

The Comfort of the Spirit in Suffering

Romans 8:18-25

By Rev. Nollie Malabuyo August 29, 2021 (BSCC)

Dear Congregation of Christ: These last several weeks, our congregation has suffered greatly. Some have Covid or been exposed, three have broken bones, and a few others are sick. So, last Sunday and today, we have decided to cancel in-person worship services, as a precautionary measure. Lord willing, we will resume in-person services next Lord's Day, when, Lord willing again, we will partake the Lord's Supper.

Thus far, we have studied Romans Chapters 1-5. To briefly recap, we learned in Chapters 1-2 that the gospel is power of God to save his people from their sins. But those who reject this saving gospel are under God's wrath. Chapter 3 teaches us that all mankind are sinners, and all sinners do not seek after God. We skipped Chapter 4 which deals with righteousness through faith in Christ, a righteousness given by God to those who believe. Then in Chapter 5, Paul teaches that those who believe have peace with God, because Christ by his death reconciled us to God.

Today, we will begin a three-part study of Romans Chapter 8: verses 1-17, verses 18-25, and verses 26-39. But I decided to preach on verses 18-25 today, and then go back to verses 1-17 next Sunday. Why did I decide to do this? Romans Chapter 8 focuses on the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of all believers. Mainly, the Spirit's work is giving assurance and comfort to us in all our sufferings in this life. And verses 18-25 assures and comforts us because of God's promise of a glorious redemption of all believers, as well as the glorious restoration of this fallen creation.

Therefore, today, we will meditate on the theme, **The Comfort of the Spirit in Suffering** under three points: first, **Incomparable Glory**; second, **Creation Set Free from Corruption**; and third, **Redemption of Our Bodies**.

Incomparable Glory

In Romans 8:17, the verse preceding our text, the Apostle Paul says that all who believe in Christ are God's adopted children, *"heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him."* Christians are bound to suffer in this hostile world, but what follows suffering is future glory still to be revealed to us. Paul then continues this assurance in our opening verse, *"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us"* (v 18).

What are these sufferings? We know and we see harassment, persecution, torture and even death are a big portion of these sufferings. The last two weeks, we have seen the disaster in Afghanistan. Surely, Afghan Christians are now suffering at the hands of the monstrous Taliban. One report said that the houses of known Christians with women 15 years and older have been marked with an "X." This is a sign that would mark those women as booty or future slaves to be sold at slave auctions. We in America and the West can never imagine the extent of the brutal sufferings of our brothers and sisters in Christ in Afghanistan and other Islamic nations.

But sufferings in this life also include sickness, disability, poverty, troubled relationships, and death itself. These last two years, our nation has been turned upside down by the Covid-19 pandemic. The physical, mental, social and economic impact of this pandemic will be felt for a long time. Our own church, family and friends have been severely affected. But the Apostle Peter encourages us in our sufferings, *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you”* (1 Pet 4:12). Sufferings in this life is a certainty, especially for true believers. It is a certainty in this present age.

But Paul follows this grim reminder with an assurance that the sufferings in this present time *“are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”* Though Paul talks about *future* glory still to be revealed to us, we see glimpses of this glory even in this present age. God reveals himself in his majestic creation. He revealed himself in glory throughout the history of his chosen nation Israel from Moses in Egypt and in the wilderness, during the conquest of Canaan, the periods of the judges and kings, all the way to the prophets. Isaiah saw the glory of God in the temple, when angels declared, *“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”* (Isa 6:1-3)

Our Lord Jesus Christ himself revealed his glory to Peter, James and John when he appeared in glory to them at the Mount of Transfiguration, his face shining like the sun (Matt 17:2). He showed his glory as the divine Son of God when he performed signs and wonders that only God can do. Finally, he demonstrated his divine power and glory when he rose from the grave.

Therefore, Paul says the same thing in 2 Corinthians 4:17, *“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”* We must consider our sufferings in this present age as a mere lightweight compared to the heavy, weighty glory that awaits us. This present time is hardly a blip compared to eternity. Paul in effect tells us, *“You haven’t seen anything yet”* (2 Cor 4:18). What should be our reaction? Peter exhorts us, *“But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed”* (see also 1 Pet 1:5-9).

In Philippians 1:21, Paul says, *“to die is gain.”* But what does he and all believers gain in death? There are countless gains, but I will cite only five. *First*, we gain eternal life with Christ, face to face with the Master he served to the end. *Second*, all our tears, mourning, crying and pain are forever a thing of the past; most of all, we will never sin and die again (Rev 21:4). *Third*, we gain glorification. Christ will give us glorified, resurrected bodies like his, for we will be like him in his glorified human body (1 John 3:2; Rom 8:30). We will elaborate on this later in the third point.

Fourth, we gain sight of our beloved family, and all our brothers and sisters in Christ from creation all the way to the last day of this present time. *Fifth and last*, we gain the eternal pleasures and treasures of heaven. These pleasures are symbolized by images of “pearly gates” and “streets of gold,” images that we cannot even imagine. We look forward to enjoying the best of eternal life: eating and drinking with Christ forever when he brings all of us to the new heaven and new earth in the great Wedding Feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:9).

This takes us to the question: What happens to this earth when Christ returns from heaven in the clouds of power and glory?

Creation Set Free from Corruption

Paul answers this question in verses 19-22. In these verses, Creation is personified, as if it is a human being. Creation awaits *“with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.”* All believers long for the Second Coming of our Lord when the glory of all believers will be revealed to everyone. Why does Creation wait for this future revelation? Because at the same time, Creation will be restored to its perfect glorious state, much like the Garden of Eden in the beginning.

What happened to Creation when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden? Like Adam and all humanity, Creation was *“subjected to futility”* by its Creator. Like all humanity, it became corrupt and enslaved to sin. How? After Adam sinned, God cursed the earth. Thorns and thistles became part of nature, making God-given work a toil with *“blood, sweat and tears.”* The beasts of the land, the birds of the air, and sea creatures often became enemies of man. Women suffer great pain in childbirth, and the relationship between husband and wife is always a struggle. And the most tragic result of Adam’s sin is the corruption of his nature, a sinful nature that will always be a slave to sin (Gen 3:16-19). Therefore, from that day on, Creation has been groaning under God’s curse of corruption, sin and death.

But the judgment in the Garden of Eden also came with a promise of redemption from the curse, from the groaning. Though Satan the ancient serpent would appear to conquer the Seed of the woman, the Seed of the woman would then crush the serpent’s head to death (Gen 3:15). Christ is this Seed of the woman who would crush Satan under his feet at his death and resurrection. When he died on the cross, God forgave all the sins of his people. When he rose from the grave, he conquered death forever, and he will in turn give glorious, resurrected bodies to all believers. This is the restoration that Creation awaits. Therefore, Creation, the earth, will not be destroyed and dissolved by fire. It is the cosmic creation, the sun, moon, stars and all the heavenly bodies that will be destroyed, as Peter says in 2 Peter 3:10, *“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved.”*

The Garden of Eden is a foretaste of heaven, *“the paradise of God”* (Rev 2:7). Unlike Adam and Eve after they sinned, believers will be allowed to partake of the Tree of Life, which was also in the Garden of Eden. Therefore, if the Garden of Eden is a foretaste of heaven, we can hypothesize a few things about heaven, not being dogmatic in these hypotheses.

First, as there was work in Eden before sin (Gen 2:15), so also there will be work in heaven. In fact, there will be responsibilities and stewardship in heaven for faithful Christians, *“I will set you over much”* (Matt 25:14-30). In the new heaven and new earth, we shall also build houses and vineyards (Isa 65:21). *Second*, as there were animals in Eden, so also there *might* be animals in heaven—beautiful, peaceful and non-predatory animals (Isa 11:6-9). There will be no pests, poisonous snakes, and animals that spread disease. They will be for our enjoyment (Gen 2:19-20). Land, water and air creatures will abound (Gen 1:26), but there will be no oceans (Rev 21:1). *Third and last*, this restored creation called the “new heaven and new earth” will be *one entity*. The new heaven is the new earth and vice versa. The distinction between heaven and earth will end. God will dwell with his people in this one heaven and earth (Psa 23:6; Rev 21:1-3).

When Christ returns from heaven, the groaning of Creation will turn into joyful singing, *“Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together”* (Psa 98:8); and, *“The mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands”* (Isa 55:12).

Redemption of Our Bodies

As creation will be restored, so will our bodies. But in this present time, all of us believers also *“groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies”* (v 23). Our bodies are also subjected to futility, the curse of sin and death. But when our Lord returns from heaven, the dead bodies of believers will be raised from the grave. God’s promise is that the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us from the dead (Rom 8:11). His resurrection, the “firstfruits,” is the down payment of our own resurrection (1 Cor 15:20-23).

What kind of resurrected bodies will we have? It will be like Jesus’ resurrection body. When Mary Magdalene went to his tomb, she did not recognize the resurrected Lord at first. His body was a glorious body. But afterwards, when he called her by her name, she recognized him. Therefore, our resurrection bodies will be the same but at the same time, different, because they will be glorious. In the same way, we will recognize our families and friends (Gen 25:8; 35:29; 49:33; 1 Sam 28:14; 2 Sam 12:23; Matt 22:23-33), and even Biblical characters (Matt 17:3; Luke 16:23).

Paul also says that this body will be immortal, incorruptible, not subjected to sin, disease, defects, and most importantly, death. As Jesus is the Morning Star, we will also shine like the stars of heaven (Dan 12:3). God created us in his image, perfect, unblemished, sinless, but our bodies became corrupted after Adam’s sin. In the future age, God will restore this perfect, unblemished, sinless bodies. We shall become images of the resurrected Christ (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49). John promises, *“We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is”* (1 John 3:2). By his power, Christ *“will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body”* (Phil 3:21).

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, this is our comfort and assurance in all our sufferings. God has promised us that after these sufferings in this present age, a glorious existence will follow in the eternal age. With all creation, we groan inwardly because of sin and death. We wait eagerly for this redemption. We groan with David, *“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?”* (Psa 13:1) and with the saints in heaven now, *“How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”* (Rev 6:10)

Our groanings in this world are sent to God in heaven by the Holy Spirit, *“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words”* (Rom 8:26). Oftentimes, when we pray, we do not even know what to say, how to say it. Be assured that the Spirit of God sends those unspoken words of prayer to God’s throne of grace in heaven. Therefore, pray unceasingly, for we know that God hears our groanings in sufferings, our thanksgiving and praise for his providence, and our joy when he grants our requests.