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LIVING IN THE WEEDPATCH

Romans 8:17-30

Recently I was thinking about how life is not always a nice, smooth road. In my many years I’ve broken quite a few small bones, including my hand 3 times, several fingers, a toe and a rib. I suffered a concussion severe enough that it put me in the hospital for 2 days and caused some permanent hearing loss. I have dealt with constant allergy and sinus problems. I went through something that attacked my nervous system many years ago and left me with some residual chronic pain. I’ve had to deal with canker sores throughout my life. I’ve had surgeries to repair a torn elbow tendon and a hernia. There are a couple of other issues, but you get the point. But with all of that, most people would consider me blessed. I don’t have any major health issues. I know many people who have had health issues of a far more serious nature. That’s just the physical aspect of life. There are many other hard parts of life that I’ve had to deal with that are not physical. Still, compared with the travails many people in this world deal with, my issues might seem trivial.

Why is life like that? How are we supposed to deal with it all? Today we are going to think about some of the difficult aspects of life and see how we can deal with them as we look at Romans 8:17-30.

PREMISE: SUFFERING WILL BE A PART OF LIFE

Verse 17 says we are co-heirs with Christ “if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” We like the glory part of that, but that talk about suffering, not so much. Sometimes preachers go off here talking about how Christ has called us to suffer with him, but we need to not rip this verse out of its context. Note that the next verse says, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” He is still discussing suffering. In order for us to get the right perspective on the suffering, we need to get what Paul is saying in the entire section.

Verse 20 says, “The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it.” This goes back to the familiar tragic events in Eden long ago. In Genesis 3 the first humans made the disastrous choice to disobey God, and as a result became subject to the effects of aging and the horror of death. It was a dramatic and cataclysmic change. In verse 17-18 God said, “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.” Adam’s and Eve’s choice actually affected creation itself. It introduced evil into creation, and that meant that nothing would ever be as it was originally designed. Evil brings sorrow and hardship and pain, that’s why it’s called evil. Evil is like an infection. Suppose you get an infection in your body, say a flu virus. What happens? Things don’t work right. The virus impacts your entire being. You have a fever, a headache, your body hurts all over, there’s inflammation everywhere. You are sick, weak, and hurting. And that is now a part of the world as we experience it. Creation is sick, infected with the virus of evil and it is impacting every part of creation.

In Romans in 8:22 Paul said, “We know that the whole (all of it) creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” Evil has infected the whole thing. It is as though creation itself is suffering so intensely that it groans as in the pains of childbirth. That’s not a little minor groaning. Our daughter went through that yesterday. She had an epidural, but it was too late. The baby came so quickly it didn’t have time to kick in. She said it hurt so bad she thought she was going to die. She did more than groan. That’s the kind of pain all of creation is in.

Paul used two words in these verses to describe what nature is like now that it has been infected with evil. Verse 20 says creation is subject to *frustration*. What does that mean? It is frustrated because nothing in creation is quite what it ought to be. Remember that God said in Genesis 3:18 that now that creation is infected the ground would produce thorns and thistles. That’s a little picture of the frustration of creation. In our back yard we have a bougainvillea that is gorgeous when it is bloom. Have you seen the thorns on those plants? Yes, it’s lovely, but you’d better be careful around it because those thorns are long and sharp and can really hurt. Same with roses. So it is everywhere in creation.

British actor, Stephen Fry, an atheist, was asked in an interview if there was a God and he could talk to him, what would he say? Fry said he would tell him, “How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault. It’s not right. It’s utterly, utterly evil.” It upsets him that there is so much pain in this world. He recognizes the world has been infected with evil, saying creation is utterly evil. He doesn’t understand the biblical perspective on why that is so, but he most certainly is clear on the fact that creation is subject to frustration.

As you all know, one of our favorite places in the world is Hawaii. People often refer to it as paradise. It’s easy to understand why. The warm, tropical climate is incredible and the beauty of the place is spectacular. We love having vacations there. But it isn’t paradise. A couple of times when we went there Laurie got urinary tract infections and we ended up in a doctor’s office. The last time that happened she had maybe the worst urinary tract infection she’s ever had. At the same time, I got an infection in my eye. As part of our wonderful vacation we went to the doctor together. It was very romantic. Then there was the time Laurie was attacked by a plumeria tree. Well, she didn’t actually get attacked by it, but she did bang her head on a low hanging limb that she insists had not been there seconds earlier. She hit her head hard enough that she had to put ice on it. She got back at that tree though. Security from the hotel came to make sure she was all right and she told the guy about that vicious tree. All I’ll say about that is, that tree is gone now. I once got an allergic reaction to, are you ready for this, too much sunlight! I once fell off a stand up paddle board and cut my leg on some coral, then the wound got infected. It’s really great going on a much anticipated vacation in the tropics and being in a hotel sick, or be unable to go in the water or even out in the sun. Do you know what people say about that? “Well, that’s life.” It is life, but why is life like that? More to the point, why is there cancer, Parkinson’s, Huntington’s disease, cruelty, abuse, racism, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, home owners associations? Because creation is subject to frustration and it is groaning like a woman in the midst of childbirth.

We have a couple of places in our back yard that have grown impressive patches of weeds. We also have a couple of fruit trees. We have to work to nurture those trees. Do you know what we’ve done to grow the weeds? Nothing. It just happens. We have to work to get rid of them. Welcome to creation that is groaning because it is infected with evil.

Verse 21 says that creation is in bondage to *decay*. Decay is also now a part of creation. We know about that all too well. Human beings grow bigger, stronger more capable into their 20’s. But guess what happens in the 30’s. Decay begins. It’s slow at first, not all that obvious. But it’s not long before it becomes apparent. Instead of becoming stronger, better, we are becoming weaker, more vulnerable, less physically capable. Eventually that decay process ends, but it ends with death.

You see that everywhere in our world. Things get old, wear out, fall apart. Things always tend toward disorder. Recently Laurie and I next to a car just like ours. It was a red Nissan Rogue just like the one we have. Well, it wasn’t just like ours. It was the same make and model, but it was clean and sparkling. Ours was dirty. That did it. The next day we went and got our car washed. It looked great. Here’s what amazes me. A week later, it wasn’t as clean. It was a little dirty. This amazes me because we keep our car in our garage. It was inside most of the time. How did it get dirty in the few brief trips we took? Welcome to a world that is in bondage to decay. It is the natural process of things to get old, disordered, worn out and to break and eventually to die.

There are some unusually named towns in the area of Bakersfield where I grew up. One of them was Buttonwillow. Another was Weedpatch. Yes, there actually is a town named Weedpatch. Lovely spot. It’s a community of 2658 people situated about 10 miles from Bakersfield on the Weedpatch Highway. It was alluded to in Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes Of Wrath.* It is a place that makes Bakersfield look appealing. The point of this passage is we all live in Weedpatch. Not the town, but the world where evil has invaded and as a result there are thorns and thistles everywhere.

That brings us to verse 23. If all of creation is groaning because it is subjected to frustration and decay, what do you suppose is going to happen to us? Verse 23 says, “Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for out adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.” We, as part of creation, are also infected with evil, thus subjected to frustration and decay, so we also groan. Just as creation is suffering, so we are suffering.

Politician Mike Huckabee once referred to a terrible winter storm back east and the fact that a lot of people got hurt because of the ice everywhere. He said not one person ever said, “Hey honey, I’m going to go get the newspaper and I’m going to fall and break my leg, okay?” But it happens. He says it doesn’t matter how careful or how sure-footed you are, when you hit that slick spot of ice, its over before you can do anything about it. Then he said that’s a picture of what the Bible says about trials. “There is nothing preventative you can do to keep from having trials. You are going to encounter them.”

Every human being is going to deal with suffering, Christians included. That’s because all of creation, including us, is subject to frustration and decay. Because we are trying to follow Christ in a broken, evil-infected world where Satan is on the loose, we are going to receive some suffering specifically because of our faith. Satan is going to target us for it, just like he did with Job. You’re going to suffer. Oddly, you’re going to suffer more with Jesus, because you have become a target.

To sum up so far, living in this world means you are going to suffer. There is no way around it. But there is good news in this passage. There are some truths that can help us deal with the suffering of this world.What can help us deal with the suffering?

WE WILL SHARE IN THE GLORY OF CHRIST

Verse 17 says we have an inheritance, and part of it is that we will share in the glory of Christ. What does that mean and how does it help us? Glory has two aspects. There is an inherent aspect and an attributive aspect of glory. The inherent aspect of glory is that something about a person or an object is spectacular, magnificent, glorious in and of itself. You look at a sunset over the ocean with the sky blazing with reds, oranges, yellows, and pinks. It is impossibly beautiful. That sunset has glory. Glory is a quality that makes your jaw drop, that makes you say, “Oh, wow.” That’s the inherent sense of glory. There is also an attributive aspect to glory. Tom Brady is called the GOAT, the greatest of all time. He has played football at a level no one has ever done before. Because of that he has gotten a ton of praise. He is given glory. That’s the attributive sense of glory.

Jesus Christ has glory in both of those senses. He has inherent glory because he is powerful, holy, good, perfectly loving, majestic in every way. In John 1:14 the apostle said of Jesus, “We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” But Jesus also has that attributive glory. Philippians 2:10-11 says, “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Revelation 5:11-12 pictures thousands and thousands of angels calling out in a loud voice, “worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and honor and glory and praise.” They are giving him glory.

I have called this series of sermons on Romans *The Road To Glory*. That’s because it is about how the gospel of grace connects us to God, gives us life and enables us to be in God’s kingdom. In that kingdom we have an inheritance that includes sharing in Christ’s glory. As astounding as it might sound, we will share some of that glory, both its inherent and its attributive aspects. We will, ourselves, be glorious beings, so majestic as to cause an “oh wow” response in those who behold us, and we will be given glory and honor.

Don’t you want to be a beautiful, spectacular being? I have told you before that I am astounded that I get to be married to a beautiful woman. After more than 42 years of marriage I still tell her that I often look at her and am astounded at how beautiful she is. Maybe I see her through the eyes of love, but I still think she’s amazing in how beautiful she is. But what if she was physically beautiful, but she was a horrible person, proud, arrogant, self-centered and unkind? Would she be beautiful? Not really. What I love about Laurie is that her heart is even more beautiful than her outward appearance. She is humble, loving, good, kind, tender, self-sacrificing. She is the best person I know. She is beautiful inside and out. She is glorious.

In Christ you and I have the hope that some day we will be transformed into gloriously beautiful people. We will be glorious inside and out, even more than Laurie is now. In verse 23 Paul said, “We wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.” Our entire being is going to be redeemed, transformed into beings who share in the glory of Christ. Wouldn’t you love to be that beautiful, so lovely that people would say, “Wow, look at him,” “look at her. Spectacular.”

All my life I’ve been average. Average size, average looking, unremarkable. I’m not Quasimodo, I’m not hideous, I’m just not a person anyone would notice. Neither do I have any remarkable abilities. I’m average all around. Someday that is going to change. I will share in the glory of Christ, which means I’m going to be awesome. I’ve always wanted to be awesome. At last I’m going to get my wish.

With that inherent glory will come glory attributed to us. We were created for glory. God has made us in his image. We were created to be glorious in his image, and to be given the glory that a glorious being deserves. We have always wanted that. God built that desire for glory into us. We try to get it in this world through the notice and praise of people, but it doesn’t work. That’s because we are made for a much greater glory. We will receive that glory as part of our inheritance.

Have you ever been praised in front of other people? Do you know how good that feels? But we all know it doesn’t last. It feels good because we were made for glory. In Christ’s kingdom we will receive the glory we were made for. It will be a feast of glory, the kind of feast where you say, “No, I couldn’t take any more.” It will be the total fulfillment of our God-given need for glory.

How does that help us deal with suffering? It reminds us that suffering is not forever. The glory that is to come gives us hope that enables us to persevere. I sometimes think of the summer before my son’s senior year in high school. He was like most teenagers. He loved to stay up late and get up late. Given his preferences he’d sleep until late in the morning. That summer I was astounded to see him get up every morning while it was still dark and go to his school where he participated in grueling workouts. It wasn’t fun. It was just hard. Why did he do it? He did it for the glory set before him. He was looking forward to playing football and what he hoped would be a championship team. The glory of football enabled him to endure, to work, to keep going, to keep doing things he would much rather not do. That’s what the hope of sharing in Christ’s glory does for us in the midst of our suffering. 2 Corinthians 4:17 says, “Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST WILL HELP US

Verse 26 says that the Spirit of Christ “helps us in our weakness.” The Spirit helps us in many ways. One of them is that “the Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans,” or a better translation is, “groanings too deep for words.” The Holy Spirit prays for us when we feel so overwhelmed we don’t know how to pray. There are people who somehow interpret this to mean speaking in tongues in some unintelligible language. That is not what this passage is about at all. It is not we who are making the groanings. It is the Holy Spirit, and he is interceding for us.

Sometimes we are so overwhelmed by a situation we don’t even know what to pray. This is a great promise. We can just bring our concern for God and tell him we don’t know how to pray, knowing that the Holy Spirit is interceding, praying when I don’t know what to pray.

That’s just one example of how the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. I have a lot more weaknesses than not knowing how to pray. The good news is, in our suffering, when life is hard, when we don’t feel like we are strong enough or wise enough to keep going, the Spirit helps us.

Timothy was one of Paul’s best friends and a most trusted associate. Paul sent him to lead a church where there was considerable turmoil. It proved to be a discouraging assignment for him. Paul wrote him two letters to buoy him up and urge him to stand firm because he was struggling, feeling like giving up. In 2 Timothy 1:7 Paul said, “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self discipline.” The Holy Spirit is there to give us power and strength and the discipline to persevere and endure.

Some familiar words from the Old Testament remind us of the help of the Spirit of God. Psalm 23:4 says, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” Isaiah 40:29 says God, “gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.” Verse 31 says, “Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.” What ever we face, Jesus said he would be with us in the form of his Spirit, and he would give us strength to keep going.

When Paul was struggling with a problem and with what he perceived to be a weakness, he prayed and asked God to change the situation. In 2 Corinthians 12:9 God replied, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” In 1 Corinthians 10:13 Paul wrote, “God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will provide a way so that you can endure it.”

The Holy Spirit will help us in our weakness. He will strengthen us, he will enable us to endure. We need to look to him, to trust in him to give us the strength and patience and endurance we need to deal with our suffering, and he will provide what we need. In his book, *Against The Flow*, Oxford professor John Lennox tells of a conversation he had with a Russian follower of Jesus who had survived a Siberian labor camp. He was sent there after being convicted of the terrible crime of teaching his children about the Bible. He described to Lennox the horrors he had seen and experienced in that camp, things no one should ever have to see or endure. Lennox said he couldn’t imagine having to go through what the man endured. Then the man said to him, “You couldn’t cope with that, could you?” Lennox was embarrassed to admit that he knew he was too weak to handle it. Then the man said, “Nor could I. I was a man who fainted at the sight of his own blood…But what I discovered in that camp was this: God does not help us to face theoretical situations, but real ones. Like you, I couldn’t imagine how one could cope in the Gulag. But once there, I found that God met me, exactly as Jesus had promised.” Lennox concluded by saying we can be confident that the Lord will give us sufficient grace to handle whatever comes our way, but not a moment before.

GOD WILL MAKE GOOD COME OUT OF EVERYTHING

Finally, we have a very familiar, often quoted verse. Verse 28 says, “In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” No matter what happens, we must remember that somehow God will bring good out of it. This does not mean that the things that happen are good. It means that even in the bad things, somehow God can make something good come from it.

Remember the story of Joseph. His brothers were jealous of his favored child status and finally got sick of him, so they sold him as a slave. As a slave he ended up being falsely accused of sexual assault and thrown in prison. These were not just bad things, they were terrible things, painful things, potentially life destroying things. God would never call them good. But remember how it turned out. God worked out the circumstances so that Joseph rose to the second highest position in Egypt. In that exalted role he was able to save his family from a terrible famine. God brought good out of the worst of trials.

Paul was also falsely accused, thrown in prison, and kept there by an unjust judge who wanted a bribe. This was bad stuff. And out of that terrible circumstance Paul wrote some letters to the churches at Ephesus, Colossae and Philippi. God brought something that is precious to us today out of the suffering Paul experienced.

Jesus the Messiah was nailed to a cross and killed. It was the worst injustice and the worst suffering in all of human history. But out of it God brought rescue for the human race. God turned the worst thing that has ever happened into the best thing that has ever happened.

You all know that 12 years ago I was fired from my role as a pastor. This was from a church that I had started! There’s something especially ironic about starting a church, serving it for years and then having that church reject you. It is a little bit like having children, raising them, then having them turn into teenagers who are embarrassed by their parents and wish people thought they didn’t have any. It wasn’t very fun. It was a hard thing. The question is, did God keep his promise to work good for Laurie and me out of a difficult thing? I can tell you unequivocally that the answer is yes. I have learned and grown as a result of that experience. I feel like I’m wiser and much more what God wants me to be. I see a number of things more clearly than I did before because of those events. And the surprising thing is I have enjoyed my life and ministry more and have been happier than I was previously, by quite a bit. That was a hard thing. But God has worked good out of something I thought I would much rather have avoided. God kept his promise.

I need to attach one caution to this verse. It is common to trot this verse out when someone has suffered some painful thing in life, telling them that God will work some good for them out of it. People did that to us when our son, Joel, died, and again 12 years ago. I can tell you from personal experience it is not helpful, in fact it is irritating. I do not remember fondly those who did that. So I am going to share with you a way to avoid making that mistake. It is a very simple solution. Here it is: ***apply this truth to your life, not to someone else’s***.

APPLICATION

EXPECT LIFE TO FEATURE DISAPPOINTMENT AND SUFFERING

Wow, thank you so much Pastor Eeyore. I feel so encouraged. This may sound like something only a true pessimist could love, but it is a dose of reality. We live in a broken world, a world that has been infected by evil. We live in a weed patch. We’re living in a fool’s paradise if we think that’s not going to affect us. So don’t be surprised by it. Be thankful for the good that happens, and there is a lot of it, but don’t be shocked by the suffering. It’s always going to be part of life.

NEVER LOSE SIGHT OF THE HOPE OF GLORY

Sometimes pastors like me paint a picture that doesn’t match up with reality. We’ve learned about a new life in Christ. We’ve heard about the fact that God wants us to have the fullest life possible. That’s all true. But we won’t share in Christ’s glory fully until we are in his eternal kingdom. We forget this truth to our peril.

That our hope is future means there will always be a gap between what we experience and what we long for. It is great to know God as we do now, but what we long for is to be in his presence and share in that glory. When I moved to this area after graduating from seminary, Laurie and I were engaged. She was still living in the LA area. We had to endure a couple of months of separation until our wedding. This was back when there were no cell phones, there was no texting, it was expensive to make long distance phone calls, there was no such thing as email, and we had to walk 5 miles through the snow uphill both ways to get to school. Oh, wait, skip that last one. The point is communication was much harder back then. All we could do is send smoke signals. Okay, it wasn’t that bad. We wrote letters that we sent via snail mail, and we called each other on occasion. She would come down for the weekend. Those visits, calls and letters were like water to a man dying of thirst. They were life giving. But they weren’t what We longed for. We anxiously awaited August 24, 1979 when we finally got what we wanted so deeply. That day we got married. We got to live with each other every day, and it was glorious. That was what we wanted, what we longed for, and it turned out to be better than we had even dreamed.

We are in that engagement period. Yes, our interactions with our Heavenly Father now are huge, life giving. We need them. But they are not what we long for. What we hope for is being with him, sharing in his glory. Knowing this enables us to live with that sense of wishing for more. And it helps us guard against trying to satisfy that desire with something in this world, that will inevitably end in frustration, and could even cause us to compromise.

COUNT ON THE SPIRIT’S HELP

No matter what we face, the Holy Spirit is with us. God’s grace is made perfect in our weakness. So we need to look to him to give us the strength we need and the ability to endure whatever comes our way.

BELIEVE THAT GOD WILL BRING GOOD

It is all too easy to become discouraged and even lose hope when we face hard times, losses, disappointments and obstacles. It is crucial that we keep in mind that God will bring good out of everything we face. Our tendency is when there is something hard, something dark, then we see everything as dark. There is light in the darkness. Never forget that God can and will use anything and everything to somehow produce good for us.

LIVE FOR GOD’S PURPOSE

Verse 28 says God will work good for those who are called to his purpose. He tells us what his purpose is. It is that we would be conformed to the image of his Son. Just that one thing will make a huge difference for us. If we keep focused on this as our purpose, that we would become like Jesus, we will be able to deal with whatever comes our way. Perhaps I don’t like some circumstance in my life. Well Jesus had quite a few he didn’t like. But he endured and persevered through them anyway. If I can remember that my purpose is not to promote me, not to keep me safe and comfortable at all times, not to protect myself, not even to be happy and successful, but to be more like Jesus, then we can deal with whatever comes our way.

Neymar da Silva Santos, Jr. is a soccer star from Brazil. He plays for the Paris St. Germain Football Club. He is quite outspoken about his faith. He said, “Life only makes sense when our highest ideal is to serve Christ.” However, his soccer team doesn’t want him to make statements “of religious propaganda that could damage the unity and image of the team.” So his contract includes a clause that pays him $630,000 per month to avoid declarations of faith. That feels like selling out to me, but that’s between him and the Lord. The bigger point is that he is right, life is only going to make sense when our goal is to serve Christ, when we live for his purpose.