



Sermon Transcript

May 16, 2021

50 Days of Spiritual Growth

All Things For Good

Romans 8:18-30

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 16, 2021 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Romans 8:18-30

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. **19** For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. **20** For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope **21** that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. **22** For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. **23** And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. **24** For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? **25** But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

26 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. **27** And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. **28** And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. **29** For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. **30** And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Introduction

“Things are not as they seem.” That is what Darrell Johnson had written in his journal after his eighteen year old son Alex had injured himself on a hike four days before Christmas of 2000. He was hiking with a group of friends in the mountains just north of Los Angeles when he slipped on some loose rocks and fell over the edge of a 120 foot cliff. When the rescue team arrived, the helicopter pilot thought for sure Alex was dead. But when the paramedics got to him, they found a pulse and they rushed him to the trauma center in Pasadena. He was attached to life support systems and Alex’s parents were told that the next couple days would be critical and no one could forecast what his future will be like even if he survives.

The night before Christmas Eve, after spending an entire day in the ICU, Alex’s father, Darrell Johnson, wrote these words in his journal.

“Things are not as they seem. In your life. In your son’s life. In your wife’s life. In the lives of your other children. In the lives of other patients in ICU. Things are not as they seem. There is more going on than what meets the unaided senses. There is a God. A living God. A good God. A faithful God. A powerful God. A reigning God. And ever-present God. There is never a time when this God is not good. There is never a time when this God is not faithful. There is never a time when this God is not powerful. There is never a time when the God of the Bible is not on the throne of the universe. There is never a time when the God we meet in Jesus is not present. It is a promise: *I will never leave you or forsake you.*”¹

“Things are not as they seem.” Do you know what Darrell Johnson is describing here? He is describing the essence of Christian hope. Paul gives us a sense of what we mean by “Christian hope” in our passage this morning. He says in Romans 8:24-25, “*For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*” Our hope does not rest in what we see. What do we see? We see a lot of suffering. We see a lot of pain. We see and hear what our text describes as *groaning*. We see and hear a lot of *groaning* in this broken world. That is what we see and it can cause us to despair. It can cause us to lose hope. But our hope is not in what we see with our eyes. “Things are not what they seem.” Rather, our hope rests in what we know. What do we know? Paul says in Romans 8:28, “*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good.*” Christians live with real and expectant hope.

Don't lose sight of where we are this morning. We are in Romans 8. In fact, we are in the seventh week of an eight-week journey through Romans 6-8. During this time of what we are calling **50 Days of Spiritual Growth** we have been looking at the doctrine of sanctification. Sanctification describes how a relationship with Jesus changes us. It describes how God makes us to look more and more like Jesus.

I hope you are discovering through Romans 8 that our sanctification, our spiritual growth, is just as much a work of God's grace as our justification. Just like we are saved by God's grace, we also grow in our faith by God's grace. And so Romans 8 is calling us to "mind the Spirit." Romans 7 teaches us that you and I do not have the power in ourselves to live a life of obedience to Christ. Therefore, when we turn the page to Romans 8, we find the Holy Spirit mentioned nineteen times. This is why Paul says in Romans 8:5 that "*those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.*" Another way to say that is that they *mind the Spirit*. Those who *live according to the Spirit* preoccupy their minds with the things that preoccupy the mind of the Holy Spirit.

For the last couple of weeks we have preoccupied our minds with these wonderful truths from Romans 8 that empower us to put to death the deeds of the flesh.

- There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
- We have power over sin because the Holy Spirit lives inside of us.
- We are adopted into the family of God; sons of God, children of God and fellow heirs with Jesus..

When you put these three statements together, you discover that it is the love of God for us in Christ that the Spirit is bringing to mind and this is what empowers us to freely give our lives to Christ. In fact, the love of God is the climax and the conclusion of Romans 8 and it is where we will end this series next Sunday. Nothing "*will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

This morning, we are going to *mind the Spirit* by looking at Romans 8:28. "*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good.*" We find this familiar verse and this wonderful promise in the context of suffering. But this is not a "one-off sermon" on suffering. We are still in the wider context of Romans 6-8 and the topic of sanctification. So the point Paul is making is that our suffering and our groaning and our pain is part of the way God grows us in our faith. We see this in Romans 5:3 where Paul says we *rejoice in our sufferings*. How so? It produces something in us. He says that "*our suffering produces endurance . . . character . . . hope.*" This is why Darrell Johnson can say, "Things are not as they seem."

What do we see?

What do we see? If things are not as they seem, how do things seem to be? Simply put, you could say that things don't seem to be very good. In verse 18, Paul mentions "*the sufferings of this present time.*" What he is saying here is that suffering . . . pain is one way you can summarize the human experience. This is our present reality. This is our common lot and our common story. Everyone here this morning has a story. Everyone here this morning can speak to some kind of suffering and pain in their life. And Paul acknowledges that suffering and pain have been around for a long time. There is nothing new under the sun here. He says in verse 22, "*For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.*" So when you look around, what do you see? You see a world filled with all kinds of suffering. Surely, while sitting in the ICU and looking at his son hooked up to life support systems it would be natural and right to conclude, "things don't seem to be very good."

The word Paul uses to describe our suffering is the word *groaning*. That is an appropriate word to give expression to the *sufferings of this present time*. I have noticed that the older I get there is a certain *groaning* that takes place just from getting up from a chair and trying to stand up straight. This has been a year where we have seen a lot of death unfold in front of us on live television. As the hotspot for the virus moved from place to place—and now what we see coming out of India—it is all *groaning*. We have seen the *groaning* that emerges from injustice. There is a certain *groaning* that takes place when the doctor announces a prognosis, or when a relationship is severed or when a job is lost. In these cases, Paul says in verse 23, *we groan inwardly*. It is a *groaning* shared by all of creation. This is what "seems to be." It is what we see.

Why is it this way? Paul gives reason as to why the world is filled with this kind of pain and suffering. He says in verse 20, "*For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it.*" This is what we learn in Genesis 3:17 when God pronounced judgment for the sin of Adam. Here God says, "*cursed is the ground because of you.*" As man goes, so goes the rest of creation, of which man was created to rule. There is no corner in the universe where the curse for man's sin can't be felt. It doesn't matter what culture you come from. Life is filled with groaning. It doesn't matter what your economic status happens to be. Life is filled with groaning. It doesn't matter if you live in an urban setting or try to escape to a quiet and tranquil rural community. Life is filled with groaning. It doesn't matter whether you are a Christian or not. Life is filled with groaning. But this groaning that we see with our eyes can cause us to think that this is how things are. It can cause us to question God's goodness.

That is one of the strategies of the enemy. He wants you to be suspicious of the goodness of God. It is one of his oldest tricks in the book. It is a regular “go to” of the enemy. It is the same suspicion he aroused in Eve when he slyly asked her, “*Has God said, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’*” God didn’t come close to saying anything like that. It was just that one tree. But the enemy sowed suspicion into Eve’s heart. It was the suspicion that is often sowed into our hearts when we experience suffering. Darrell Johnson put it this way. “Someone wants me to think that the living God is holding back, that he is not generously disposed towards me.”² At least, that is the way things seem to be when I face sufferings and groanings in my life.

But don’t forget, “things are not as they seem.” In Romans 8:11, Paul refers to the death and the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus suffered. He suffered like no other. On the cross, he bore our sin and the curse of death that has held all of creation in bondage. But he also rose from the dead. He defeated sin and the curse of sin, namely death. Because of the hope of the resurrection, God takes our suffering and uses it for our good. Even death itself ceases to be terminal. It is no longer an enemy. It is a welcomed friend. It is transitional. “Things are not as they seem.”

Five months before he died, C. S. Lewis wrote to a woman who feared her own death was imminent. He wrote, “Can you not see death as a friend and deliverer? . . . What is there to be afraid of? . . . Your sins are confessed . . . Has this world been so kind to you that you should leave with regret? There are better things ahead than any we leave behind . . . Our Lord says to you, ‘Peace, child, peace. Relax. Let go. I will catch you. Do you trust me so little?’” And then he added, “Of course, this may not be the end. Then make it a good rehearsal.” He signed it, “Yours, and like you, a tired traveler, near the journey’s end.”³ Jesus transforms what you see and what “seems to be.”

What do we know?

So what is it that we know? “*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good.*” What is the “good” that God is working in our lives through the groanings and the sufferings of our lives?

Let me first tell you what Paul is not saying here. He is not saying that when you go through a trial or a difficulty that the reason you are going through this trial is because God is about to bring something better into your life. For example, if you lose a job this verse is not promising a better job down the road. Who knows? Maybe. Maybe not. It is possible you may never have a job as good as the one you just had. Or if you suffer a

broken engagement, someone might wrongly apply this verse by assuring you that there is someone better out there for you. There may be. There may not be. That is not “the good” that this verse is promising us. We often wrongly confine the “good” of this verse to material and physical things. And I am not suggesting that God doesn’t at times bring about a good in the material and physical blessings of life. But that is not what Paul is assuring us of when he says *all things work together for good*.

The *good* Paul is referring to here is defined for us in verse 29. It is the *good* of being “conformed to the image of his Son.” The *good* that God is working in our suffering is that he is making us to be more like Jesus. This is not to suggest that the suffering we experience is being called *good*. Very clearly, from the text the suffering Paul is referring to is likened to *futility* and *bondage* and *corruption* and it leads to deep *groaning*. You can even go as far as to say, that in itself, suffering is not “a good.” Instead, what he is saying is that God can take the good of life, the bad of life and even the failings of our life and work them for our good. He uses them all to grow us. And on this side of heaven, we may not even be able to understand how God brings about the *good* in our life through these various things. But this we know, *ALL things* are what God works together for our good, making us more and more like Jesus.

I wasn’t able to finish my sermon last Sunday. If you recall, I was talking about the blessing of being adopted as sons of God. Paul is writing in a Roman context where adoption was readily practiced. In this context adoption took place when a person of wealth did not have a son to pass his estate onto and so he would adopt a male heir. The point we didn’t quite get to last week was where Paul says that not only are we children of God, but if that is what we are then we are *heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ*. He is our brother. Do you know what that means? The glory that is given to Christ is shared with us. Paul says at the end of verse 17 that we will be “*glorified with him*.” Our inheritance is that when we see him we will be like him. In fact, in verse 19, Paul says that all of creation is longing for this day, “*for the revealing of the sons of God*.” That is us! That is us fully formed into the image of Christ. This is why Paul says in verse 18 that our current sufferings do not compare to the glory that awaits us. It is not to say that our sufferings are not significant, they are. But they are achieving for us a glory that far outshines them as we walk by faith through the struggles of life. And when that glory is complete and revealed in us, it will impact all of God’s creation. When we are fully transformed into the image of the glory of Christ, creation itself will be set free from *its bondage to corruption*. We have a far more glorious future than we can ever imagine of think.

But right now, that transformation into the likeness of Christ is happening through the crucible of suffering. Look what he says in verse 17. He says that there is a glory that awaits us *“provided we suffer with him.”* What is he saying here? Philip Yancey called our suffering “God’s alchemy of redemption.”⁴ It is the point Paul is making when he says in 2 Corinthians 12:9 that God’s power is made perfect *in*—not in the absence of, but in the midst of—weakness. Wesley Hill, struggles with same-sex attraction but chooses to remain celibate because of his conviction that sex is confined to marriage between a man and a woman. It is a battle. He knows suffering through this challenge. He says, “One of the hardest-to-swallow, most countercultural, counterintuitive implications of the gospel is that bearing up under a difficult burden with patient perseverance is a good thing . . . There is much virtue in bearing up under a long, hard struggle even if there is no apparent “victory” in the short run.”⁵

When you are suffering or when following after Christ requires you to carry your cross and deny yourself, remember: “things are not as they seem.” Maybe you feel that when God takes you out into the desert he has abandoned you or that he is not good or that following Jesus isn’t worth it. But, “things are not as they seem.” Darrell Johnson says, “We may think that Father must have let us down, not realizing that the desert just may be the place of great redemption. It may be the place where having been stripped of all that is not God we are left with God alone, and are, therefore, in a most blessed state.”⁶ *“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”*

What is it that we see? We see pain and suffering and groaning. What is it that we know? We know that God is at work in all of that to form us into his image. So . . .

What do we do?

This leaves us with a final question. What do we do? We live with real Christian hope and we pray.

Christian Hope: I love verse 23. We have the *firstfruits of the Spirit*. Because the Holy Spirit is already living inside of us, the process of transformation—sanctification—has already begun even as we groan. In fact, we can now say, because of our groanings and sufferings, we are being transformed. So what do we do? *We wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies*. We are longing for *the revealing of the sons of God*. That is Christian hope. The Spirit of God will complete what he has started in us. We live knowing that there is a hope that brings about the justice of God to this broken

world. That is a far better hope than the mere wistful thinking that things are progressing. Most people have a pessimistic view of the future.

Tim Keller said that “what we believe about our future completely controls how we are experiencing our present.”⁷ Howard Thurman was an African American scholar at Boston University and he gave a lecture at Harvard University on the meaning of Negro Spirituals. In his lecture he gave a response to the criticism that these spirituals were too other worldly, too filled with references to heaven, to crowns and thrones and the robes the singers would wear when Jesus returned. The argument was that these kinds of songs and thinking made the former slaves to docile and submissive. To the contrary, Thurman argued, this kind of faith sung served to deepen the slaves ability to persevere. It was the Christian belief in judgment, a day when all wrongs would be made right and immortality and in God. He said, “It taught a people how to ride high in life, to look squarely in the face those facts that argue most dramatically against all hope, and to use those facts . . . with all its cruelty, could not crush.”⁸ Keller concluded, “Why could nothing destroy their hope? It was because it was otherworldly, it was not based on any circumstances within the walls of this world. It lay in the future of God.”⁹

That is what we do. We *wait eagerly* and *we wait for it with patience* as we put our hope in what is yet to come.

Christian Prayer: The other thing we do is pray. We trust. First of all, the Holy Spirit prays for us in our struggles and in our suffering. Romans 8:26-27 is a wonderful comfort. “*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. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*” But we too pray for strength as we seek to persevere and trust God.

Darrell Johnson wrote a book on the Lord’s Prayer and he was reflecting on the request, “*lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.*” He said that it seems odd that we would have to pray for God not to “tempt” us, especially when James tells us that God tempts no one. But what he brought out is that the word translated “temptation” can also be translated as “test.” But God does test us. In fact, he said you have to take the whole petition together, “*lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.*” What he is saying here is that what God gives as a test, the evil one turns into a temptation. The testing of our faith is for our good, but the evil one can turn it into an opportunity to trust God’s goodness.

So here is how he prays this request. “Father, as you lead us into the test, do not let the test become a temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. You know that we cannot stand up very much pressure. As you lead us to the test—all of life is a test—as you seek to prove and improve our faith, do not let the test become a temptation, a seduction to sin, but deliver us from the subtle wiles of the deceiver against whom we are no match. Father, rescue us from the evil one.”¹⁰ Then he concludes, “Life with a capital ‘L’ is found in trusting God . . . So to make sure our trust is, in fact, in God and God alone, God puts us to the test.”¹¹

It is through prayer that we really come to learn that “things are not what they seem.” God gives us grace as we learn to trust God in the testing we face in life.

Conclusion

Mind the Spirit this week by reminding yourself that “*for those who love God, ALL things work together for good.*” What is the “ALL THINGS” that you would saying is causing you to *groan* in this broken world? Remember, “things are not what they seem.” God has purpose for our suffering. It is what God is using in our lives to form our hearts toward him.

- I am accepted in Jesus
- I have power over sin
- I am not alone, the Holy Spirit dwells with me
- I have authority over the kingdom of darkness

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- ¹Darrell Johnson *Fifty-Seven Words That Change the World* (Vancouver: Canadian Church Leaders Network, 2021) 84
- ²Ibid., 81
- ³C. S. Lewis quoted in Randy Alcorn *Heaven* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 2004) 447
- ⁴Philip Yancey *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 274
- ⁵Wesley Hill *Washed and Waiting* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010) 87
- ⁶Johnson, 81
- ⁷Tim Keller *Making Sense of God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018) 153
- ⁸Howard Thurman *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, Walter Earl Fluker, ed. (New York: Beacon, 1991) See “The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death,” p 55-79
- ⁹Keller, 157-158
- ¹⁰Johnson, 78
- ¹¹Ibid, 78

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What has been your experience with fasting? If you were to fast from something for 24 hours, what would it be and why?
How do you think fasting teach you to practice self-control?
How do you think fasting direct your attention to God?

Diving Into The Word

2. Read Romans 8:18-30

How are you growing in resemblance to Christ? How do you need to pray to do so more?

What is causing you to “groan” at the moment?

How will you remember the glory you are heading to? How will it transform your view of your life?

Have you experienced feeling too weak to pray with words? How does it encourage you that the Spirit intercedes for you?

Which outworking of Romans 8:28 most grips you and why?

God leads us to gratitude and joy even for the good things of life.

God removes fear and anxiety when life goes wrong.

God gives confidence that we cannot ruin God’s purposes for us.

Taking It Home

3. What is one thing you are taking from your study?
4. Based on what you talked about, how would you like the group to pray for you and your spiritual growth?