

#23 One Gospel, One People — “Groaning” (2017.07.02)

Romans has been quite a ride so far. The point of the ride is to lift up the glorious gospel, but the ride has had its ups and downs. It is rhetorical and technical and deeply theological. In it, Paul makes us look at our sinfulness and our inability to please God with our actions and intentions. He has talked about our bondage to sin and how that bondage to sin brings death, when we consider what God requires of us, because of his Holy Character. And all this discussion has been further complicated by Paul’s balancing act of anticipating and reacting to what Christians with a Jewish background might cringe at and criticize in his unfolding of the Gospel message.

True, there have been some amazing rest stops along the way of grace-filled hope: when Paul has focused on what God has done for us through Christ’s sacrifice and the gift of the Holy Spirit. But, even in those moments, Paul’s thinking has been intense and heavy and we’ve had to work hard to understand every nuance of his teaching.

Let’s face it, you can’t read Romans without realizing that everything that Paul says has been planned and deeply considered. Sure, there are times that he goes off on tangents, but those tangents, are never pointless. They always enrich the discussion, not to mention the confusion.

The point I am trying to make is that Romans is hard work. It is deeply satisfying, rewarding, hard work, but it is hard work nonetheless.

For that reason, I think we can suffer from what I like to call Romanitus. (Isn’t that an incredibly creative word, I just made up?) Romans trains us to be constantly searching for the next section that is going to require some theological heavy-lifting. We expect to be climbing uphill all the way. What that means is that when we hit a clearing with some flat land, we just motor right through without even thinking about it. So, my definition of Romanitus is: approaching a relatively straight-forward part of the letter without much thought or consideration.

Please turn with me to Romans 8:18-25 pg. 955

The passage we are looking at today is one of those passages that display whether or not we have Romanitus. Most people read through this passage and just keep moving on to the next theological challenge because what Paul says in this passage is fairly straightforward. In the very least, it doesn't make us scratch our heads or pull our hair out, thankfully!

And, our passage today seems oddly out of place, or off topic, because the focus moves from us being adopted children and heirs and co-heirs with Christ, to Paul considering the present state of the world.

And by world, I don't mean people, or culture, or society. I mean world as in rocks and trees and trees and rocks, Oh, and that reminds me, "Happy Canada Day weekend everyone!

Why would Paul move from lives being completely changed for the better by our adoption into God's family and then change the subject to rocks and trees and trees and rocks? Was Paul actually Canadian?

Well, believe it or not, what we are about to look at is in climatic part of all that we have looked at so far. And, more than that, it is the climax of the climatic! This isn't filler folks! This isn't a tangent. This is the point! It isn't the point of Romans, but it is the point of the Gospel. It is the point of Christ's sacrifice. It is the point of justification and sanctification and the gift, presence, and power, of the Holy Spirit in our lives. So, this is a pretty big point!

Here's how I would describe it to you. Think of Romans as an expedition through the densest theological jungle there is! (Notice that I now have hair. If I am going to photoshop my face on an image, I am going to have hair!) So, we are on this expedition and, so far, we have slowly and persistently chopped our way through the thickest, darkest theological underbrush on the planet. We have tried to stay on the right path, but the right path has been hard to see sometimes, so in the middle of the journey, we stop and we find a tall tree and we

climb it. Why do we climb it? Because we want to get above the treeline so that we can get a clear view. We want to get a glimpse of our destination.

The passage we are looking at today is the view from the top of the tree. It is the view that helps us to clearly see where we are headed. We may be tired, and thirsty, we may have some bruises and some scratches and an assortment of bug bites. We may be achy and smelly and dirty from the journey, but this view is going to change everything. This view is so amazing that it is going to melt all those aches and pains and it is going to give us a new drive to head towards our destination!

From this treetop we can see, in astonishing clarity, the whole plan of salvation, not only for you and me, but for all of God's creation! And trust me, once you've glimpsed this view, you will never forget it and yet, so many people, when they study Romans, never stop and climb the tree to see the view. Silly people!

Now, Paul begins by continuing on with a thought that he left us with in the previous paragraph. Let's go back to verse 17 for a moment, because we really didn't spend much time discussing the last part of the verse.

In verse 17 we read: *"Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."*

Last week, I briefly touched on the fact that it seems like this is a conditional sentence. And it is. OK, but what is Paul actually saying? Is he saying no pain, no gain? Yes, he is. Is he saying, that if we don't suffer, we won't share in his glory? Yes, he is. Is he saying that our suffering is necessary to earn our salvation? No, he is not! Is he saying that our suffering adds to what Christ has done? No, he is not! OK then, what is he saying?

He is saying a few things: First, he is saying that it is impossible to live the Christian life in a fallen world and not suffer. Jesus said this himself, did He not? *"If the world hates you,*

keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15:18). Jesus’ point is simply this: “Don’t expect better treatment than I got!” And we all know how He was treated!

Secondly, suffering is part of our reality because our salvation is yet to be complete. We have new life, but we also struggle to live out that new life. We still must deal with the part of ourselves that continues to be unredeemed and an outpost of our enemy, sin. We suffer because we sin. We suffer in the struggle not to sin. We will come back to this point a bit later.

But, it means more than that. Suffering and glory go together in Scripture. Or better put: suffering is the path to glory.

It certainly was for Christ. Paul reminds us of this in his letter to the Philippians, speaking of Jesus he writes: *“And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!”⁹ Therefore [as a result, for this reason] God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Philippians 2:8-10)*

Jesus was exalted to the highest place. He was glorified, as a result of, his suffering and death on a cross.

And suffering is the path to glory for us as his followers as well. That is what Paul is referring to in this passage and it is also what Peter tells us in his first letter. Peter says that the God of all grace, *“called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while.” (1 Peter 5:10)*

Why do suffering and glory go together? Paul has already explained it in Romans 5. Paul begins by talking about having gained access, by faith, into the grace we now stand. And, because of that grace, we can boast in the hope of the glory of God (5:2). The “hope of the glory of God,” is just another way of saying, “the guaranteed promise of our completed salvation.” Paul’s point is that we can boast in this glory, because it comes by faith through

being in a state of grace. It comes from God. It is a work of God. It is God's purpose and God's plan. But then Paul goes on to say, *"Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope."* (**Romans 5:2-4**)

So why does suffering and glory go together? Because, even though God's grace is responsible for our maturing, the process by which that maturing takes place is through God's use of our suffering to help us to grow. And therefore, when we see that we are growing, we have the evidence of God working in our lives, which means we have proof of our inheritance as children of God. Make sense? Suffering and glory go together. Suffering is used by God to bring Christ-like maturity into our lives.

So, when Paul says, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." All that he is really saying is that suffering is the reality of living in a fallen world, but more than that, suffering is also the process that God uses to bring us to a greater maturity and therefore it is evidence that He is our loving Father and we are His adopted children.

And then, all this talk of suffering and glory spills into the passage we have before us today. Beginning with verse 18 we read: *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."* Let's stop there for now.

The Greek word translated as "considered" is important. It tells us that this is a conclusion that Paul has come to after a lot of thought and observation. This is a thesis that he has tested and proven to be true. And what exactly is that thesis? It's that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

So, let's be clear here. Paul isn't comparing our present suffering with our future glory. There's no point. It isn't worth the effort. The extremes between the suffering verses the resulting glory are too great to bother comparing them. The glory is off the charts!

It's similar to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians when he declares: *"For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."* (**2 Corinthians 4:17**)

Paul isn't saying that our troubles really aren't troubles. He isn't brushing them aside, or minimizing them in any way. Paul isn't an old guy that is telling us that he used to walk uphill both ways to school, every day, in a snow storm, and we don't know what suffering is! All he is doing is contrasting our suffering with the result of our eternal glory. In that context, even the greatest, most protracted suffering, will be considered light and momentary, by us, when we see and experience the eternal glory that God produces as a result. There is an economy of scale here that can't be rightly expressed or understood. "Light" verses "far outweighs," "momentary" verses "eternal."

Just think about momentary for a moment. The Mayfly has a lifespan of 24 hrs. Many species of Mayfly only live a few hours. Let's compare that with the conservative three score and ten of a human being. That's 70 years, or 25,550 days to one in lifespan. This is a generous ratio! To us, a Mayfly's entire life is momentary. But how do you compare 70 years to eternity? What exactly do you multiply 70 years by in order to arrive at eternity? Eternity never ends.

If what we endure now is necessary, expected and even instrumental in the glory of what we become and experience and enjoy for age upon age upon age, then our troubles and sufferings really are momentary!

And if what we become is what we have always wanted to be, with no frustrations, no inadequacies, no regrets, no offenses, no mistakes, no missed opportunities, no worries, no anxieties, and no "what ifs" complete with the added bonus of utter joy and satisfaction and creativity and productivity and meaning and worth, and perfect love, both given and received, then how can we compare the two? You can't! And that is what Paul is trying to tell us here.

He is putting our suffering and struggle in it's proper context. He is giving us a treetop view of where we are headed so that, even though we are presently achy, dirty, and exhausted, we will be motivated to keep moving towards our destination.

But then, Paul takes a bit of an unexpected turn in the discussion. Beginning in verse 19 we read: *"For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed."*

Paul moves his focus from us to nature. Paul takes a page from the Psalmist and personifies nature. Rocks and trees and trees and rocks become a living, breathing, thinking being.

OK, but what exactly does Paul mean by "the creation"? Well, the context tells us that he is referring to everything in our world except people.

I love the image we have in verse 19. The phrase "waits in eager expectation" literally means "to strain one's neck forward." Like someone looking for a long-lost-loved-one in a crowded airport.

I love Phillips paraphrase of this verse: *"The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own"* (**Romans 8:19, Phillips NT**). This captures the essence of the Greek beautifully.

There is anticipation and excitement and longing and desire expressed here. Creation is beside itself with excitement for the children of God to be revealed. It's all that it can think of! What does that mean? In what way are we to be revealed?

Hold onto that thought for a moment and let's continue reading: *"For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."*

OK, what exactly is going on here? It's a reference to Genesis 3:17 where we have the ground being cursed because of Adam's sin. Creation has been subjected to frustration because of our sin.

The word "frustration" means: "not being able to live up to its intended purpose." It means 'emptiness, futility, purposelessness. It is the word chosen by the Greek translation of the Old Testament that Paul used to translate the phrases in Ecclesiastes, 'Meaningless! Meaningless! ... Utterly meaningless!'

One commentator commented, 'the whole Book of Ecclesiastes is a commentary upon this verse'. For it expresses the existential absurdity of a life lived 'under the sun', imprisoned in time and space, with no ultimate reference point to either God or eternity.

God subjected the creation to frustration because of Adam's sin. Adam had a role of being a caretaker of God's creation. He was supposed to represent God's interests in creation, but instead he used creation to satisfy his own interests and became independent and rebellious. The result is a world that can never reach its potential as it now stands. And all this happened by no choice of its own. Creation was an innocent bystander caught in the crossfire of man's pride and self-rule. And, the result was bondage to decay.

Now, a certain amount of decay is natural and good: leaves fall to the ground and give back nutrients and that kind of thing. That isn't the kind of decay that Paul is talking about. He is talking about unnatural decay, of moving from usable to useless, of expending more energy to try and achieve the same result. He is talking of systems that still work, and still bear the fingerprint of God, but that have been altered and weakened and broken and compromised.

OK, so why is it that all creation stands on tippy toe for the children of God to be revealed? It's because its freedom from the effects of the fall are tied to our freedom from the effects of the fall. When our salvation is complete so will creation's freedom to live up to its full potential once again be complete.

What Paul is talking about here are two ages. There is the present age of suffering, both for us and for the creation. And then there is the future age of glory. When Christ returns and our redemption is complete and there is a new heaven and earth. This is the recreation. It is recreation because it takes just as much effort and focus and energy for God to recreate than it did for Him to create in the first place!

Actually, I believe it takes more energy. Just try renovating a house that is full of rot and decay. Every time you go to fix one thing, three other problems are exposed. Quite often it is less costly to completely start over instead of trying to restore everything that is broken. But, our God doesn't throw things away. He restores and redeems them. He takes what is broken and makes it better than new!

So many people think the problem with the world is people. They are right. But the solution isn't getting rid of people, it is the completion of our redemption, it is the return of Christ, when God's children will be fully redeemed. When we are fully redeemed, so will be the world. This doesn't mean we don't have to care about the world now. We are still called to be its caretakers, no matter how imperfect we are. **How can we ignore what God will restore? How can we abuse, what God will use?**

And so, *"the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."* And it will continue until our complete redemption.

Moving on, let's put verse 22 and 23 together: *"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."*²³ *Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies."*

Looking at the context here, both we, and creation, groan as in the pains of childbirth. Paul says that the creation groans, and in the same way, so do we, ourselves. We experience the same kind of expectation in what God is going to accomplish. We also wait eagerly. But,

where the creation waits for the children of God to be revealed, we wait for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

OK well that is a bit confusing. Hasn't Paul in verse 15 already said we are adopted? Yes, he did, but notice here in verse 23, that he qualifies what he means by adoption. He connects it with the redemption of our bodies. So, we are back at considering the yet and not yet quality of our salvation in this present period of suffering. We have the firstfruits of Spirit. Firstfruits were the best of the early part of the harvest. They are a preview of what is to come. The presence of the Spirit in our lives is a preview of what is to come. Or as Paul says in Ephesians, the Spirit is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance (Ephesians 1:14). We have new life, we have been adopted, we are heirs and co-heirs with Christ. All of this is our present reality as followers of Christ, but none of this is our completed reality. It is only the beginning that will continue until we leave the age of suffering and enter the age of glory at Christ's return. Then our adoption will be complete, with the redemption of our bodies. Then the children of God will be completely revealed in our final glory.

But until then, we are still in the age of suffering. We are in the age of renovation. We in the age of being incomplete.

Let's say that you buy a house. The only thing you can buy in this market is a real fixer upper. In reality, it is a money pit. But because you want a home and you want a life and you want to put down roots, you place your down payment on the house and you move in.

Unfortunately, you can only live in one room and your kitchen consists of a water bucket, extension cords, a microwave, and a toaster oven that has seen better days. It is make-shift at best.

The process of turning this house into a home, your home, the home you always wanted, isn't going to take a few months, or even a few years. It is a life-long project that is

difficult, costly and quite frankly way more complicated than either your skills or knowledge can handle.

At times, you look at your progress and see what's possible. You can picture what life will be like when everything is finished. At other times, you wonder why you bought the house in the first place!

There are times when you just want to walk away and give up. The struggle, the dust, the dirt, the challenge seems too much, too overwhelming and the construction stalls. There is something very painful about being stuck in the in-between of what is and what will be. Particularly when what will be seems so far away.

That's the way it is for us as Christians. Now, Christ purchased everything for us and the Holy Spirit is the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance and what will guide the building process is much more the work of the Spirit than us, but we are on that walk, we are in that place of renovation. We are a real fixer upper.

There is rot and mould and wobbly floors, and sticky doors and termites galore! The fact of the matter is, that once the renovation is done, there will really be nothing original left. Our home will be completely new. But for now, we wait, we long, we get impatient. Now, even the minor fixes are so much more completed. Now that we have looked at the electrical and behind the walls and at the plumbing and the foundation, the sheer scale of the renovation is overwhelming. We see our real state and that makes us long even more for our completed state. But, the only way to get there is to trust our contractor and do all we can to help him and be in agreement with what he says must be done. It is so slow. It is so up and down and sometimes it seems at a standstill, but it isn't, God is at work. And yet we groan inwardly.

There are all kinds of suffering in this world. Some of it is senseless. It is the result of sheer cruelty or terrible tragedy. There is suffering because of our own sin and stupidity as well. There is nothing so hopeless as senseless suffering, but our reality as Christians is that

there is no such thing as senseless suffering. All of our suffering, regardless of its original source or circumstances becomes suffering like that in childbirth.

What does that mean? It means that while our suffering is real, and the pain is real, the result will be new-life birthed! It is suffering in hope. It is suffering with purpose and life as the goal. Most mothers will agree that the suffering endured in childbirth was worth the promise of new life. Our suffering brings new-life.

Paul finishes his thought by saying: *“For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”*

The first part of verse 24 is interesting: “For in this hope we were saved.” Notice the past tense. Paul is speaking about our conversion. When we gave our lives to Christ, it was in this hope. This hope of full, complete, eternal redemption, of not only our souls, but our bodies, and not only us, but all of creation. A new heaven and a new earth, full of new potential and zero frustration. Our future hope isn’t floating around as extras in a cream cheese commercial. Our future isn’t to learn the harp and look angelic. Our future is glorified, flesh and blood, life in perfect relationship with our heavenly father and His restored creation. How is that for a tree top view?

For now, we wait. This is still the object our future hope. It isn’t our present reality. But that doesn’t mean the renovations haven’t already started. That doesn’t mean that our inheritance isn’t already in the bank waiting for us to withdraw it. We wait in the age of suffering, but it isn’t suffering that sucks the life out of us, it is the suffering, the pain, of new-life being born. It is the suffering of hope. It is the suffering that has purpose and that is worth the struggle and worth the determination to not given in or give up on everything that is presently broken because our suffering is not worth comparing with the glory that awaits us. So if you are in Christ, instead of dragging your heels, stand on your tippy toes and eagerly

await the completion of what God has already started in you! Every ache and pain will be so worth it!