

Sermon Series: Romans 8
"Therefore...How Are We to Live?"
"Despair & Hope"

Today we're in the third week of our sermon series on the book of Romans. We're working our way, verse by verse, through chapter eight. It's a chapter not only central to what Paul is saying in Romans itself, but also one that covers some of the major themes in the Bible.

The challenge we're holding in front of you is to read the book of Romans (each week) during this series. We're focusing on chapter eight, but we're challenging you to read the entire letter each week. Because, in Paul's letter, we find not only some of the most important doctrinal teachings of the Church, but also some of the most direct challenges we have for the Christian life.

In week one, it was all about guilt and grace. When you're feeling guilty, when you're honest with yourself (and with God) about where you actually stand (in his presence), on your own, it's good to know that there is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Because of Jesus, there's nothing God holds against you. All of your sins have been covered. All of your guilt has been laid on him.

Last week, it was the struggle we face living in the flesh, but the strength we're given through the Spirit. The same Spirit that Jesus had within him is in us. God hasn't left us on our own to find our own way. He's given us his Spirit and he leads the way for us.

Today, it's all about hope. It's about how to live in this life (with hope) when things in your life are feeling hopeless.

Where you put your hope is one of the most important decisions you will ever make in life. Where you put your hope sets the framework (or the foundation) for who you are, and almost everything you do.

For example (and I made a short list), just a couple of things, it lays (first of all) the foundation for your personality. What we put our hope in allows us to (either have) a sense of joy and peace (as we go through life), or it causes us to become discouraged or stressed out, because the things we end up (hoping for) let us down.

What we put our hope in (also determines) our life's purpose. Whatever you put your hope in is what you live for. Another way to think about it is whatever you're living for is what you put your hope in.

If I look at your life and see what you're living for, I can know (without question) where you put your hope. You put your hope in your money, you live for money. You put your hope in your marriage (or your family) you end up living for your marriage or your family.

The challenge is that many of us end up putting our hope in things that inevitably are going to be stripped away. That's why Paul talks about how Jesus can give us a "living hope", a hope that will never die.

Another thing it does (where we put our hope) is it determines our ability to endure. It's not a matter of "if" there will be challenges (in life); it's a matter of "when." What's going to happen when it happens? It depends on where you put your hope.

If you put your hope in things that are temporary, it'll lead to despair. But if you put your hope in something outside of this life (that's not going to change), it gives you the ability to endure.

That's why Paul talks to us about a hope that doesn't disappoint. There's one hope (he says) that is not going to disappoint, and his name is Jesus. Everything else will let you down, one day be gone. But there's one hope that never will, and it's Christ.

And so, in Romans, chapter eight, Paul's going to talk with us about putting our hope in the right things. We pick it up today in verse 18. (Follow along.) Paul says, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Paul starts this section by using a very general term, "our present sufferings", to describe something that's very personal. Our present sufferings; that's a generic term, a broad description of things we deal with; not much emotion.

And so, what we need to do (as we read it) is to fill in this general term (our present sufferings) with what's happening in your life. Your present sufferings; for some of you, it might health-related. Some of you have been dealing with health-related challenges for years.

For some of you it's financial. It's hard to make it all work. There's not enough at the end of the month to get you to the end of the month; your present sufferings.

For others of you it might be relational. In fact, it's even possible that (some of you) are sitting next to (right now) the source of your present sufferings. "He's my present suffering." (I'm not saying, I'm just saying.) It's possible.

You fill in the blank (this general term) with what's personal for you. Because we all have them, our present sufferings; every one of us, everywhere you look, they're there.

But here's the deal. It's important to notice how scripture deals with this; our present sufferings. Because many have this idea that if you're a Christian, it's not going to happen. You become a Christian and it all goes away. You join God's team and it's all good. (It's not true.) The Bible doesn't teach that. Jesus said, "In this world, you will have troubles." It's going to happen. This side of eternity, it's only a matter of time.

What happens is that (when it happens), our present sufferings, they reveal where it is we've put our hope. It shows the foundation. It shows where our hope has been built.

Victor Frankl was a Jewish Austrian who was imprisoned in Auschwitz. In prison, (while he was there) he studied what happened to his prison-mates over time. In his book, "Man's Search For Meaning," he wrote about what he saw.

He said, some of the prisoners responded to the hopeless situation they faced, (the brutality), by becoming brutal themselves, hard-hearted. Some of you have seen that happen. People who lose hope end up with a hard heart. They stop seeing the good. When what we put our hope in is gone, we grow hard.

Others (he said), over time, just stopped doing anything. He said they (literally) lost hope. They just laid there. They didn't do anything. They couldn't get out of bed. They simply gave up.

Some people end up that way. They stop functioning because it seems as if there's no hope. They just quit. It's not worth it. Why keep going? There's nothing to live for.

Another way some would respond (he said) would be to put their hope in what they hoped their future would be when they got out: a future job, a house, their families. But then they'd get out and it wouldn't happen (it wasn't real), and they'd lose hope.

But those who survived (he said), who kept it together, those who overcame Auschwitz were those (and I quote) "who had a fixed reference point beyond this world." They had a fixed reference point beyond this world. They were the ones who survived, who never lost hope. They had a hope that (even death) could not touch or take away.

Paul talks about "present sufferings" and then challenges us to remember that our hope is in heaven. "I consider that our present sufferings (he says) are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us...For the creation (verse 20) was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."

Here's what Paul says. You have this present suffering that you're experiencing. (You know what it is.) Go ahead and get it in your head. And then take that and compare it with what awaits you in heaven. He says, "Go ahead and do that." Compare what you're going through now with what God has planned for you in Jesus, and (he says) it's not even worth comparing. (He says) "I don't even consider them worth comparing; not even close."

Lee Strobel helps us think this through. He gives this illustration. He says, imagine for a moment that it's January 1, the beginning of a New Year. For our purposes, let's pretend it's January 1, 2014, and it's the worst day ever.

You start out with a root canal, and the anesthesia wears off about half way through. It's just awful. And then you're driving home and you get in an accident and your car is totaled. Now, you're not hurt, but the car you hit was also totaled, and it was your spouse. And then you get home and there's a foreclosure notice. And while you're reading it, you look down at a text from your boss and your position's been eliminated, so you don't need to come to work. It's the worst day ever!

And then, it's January 2, (and it all changes), and you find out you had a rich uncle (you didn't even know you had) who left you \$42 million. And so you go out and buy a new car, and this dream house, and find out Michael Jordan lives next door and wants you to come over and shoot baskets in his driveway. And then

you start this new company and it turns out they find a cure for cancer. And this Tahitian island comes up for sale and you go ahead you buy it. It turns out to be this incredible year!

Now, imagine that it's (the last day) of the year and one of your friends comes over and asks you how you're doing. You say it's been incredible. You can't decide if you want to lie in the pool (in the backyard) or go off to Tahiti or shoot baskets with Mike.

Your friend says, "I'm glad to hear that. But I remember hearing something (maybe on Facebook) about you having this root canal and car accident and something about your job. I was just wondering how it's been." And you say, "Now that you mention it, I guess I did. I forgot all about it. It was a rough day, a tough start. But I can't even compare it to what happened after."

That's the perspective Paul wants us to have. It's not that this life is easy. (Don't miss what he's saying.) I don't want to minimize the things we face. You may go through some real bad times, experiences that seem like they'll never end. It might be very difficult.

But when you're in heaven and someone says to you "How's your existence been?" and you've been there for a thousand or five thousand or ten thousand years (or more), you're going say, "It's been amazing. There's no tears, no crying, no pain."

(They say), "But I remember hearing something about your life (on earth) and how it was so hard." (You say), "Well I guess it was, I sort of remember, those 78 years I had were tough. But I can't even compare it with what God has given me ever since." That's the perspective heaven gives us. There's no comparing.

Saint Teresa of Avila experienced incredible loss in her life, endured years of chronic illness and pain. Toward the end of her life, here's how she summed up what she had experienced. She said, "In light of heaven, the worst sufferings on earth will be no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel." I love that picture. It's "no more serious", it's like a bad night in a hotel.

I remember a night our family spent (a few years back) on our way to Minnesota. It was late at night, the kids were tired, everything was booked. About midnight we pulled into a place called "The Trail's End." It literally was the end of the trail and it was not good. The sheets were moist. There was no closet. A few cockroaches, a strange smell. We were all tired, so we turned off the lights and fell asleep; tried not to think about it. We woke up in the morning. I remember smiling because we made it through. But it was bearable, (it didn't matter) because we knew it wouldn't last, where we were going.

That's the perspective of heaven. That's where this all leads. As Christians, we need to hear this. I'm not saying it's easy. (Again, don't miss the point.) But where we're going is incredible. We're not to live for heaven, but neither are we to live for (and hang onto) this life.

Paul struggled with that. His life wasn't easy. Read his story. Remember what he said about life and about heaven? He said, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." He said, "It's all about Jesus while we're here (don't lose sight of that), but when we're not here, it's better yet." He says, "I'm torn. I can't decide."

Look at verse 22. It says, ""We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, grown 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."

Paul uses a metaphor to teach us how to deal with our present sufferings. It's like the pains of childbirth. That's what he compares it to. It's like having a baby.

Now, I've read that two of the most painful things in life are childbirth and passing a kidney stone. (I've read about it.) I don't know it. (Ladies, I'm not even going there.) Don't go there. On a purely physical level (from what I understand), they are very painful experiences. But how people process that pain is very different. How they deal with it, it's not the same.

It's possible (after giving birth), when it's all over, that the mother might say, "That wasn't easy...it was no fun...but let's do this again." But you never hear (with a kidney stone), "Maybe God will bless us with another."

What's the difference? The pain is intense for both. But the outcome is so different. How we process our suffering is based on what is on the other side. That's what Paul is saying. There's suffering in this life, no doubt, but it's leading to something that is good.

Bertrand Russell was a philosopher, mathematician, died in the 1970's, an outspoken atheist. He wrote a book "Why I Am Not A Christian." Later in life, health deteriorating, he was interviewed by a British journalist who asked him (while he was in the hospital) what he had to hang on to. He responded, (very honestly); he said, (and I quote) "I have nothing to hang onto, but grim, unyielding despair." (I appreciate his honesty.) I put my hope in this world, and it's all gone.

That's the difference Paul is talking about. He's not discounting the things we face. He knows (as well as we do) that it's not easy. But if your hope is in heaven (in Jesus) it's like childbirth. If it's only for this life, then it's like a kidney stone.

There are two words that keep popping up in this section in chapter eight. The one is the word "hope." It's there a half dozen times. We're people of hope. That's who we are. We're a hope-filled people.

The other is the word "wait." Verse 23, verse 25, I like what it says in verse 19. It says, "For the whole creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed." The whole creation waits for that day to come.

Paul's saying that if we put our hope in the wrong place, it leads to despair. But if we put our hope in Jesus, it leads to hope. It's coming. It's a given. When this life comes to an end, there's an eternity that lies ahead.

This world is not our home. That's what he's saying. Even though we live in this world, we are not of this world. It's not our home. The day is coming when we'll all be together with Christ.

Let me close with one final thought, and it's personal. I love my job. I love what I'm doing. I'm not one of these guys who lives for the weekend, not even for vacations. I enjoy what I'm doing. I'm thankful for the chance I have. I really am.

At the same time, (you know how that works), there are times when I need a carrot (out there), something to look forward to, to keep me going. You get tired, it seems to never end. There are times when I simply need a (date on the calendar) that I know is coming when it'll all be good. It's amazing (at times) what a date on the calendar can do for my outlook on life.

My friends, I don't know when it's coming. I don't want to be there yet. There's so much left to do right here. But God has put a date on the calendar for each of us. It's out there, in your future, and it'll all be good. Until then, our present suffering is here. Our hope in Jesus is here. It's not even worth comparing. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thanks for your word to us and for the assurance that what's promised to us in Jesus is eternal and secure. Help us to build our hope on what you have done for us in your Son, that we might never lose hope. Take away our fears and replace them with faith, knowing that a date on the calendar, when everything promised will be ours, has already been set for us in Jesus...in whose name we pray. Amen.