

All Roads Lead Here: Hope In Weakness
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Psalm 33:16-22; Luke 24:13-21a; Romans 8:23-28

Today's final Scripture reading is Romans 8:23-28. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. "Not only [the creation], but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

In 1977, a little film called *Star Wars* became a big hit. Such a big hit, in fact, that sequels were immediately greenlighted in Hollywood. The problem was, the series itself was now to be called *Star Wars*. So they came up with a new name for the movie that started it all – "A New Hope." In 2008, Barack Obama won the first of his two terms as president with an iconic poster highlighting his profile with one simple word – "hope." (When you put Obama into a search engine, the first suggestion to finish your sentence is "hope.") Native Americans used the 8-pointed star as their symbol for "hope." The swallow has long been a sign of hope in Western literature because it's one of the first birds to appear when spring comes.

We need hope. Hope moves us forward when obstacles are in the way. But hope is a tricky thing. Hopes are often easily broken. We marry hoping that our marriage will be loving, long-lasting, and a source of joy...but even the best marriages have real struggles. We place our hopes on a new job or career to take care of our money problems, a new television show to deal with our boredom or loneliness, a child to make us feel needed. And yet often, our hopes don't live up to reality. We hope for the best but expect the worst.

In Romans 8, Paul writes about hope – he writes to the church to comfort us, encourage us, and to bring us joy. Those things are rooted in our hope in God – a hope based in present reality that looks forward to a certain, definite future. But Paul is incredibly realistic in dealing with our current state of affairs. He writes to give us hope in the midst of our problems.

And that's where we're going to start today: our weakness. Our first idea today is that *God meets us in our weakness to give us hope*. Our opening sentence says, "Not only [the creation], but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved."

Last week, we learned how all of creation groans for redemption. We do the exact same thing. We groan over our current state. Because life isn't easy. We wrestle with sin and we want to be free of it. We also wrestle with the fallout from sin. We get sick. We age. Those we love die. We deal with heartaches and tragedies. We suffer in all sorts of ways. Even for the most content person, there is a longing and a desire for things to be set right.

In my study of Japanese animation, I learned the word *natsukashi*. *Natsukashi* is a running theme in Japanese literature and entertainment. The simplest way I can describe it is nostalgia with teeth. It's the wistful melancholy and longing and sadness we feel when we remember the past and aren't sure how it will affect the future. It's a mix of uncertainty and longing and pain and hope. We don't have a single word for that. We don't like to dwell on the melancholy of life. Our praise songs are almost relentlessly upbeat. Even secular entertainment is edgy and dark and brooding, but it rarely deals with real-world pain.

But the Bible is well aware of our sufferings. An entire book of the Bible called Lamentations compiles the sorrow of the Israelites when they were sent into exile and worried they would never return home. There's Ecclesiastes, where everything under the sun is meaningless. There's Job, who deals with unspeakable loss. And there are the Psalms, which are often written by a guy on the run from enemies far too powerful to overcome. The Psalms are a desperate plea of "please" and "God help" and "why?" and "I trust" and "save me."

Suffering is never an illusion in the Bible. It's never a trick of the mind or something to ignore. Suffering is real, and there are no easy answers for why we suffer. Instead of answering the "why" about suffering, instead of getting a theory about suffering, we get God Himself come in the flesh in Jesus, the suffering Messiah. Jesus, the One who never sinned against the Father, the only person truly deserving of the good life...He suffers his whole lifetime. He's born into poverty. The gifts given by the Wise Men just cover their expenses in Egypt when they have to flee the insane rage of King Herod. He's brought up in a nowhere town of no reputation.

He goes around healing anyone who will let Him touch them, teaching thousands of individuals the way of God, without charging a cent. He sleeps in the fields and along the byways of Israel. He is constantly threatened by religious leaders and mocked for inviting notorious sinners to believe. His own family didn't know what to make of Him.

When He is arrested, the disciples who had pledged their lives to Him scatter. He is beaten to an inch of His life, dragged here there and everywhere as no one wants His blood on their hands. And finally, they have Him hung on a cross, one of the most humiliating and painful torture devices ever devised.

Jesus was what Isaiah 53 calls "a man of sorrows" "well acquainted with grief" and "familiar with suffering." Hebrews 5:7 says that Jesus "offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death." Do we groan? Do we suffer? Absolutely. But God redeems that pain and heartache, all the grief and tears and sorrows, not by explaining it away but showing that through His Son, He knows. Think about Jesus' nail-pierced hands and feet and know that in your sorrows, Jesus walks alongside you in full knowledge of what it means to suffer. He is there.

We are saved in the hope that we will be redeemed and remade, body and soul. We aren't saved by that hope, but our salvation includes this hope. It's an integral part of our faith. We don't believe in Jesus just as a good guy who taught nice things. No, we believe in Jesus who has set us right with the Father, who has sent us His Spirit, and who will set things right. Our hope has substance. And that leads into our second thought today: *godly hope is not a dream or a wish but a longing for a promise made by our trustworthy God to be fulfilled.*

Paul explains the basic meaning of hope: you don't hope for what you have. Hope requires an object that hasn't yet been grasped. But that hope we have is different from our earthly hopes, and here's how. When we hope for earthly things, we set ourselves up for disappointment. "I hope it doesn't rain next Sunday for Pray in the Driveway." "I hope the Tigers win the pennant." Those hopes are just wishes for good things, but they probably don't have much basis in reality.

Some of our hopes are based on firmer things. Do I hope we'll have good treats after the services? Sure, but that's a reasonable hope because everybody brings all sorts of tasty stuff to share every week. My hope is based on previous experience. But you never know. Someone might have forgotten; we've gotten our weeks mixed up before. Or maybe my hope is for ice cream and we're having bagels. Who knows?

But our hope in God is very different. It is based on His reliability that is far greater than our own. It is based on the testimony of hundreds of eyewitnesses who saw Jesus after His crucifixion alive and well. We take the evidence of millions who came before us in faith and found joy and peace. We take the evidence that God has become real to us, that we want more of Him, that when we think on God or pray or sing to Him, we want more.

Paul characterizes Christian hope as both eager and patient. Now that's odd because they aren't antonyms, they aren't exactly opposite, but they are pretty close. What Paul means is that we desperately want to be redeemed, to be whole, to enter into the presence of God and all of His joy and glory, but we're patient because we know that God will do everything at the right time.

One analogy would be thanksgiving dinner. Everything starts smelling so good right around noon, right? And you're eager to dig in. But no matter when or where we had Thanksgiving, we always seem to eat around 2 o'clock. That's because not everything is done. You have to have patience. And we do wait, because you know that when that turkey is done just right and the mashed potatoes are all finished and the pumpkin pie is that perfect shade of brown, it's going to be wonderful. Rushing it would spoil it. You're eager for it to be done, but you're patient because you want it done right.

That's our situation as believers. God gives us the grace in our weakness to wait patiently. We long for what we don't have quite yet, but we know God is doing everything in his perfect timing. I just think, in the last hundred years, there has been a population explosion around the world. What if Jesus had come back in 1900? None of us here would have even had the chance to be born, let alone know Jesus. Just a few years ago we wouldn't have had Cameron and Daryl and Maddie. God is working out His purposes, and we have to wait. We're eager and patient at the same time.

So we have hope – a good hope, a strong hope, with the firm foundation of Jesus behind it. But in the midst of it all, we suffer. Our problems and catastrophes and sufferings can erode that sense of hope. What can get us through? When the storms of life blow the monsoon rains through our lives, how can we keep from getting washed away?

That's our third idea for today: *God provides for us in our weakness through the gift of the Holy Spirit so we can stay strong.* We're so weak that we don't know what we should pray for. We're clueless about so much! People often ask me to write a prayer for them to say at special occasions. Sometimes I ask why, and the answer is, "I don't know what to say." And we can understand that because Paul agrees. Do we know what to say to God? No, we don't.

I don't know whether you've had this experience before, but I've had the opportunity to meet a couple of musicians that were legends in my mind. Not legends in everyone's minds, not a Paul McCartney or a Billy Joel, but people whose music and poetry I respect and admire. And every time that's happened, I have said something I later thought was really stupid. I mean, not awful, not crazy, but just kinda dumb. And these are just people – people I really think are great, but just people. No wonder we have a hard time knowing what to say to our Creator!

Romans 8 acknowledges that. Yet we have the Spirit given to us as the firstfruits, as the down payment on our souls. And the Holy Spirit prompts us in at least two ways. First off, the Holy Spirit inspires us as we pray to pray for the things that God wills. He guides our thoughts and minds to what really matters. That's the first meaning of what Paul says here.

But just as important, and maybe to us more comforting, is that the Spirit groans for us and with us. He intercedes for us. That means He stands in the gap. When we pray, our words aren't always as important as we might think. Sometimes we should just be silent before God and say, "May the Spirit speak to you, Father, about all the things on my heart I can't even express." Just as Jesus lived through suffering and now relates to us in our suffering, the Spirit groans with us, counseling us, guiding us, and desiring for us to become more like the precious Son of God who saves us.

And the Spirit always prays according to the will of God, so He prays when we don't have our act together and pray for things that would actually hurt us. The Father listens to the Spirit inside of us first, answering our real needs, listening to us but also answering us according to what we *really* need instead of what we *think* we need. Isn't it good to know that the Holy Spirit has our backs like that?

And here's the ultimate payoff: *all things work together for the good of those who love God.* It doesn't say that all things work together for good, period, but all things work together for good for those who love God and have been called according to His purpose. That's a huge comfort to us. That gives our hope backbone.

For us here today – who love God, who worship Him, who want more of Him in our lives – everything is working together for good. All your sufferings. All your pain. All the crazy things that have happened in your life. They have purpose. They are being redeemed. It doesn't mean all those things are good in and of themselves or that you have to accept them without question. It's OK to cry out to God to take them away, or just to tell Him how you feel about them. But God is using them to forge your character, and He's using them to show His power to the world through them.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12 about a thorn in the flesh he'd been given by Satan to torment him. We're pretty sure it was his eyesight, because in almost every letter, he wrote about how large his signature was. Other people had to write down his letters for him – this was pretty common, but it could very well have been that he couldn't see well enough to write small letters. In Galatians 4:13-15, Paul says that when he was sick, they loved him so much, they would have given him their own eyes.

Paul asks God to take this thorn away three times. And how does God respond? He told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." This awful thing that Satan did to try and get Paul down, to get him to give up, to stop proclaiming the goodness of God? God turns it around. God uses it to mold Paul and to glorify Himself. Paul continues in 2 Corinthians 12, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." Paul doesn't need his eyes to glorify God. In fact, it shows off the kind of God we serve that He would make the greatest apostle out of a former persecutor of the church who's now all but blind.

God is not so concerned about how we *feel, now*, so much as he is concerned about who He is shaping us to *be* in the *future*. As pastor Seth Richardson put it, "God is not primarily healing us *from* brokenness. He is healing us *for* newness in Christ's life, to grow in wisdom and love." When you deal with God, with all the junk in your life, it's going to be painful. To come face to face with your sin for what it is and to get rid of it hurts. To get sin out of our lives is like ongoing surgery. God is removing it from us bit by bit with the scalpel of His Holy Spirit empowered by His holy Word. Sometimes that surgery feels like it's going on without anesthetic. But we live in hope. There is purpose. God is doing it for your good. The pain is real, but so is the joy of knowing that even in the crazy-difficult times, God is working inside you to mold you into that child perfect to appear in His presence.

Friends, we groan now, but the glory of God and the glory of being with Him forever is going to outweigh our longings. We live in hope – hope that is certain of what we do not yet see. The Spirit is speaking on our behalf to the Father. On those dark days when things don't look promising, keep firm in hope...God will not disappoint us.