

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Suffering and Glory

Rev. Scott Dudley

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Scripture:

Romans 8:18-25

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ 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. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ 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.

Transcript:

The scripture is from Romans chapter eight. And it says this, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pain 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 to sonship and 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 they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. So holy spirit teach us from these words and help us to live and have hope because of them. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Well, a while back, one of our kids who was away at college called us. And the way it kind of works in our house, my wife usually handles the logistical kind of day to day phone calls and I handle the emotional ones. And so she was talking to said college student about day to day logistical thing, payments, that sort of thing. And then suddenly her tone changed. And she said, "Yeah, I'm handing you to your father now, I'm handing you to your father now." So I knew that things had become emotional. So I said to one of our kids that happened to be home at the time, I looked for that kid and I said, "See how it goes. When it gets emotional, it's my turn." And that child said, "It's because you're so much better at it." Which my wife would readily admit.

She would agree to it. Pastoral care is not her gift. The problem is it's not mine either. So our kids are just out of luck. But that story kind of raises a question. Who comforts you when you suffer? Because we all suffer. And if you're not suffering right now, don't worry, you will be. Happy Sunday, everyone online just clicked off. Or you know somebody who's suffering. Because we all suffer. A lot of people right now, especially youth, going through anxiety and depression, relationship problems, school or career problems, health crises. And then there are things that whole groups of people suffer together. Like the shootings last week in the Taiwanese church in California, or racist terrorism against Black people in the Buffalo shootings, and the hurt and horror that creates for people of color. Well, the text I just read speaks to all of that suffering.

And 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 groan inwardly. And in the original Greek of this text, the word for groan often referred to the screams of soldiers dying on the battlefield. It is a very stark word. And it points to how Jesus equips us to handle suffering in ways our secular culture can't. And first it shows that Jesus doesn't minimize suffering. Because that's terrible, right? Like you're in pain, you're suffering, and then someone gives you some cliché like, well you know, when life hands you lemons, make lemonade. And you're like, you make lemonade. You're a lemon. Jesus never does that. He

never minimizes our suffering because he himself suffered. He knows how painful it is. He was born into poverty.

He died an agonizing death on a cross. So, you know, when we bring our pain to him, it's not like Jesus says, "Oh, you think that's bad. You should see what I had to put up with." He never does that. The apostle Paul wrote this letter to Christians who were being thrown to lions, tortured, killed because they were following Jesus. And so he says, when you suffer as individuals or whole groups of people like people of color last week, you can, and you should, lament, cry, groan is the word he uses. Right after my first wife left me, a friend of mine got married. And because of what I was going through with the divorce, I just couldn't bear to go to the wedding. So a couple weeks later I got together with him to explain that I didn't go because my first wife had left and just, I couldn't do it.

And he didn't know what to say. He had no words. So he just sat there for a while and we sat there in silenced for a really long time. And I kept kind of waiting for him to say something comforting or pastor like, because he was a pastor. So I was expecting pastor like words. But we just sat there for an awkwardly long amount of time. And finally he grabbed my hand, which also was kind of awkward, because he kind of didn't know if he should or not, grabbed my hand. And then I noticed there were tears in his eyes and suddenly I didn't feel alone anymore. He joined me in my suffering. Didn't minimize it. Jesus does not minimize our suffering.

Instead, point number two, Jesus maximizes God's glory in us. If one extreme is to minimize suffering, the other is to totalize it and say, this is never going to end. This is going to define my whole life. But Paul says, I consider, and remember that word consider, that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. So Paul's not minimizing suffering here. He's just saying that whatever suffering happens to us will be outdone, outweighed, outmatched, by the glory that we are headed for. Physics says for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. God's grace says for that every suffering there is a non equal and much greater reaction of grace and glory. Now we don't experience the fullness of that until Jesus returns and remakes this Earth to be like his heaven. But we get glimpses of it, moments of it here and now.

And I'll say how in a little bit. And again, in the original Greek, the word for consider means to add up, to calculate. So Paul here literally says, I've done the math. I know what I'm

talking about. As great as the suffering we experience, greater still is the glory that God is going to bring into our lives. And he should know. Because Paul, like Jesus, suffered a lot. In his letter to the church in Corinth, he says five times I received the 40 lashes minus one, three times I was beaten with rods, three times I was shipwrecked. I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. And I've told you before, I love that last line, right? Like I've been beaten. I've been thrown in prison, but worse than all of that is being your pastor. Stupid Corinthians. He's experienced so much suffering. He has the authority to say that as great as our suffering is, the glory that we're headed for is that much greater. Because you see, we don't just suffer. We suffer like Jesus who died on a cross to pay the price for our sins and was raised again from the dead. His suffering produced something good. His suffering produced new life. And that's the pattern of our suffering if we know Jesus. That's the paradigm of our suffering, if we know him. Our suffering isn't pointless, it's productive of new life. Which is why this text compares it to childbirth. Because childbirth is painful, but it leads to new life. It leads to something good. Jesus doesn't minimize our suffering, he maximizes God's glory, which means finally Jesus switches the question. Why is there suffering? He never answered it. He never answered it. Instead he switched the question. At one point, Jesus comes across a man that was blind and his disciples ask him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind.

Religious people love that question, right? Like, oh, they're suffering. It's got to be somebody's fault. Let's find out who it is. Jesus says neither, neither this man, nor his parents sinned. This happens so that the works of God might be displayed in him. Jesus switches the question from why, to what for? What's it for? Because why did this happen to me is a disempowering hopeless question. But if we switch the question to God, what are you going to do with this? What are you doing with this? That is empowering because it means there's purpose in our pain. And if I can find the purpose, the pain is more endurable. Just like a mother can endure the pain of childbirth, because she knows something good is coming. So one of the most important prayers we can pray is God, what are you doing in this? Show me so I can participate.

And that brings courage because now we're participating in God's redemptive purposes. We're not just suffering pointlessly. It's not hamster wheel suffering that goes around and around and leads to nowhere. We're suffering for a purpose. Now, again, we don't experience the fullness of God's glory until we get to heaven. But we get moments of it right

here and right now. And that gives us hope in hard times. That's why this text says we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for the redemption of our bodies. So first fruits means just what it says, it's the first crop of a harvest. It's the first one you get. So every summer I grow tomatoes, and it takes all summer. But by late August, there's finally one tomato and it turns yellow. And then it slowly turns red until it's ready to pick.

And then do you know what happens? A deer in our neighborhood takes one bite out of the tomato. That's it, just one bite, not the whole thing. One wasteful bite, just enough to ruin it. And every year I'm like, I hate that deer. We're having venison for dinner tonight because that was this one fruit, right? He took the first fruit and it's going to be another month until there's another tomato. But toward the end of September, we are eating tomato salad, tomato soup, tomato salsa, tomato ice cream, tomato cookies. Not that last one. Because we've just got tomatoes everywhere. But that first fruit, because tomato is a fruit, assures me that more is coming. Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the first tomato, first fruit that shows that God has already begun making things new in this life and then fully in the life to come. And hope in suffering is anticipating the goodness of God in our lives.

So another word for hope is curiosity. God, what are you going to do with this? So that's the theology. That's the theology, and theology is important. But when you are suffering, theology doesn't comfort you. It's good to know, but it doesn't comfort you. So then practically, how can we experience God's hope in the middle of suffering? Well first, look to others. We need other people who can bring Jesus' comfort to us, listen to us, pray with us, sit in silence with us like my friend did for me. We need a friend or a relative, or you could always talk to one of our pastors. And then be those people for each other and for others. Listening to others and comforting them, because we all need it. And also fighting to end another persons suffering. You know, a lot of people ask the question, why does God allow so much suffering in the world?

A better question would be, why do we allow it? Why do we allow it? That's why, as a church, we help people all around the world who are in suffering in pain, get out of it. Maybe for you that means listening to a person of color lament the pain caused by what happened in Buffalo and the fear that generates for themselves and for their kids. Listen, and don't minimize. Just listen and then work to eradicate injustice, starting with where you work or live or learn. Because God's coming glory isn't just for some day after we die and it

isn't just for us. We participate with God in bringing his kingdom to Earth and alleviating suffering. Look to others. Second, look to your future. Pastor Tim Keller uses an analogy that if you assign two people the worst, most horrible work backbreaking labor, right? It's just terrible stuff.

And you tell one person, if you do this for a year, at the end, you'll get \$20,000. And then if you tell another person, if you do this for a year, at the end you'll get \$10 million. They're going to experience the identical circumstances very differently. The first guy's going to say, this is terrible. I hate this. This sucks. I'm out of here. The second guy will have hope while he works. Same circumstances. But in one case, the pain is overshadowed by the glory that is to come. How you experience your present is shaped by what you believe your future is. So if I believe that God will bring something good, eventually, it may take a decade or more, but I believe it, then I can suffer with more hope. Look to others, look to your future. And finally look to Jesus, because he's the author of hope.

The text says for in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. We love to put our hope in things we can see, my friends, my job, my money, politics. But those things don't last and they always disappoint. Real hope lies in what we cannot see. It rests only in Jesus. And so many of you have experienced this when you are in pain, when you are suffering and you feel the presence of Jesus, it alleviates the pain. A while back, McCayla Butler who oversees our care department, wrote an email reflecting on her journey through some of the most difficult suffering imaginable. And many of you know her story. And this is what she wrote. She said eight years ago, I was living a nightmare within a nightmare. I had been hospitalized for extremely high blood pressure while my one week old son was across the lake in another hospital on life support.

I had a waking dream where I was flying through the sky and up ahead I saw a huge pile of trash and I thought for sure I was going to crash into it, and I was bracing for disaster. But instead I just nicked the top of the garbage pile, which caused me to shoot straight up in the air on an exhilarating flight, way more intense and beautiful than I could imagine. And then the verse from the Bible came into my mind, you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good. The whole thing lasted less than a minute. But I believe God was speaking to me through that dream saying, you might feel like you're being attacked from every side, experiencing the greatest fear you've ever known, but I am with you, surrounding you, and I will use it for good, even though you don't know how right now.

Well, what happened in the coming days and years was far from good. We lost our son Noah. Then seven months later, we were in the process of adopting another baby, but he also devastatingly passed away after only four days. We felt so much pain, so many questions, so much confusion. I now look back on that waking dream I had eight years ago and the promise God gave me to use it all for good. Today, we have two sons at home and life is beautiful, wild, difficult, painful. And here I am on staff at Belle Pres leading a team of the very people who showed up for me and my husband during the nightmare while Noah and I were in the hospital. I can still see pastor Rosalind Renshaw arrive in our hospital doorway two seconds after Noah became sick and the overwhelming relief I felt seeing her. She knew to come be with us even before we knew we needed her.

So many people from our church entered into the sacred holy space of grief, confusion, and hope with us. Our church showed up for us and now I'm in a position to show up for others. And my pain helps me connect to other people's pain. It is mind blowing and humbling. I in no way intend to minimize the wonder of God's using it all for good to just a job I currently hold or a couple of healthy children I have at home. It's just a few threads of the tapestry. I could write a novel of all the ways I see God using Noah's life and death for good. And I likely don't even know the half of it. But each thread is a testament to God's presence and goodness in my life, what God is doing. She sees what God is doing is so much bigger and more vast than I could ever imagine.

Not long after Noah died, I met with Pastor Scott Dudley. I had questions about God's goodness and his role and the suffering in our world. I like to throw Pastor Scott easy softball questions. He told a story about a famous piano player who was giving a concert. During intermission, a little boy got up on the piano and started playing a song. The famous piano player began playing along with the boy's clumsy notes and somehow turned the clunky song of a beginner into a masterpiece. God did not cause Noah to die, nor does he orchestrate the senseless suffering in our world. But God has taken the broken, clumsy, junk pile circumstances of my story and yours and is adding in his beautiful notes, creating melodies all the time, every day, until our final breath. All our sickness, all our sorrows, Jesus carried up the hill. He has walked this path before us. He has walking with us still turning tragedy to triumph, turning agony to praise. There is blessing in the battle. Take heart and stand amazed.

Now does all this mean that there's no more pain from McCayla and her husband? No, of course not. How do you ever fully heal from something like that this side of heaven? They still have hurts. They still have questions. Nor was any of this quick. She's describing an entire decade journey in one email. But in the ways that she describes here, they have received the first fruits of the full glory that awaits them in heaven. Already, god has begun remaking their story, making all things new. But not yet is he finished. And in this messy middle between the already and the not yet where you and I live, McCayla and her husband looked to others for comfort, looked to their ultimate future and looked to Jesus who is always healing, always making all things new.

And in him, they found hope. So if you are in pain, or know someone who is in pain, you do not need to minimize it. You do not need to pretend it's not there. You don't have to pretend to be strong. Invite Jesus into it and receive his supernatural hope. In the next few minutes of worship, going to invite you just to pray, reflect, pray for others you know that are suffering and just invite Jesus into the suffering and pain either in you or around you so that you'll be able to say in the words of one of my favorite hymns, I fear no foe, with thee at hand to bless, ills have no weight, tears no bitterness.

Where is destiny? Where, grave, thy victory. I triumph still, if thou abide with me. So Jesus thank you that you are always here with us, in joy and in sorrow. And Lord, we bring you our suffering, our pain, our hurt, our concerns, our worries, as well as the worries and hurts and pains of those around us. Because Lord, we know that you meet us in that, you give us grace and strength to endure and persevere. And Lord, we know that even though it may take years for us to see it, you turn everything to good. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

1. **Icebreaker Question:** What is a meaningful tradition in your life that you hope to pass on to others?
2. **Opening Question:** Looking back...Last week we talked about the meaning of the cross. How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?
3. **Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:
 - a. What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
 - b. What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?
4. **Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:
 - a. Do you feel that God has helped you in times of suffering? If so, how?
 - b. How can you bring God's hope to suffering people this week?
5. **Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?
6. **Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.