhausting! And furthermore, this is not at all what God says to do. If you think that you as a Christian have a duty to be happy, suck it up, soldier on and bury your pain then your expectation of God is really that He doesn't understand pain and suffering, that He is impatient when you actually feel or experience it, that He wants you to get past it. But as we will see this is most certainly not what God is like.

Another common mistake of Christians is to adopt this way of thinking and speaking: that God will only let so much of it happen, and we imagine we must be getting to our limit soon. Sometimes we deal with our sufferings by saying that He will not give us more than we can handle. I know we've talked about this in Bible class. Now with these verses in Romans 8 we can really address it.

The first problem with the "*God won't give you more than you can handle*" is that the Bible does not exactly say that. The second problem is that it assumes that there is a certain amount we can handle; but we can't handle it at all! "*I cannot by my own reason or strength*" – because of my Old Adam – say "Thy will be done." Only the Holy Spirit can bring me to say it. But the biggest problem with this way of thinking is that we're presuming to limit God and dictate conditions to Him. If I have this conviction that God won't give me too much suffering, and there is too much (according to me), it can shake my belief in God's goodness. I turn into someone who makes demands about God not giving me bad things. In the case of many so-called atheists, this very thing was the trigger for their refusal to believe in the God of the Bible: seeing terrible misery and sadness in the world or in their life. The devil wants to use suffering to destroy faith in God.

The devil puts this thought in your minds: that if there is suffering, God is not in control. Maybe you don't think that; but might you think this: *If I am suffering so much, is God really there for me?* Sometimes Christians do get caught in this trap of trying to defend God in the presence of all this suffering, to answer the "Why, Lord?" questions. You often hear people say that God doesn't cause the suffering, He simply allows it. Job is brought up as an example; Satan asked for permission to afflict Job, and God only allowed him to do so much.

The Bible does speak that way. But it also speaks this way: "***In faithfulness You [O LORD] have afflicted me***" (Ps 119:75). That's from the Psalms; it says the Lord actually sends the afflictions. Even in Job, it speaks of "***all the adversity***

*that the LORD had brought upon him.*" Here in Romans 8 it says something similar: not that God simply allows suffering, but that He brings it.

As St. Paul elaborates upon **"the sufferings of this present time,"** he says: **"For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope."** He says God brought on the created world the effects of sin: decay, sickness, death, disaster, etc. This was not an automatic result of the Fall into sin. God did it. Paul says this not just about the inanimate creation, but compares what creation experiences with what you suffer: **"For we know that the whole creation groans and labors ... Not only that, but we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting ... for the redemption of our body."**

This is the groaning, the moaning, the screaming, the shrieking, the cry of anguish, the weight of despair that we get from everything that we suffer, all the bad stuff. St. Paul says that God even sends it. Our first thought is that this is terrible. We don't want to believe it. The Old Adam in us would respond by accusing God, saying that He is just mean, capricious. Sometimes people respond by saying that God is sovereign and He can do what He wants. Then you are always waiting for what will happen next. This is judging from our sufferings that we do not know what to expect from God, and perhaps He isn't good and kind. This is looking at our sufferings as punishments from a God who is not happy with us. It is a predominantly Law-oriented view of God. It frightens me how easy it is for us who know the Gospel to think this way. When we suffer, all our knowledge of the Gospel and of Christ flies out the window pretty quickly, it seems.

But this is why St. Paul is writing this. To defeat that way of looking at our sufferings. Why let the devil define what their purpose is? Read these verses carefully, and you can see Christ silently entering the picture.

First, St. Paul says that all these terrible sufferings of ours are vastly outweighed by **"the glory which shall be revealed in us."** Well, think about that.

How will you come to glory? How will you be raised? How will you stand before God not in shame but in glory? It's through Christ! Then in that verse where he says God subjected the fallen creation to corruption, he says that God subjected it "**in hope.**" In hope. So this is not only a curse, but in some way it is a gift. For you who suffer, the Lord's goal is that this will in some way end "in the hope" of eternal life. He afflicts you, in His wisdom, to preserve your faith and salvation. And finally, the closing words of this reading say that all our groaning in our sufferings is how we come to be "**eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.**" Redemption. That's what the Redeemer does. Christ.

So if you take all of this together, our sufferings are not a punishment. They reveal Christ to us. They lead us to cry out to God for help. The help He sends is your Savior, Jesus Christ. Your sufferings are intended to lead you to Christ. In this way, as Martin Luther said, God is hidden in suffering. You become best equipped to see what God is like when you are suffering. You are more ready to hear the Gospel. Your Savior becomes more precious to you. In fact, in Isaiah 53 (which we will be studying next week in Bible Class) God reveals His Son to be the *Suffering* Servant. We know the story of His Passion, which means His suffering. We know that He took all our sins to be His own and that He suffered. But part of it is that He took all our *suffering* to be His own. In your suffering you have fellowship with Him in His suffering. He made it this way. You do not have to doubt if He has sympathy for you. You may feel as if God is far away, but in Christ He came near to you in all your suffering, made it His own, suffered it perfectly, and now as the risen Lord He still does not stay removed but comes to you in your suffering and walks with you through it.

So you see, God does understand your pain and suffering. He doesn't want you to deny what you feel. He Himself came down from heaven to feel it. He is not impatient with you, wanting you to get past it or put on a happy face.

That is not what God is like. And God is not mean or capricious. We do not view our sufferings from the point of God's sovereignty, but by His grace. That is the beginning and ending point of our faith in God. We do not judge God by what we suffer. We judge who God is and what He is like by what He suffered. By His cross. That unchanging, objective sign that He loves you. In the midst of our sufferings, this is the enduring message. He suffered for you. Our sufferings are to better know Him and His sufferings for us. Luther said, "*Our suffering conforms us to our Lord that we may become like Him here in suffering and [like Him] there, in that life to come, in honor and glory*" (LW 51: Sermon on Suffering and the Cross, 1530).

All these Lutheran hymns that we sing declare the same thing:

*God, my Helper, who dost send it [suffering]  
Well doth know all my woe and how best to end it.*

*God is good, and tempers ever  
All my ill, and He will wholly leave me never. (#377 v. 2, 3)*

*What God ordains is always good; His loving thought attends me;  
No poison can be in the cup that my Physician sends me.*

*I take content what He hath sent;  
His hand that sends me sadness will turn my tears to gladness.*

*Now I may know both joy and woe;  
Someday I shall see clearly that He hath loved me dearly. (#519 v. 2, 3, 4)*

This is learning the art, in the midst of suffering, of looking to the promises that God declares to us in Jesus Christ, the promises that He makes to us in His Word, in Baptism, in the Lord's Supper. On Cantate Sunday we learn that we don't sing because we are skipping through the tulips. We sing because we need to. We sing through our tears. Our sufferings reveal to us our Savior and bring us to Him, to ask our hard questions of Him, who then says to us: "***Why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking? I am He. I am here with you, in your suffering, to lead you where there is no suffering.***" Amen!