

21. From suffering to glory

August 31, 2008

Have you ever had a day that seems everything you can think of went wrong? It was one of those days not worth getting out of bed. Of course, you have and I have. I am sure that that day was not the last bad day we would have. There will be more to come. You are thinking, "Gee, thanks for a warning."

We all go through sufferings that vary from big to small, from traumatic to something you can get over relatively easily and move on. Then we have sufferings that come from natural disasters – such as, draughts, floods, avalanches, earthquakes, wildfires, hurricanes, tornadoes and others.

In this world, even animals go through sufferings. We all have seen a cheetah chasing after a gazelle in Africa from one of those Animal Kingdom programs. It is the survival of the fittest.

Why are there so much sufferings, so much tears, so many deaths? You wonder, "Can we not just get along?" The answer is "No." As long as we have selfish sinful nature within, even the best person in this world would think about himself or herself first.

Naturally, the second question would be, "Is there any hope for mankind?" Yes, there is. It is Jesus. Through Him, we have hope, love, peace, joy and eternal life with glory.

What we Christians are going through is a lot like a birth pain. I have no idea what birthpain is like. My wife Karen repeatedly told me that I would die several times before I can handle pain of delivering a baby. She is absolutely right. She has a very high tolerance in pain and I don't. I am a total wuss when it comes to pain.

A mom who is delivering a baby goes through the greatest of all earthly pains, but the moment she holds that precious infant in her arms and gazes into her baby's eyes for the first time, she no longer remembers the pain. Why? Her heart is filled with an inexpressible joy of her new born baby.

By the way, a baby is a baby from the moment of conception whether you look at it scientifically or religiously contrary to an ignorant presidential candidate's answer.

This morning, apostle Paul explains the realities associated with the 'birth pains' of the Christian life.

A. IT CANNOT COMPARE TO OUR FUTURE

Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

Apostle Paul was not ignorant or blind to the sufferings of human existence. He himself experienced more of them than most any of us today. Yet he still considered that the future glory far outweighed the present sufferings.

It is far easy for us to drag our feet through hard times and focus on all the pains we're experiencing instead of trusting in our God who sustains us. You might be going through one of the most difficult times, if not the most difficult time in your life.

It could be catastrophic illness that changes your life, financial problems cornered you like a pack of snarling wolves, or you might be one of those unfortunate people who is about to lose your home because of upcoming foreclosure, or your spouse telling you that he or she is leaving you for someone else, or a difficult family relationship because of some misunderstanding, or some legal actions against you that you didn't expect. The list can go on and on.

Don't get discouraged. God knew those things would happen. He predicted them through Paul, and your sufferings are part of what makes you a fellow heir with Jesus. So, in the same way that trials are a certainty for believers in this life, so are their reward and glorification in the next life.

God has a specific purpose for every trial He allows. He puts obstacles in our path to strengthen, test, humble and discipline us. But there's one more reason He allows suffering, and it's much more attractive than all the others combined. He puts us through sufferings because it leads us to glory.

2 Corinthians 4:17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,

You may say, "I am not sure I can handle this suffering." Yes, you can. If the Lord sees that you couldn't handle it, He wouldn't have allowed it to be in your life.

I find that there are three groans mentioned in this portion of the study: Creation groans, Believers groan and the Holy Spirit groans.

B. CREATION GROANS

Romans 8:19-22 For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits 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 because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.

Suffering and dying are not permanent but only temporary. A bright, new eternal world is waiting to be revealed.

I asked you to underline 'eagerly waits'. Greek word for this 'eagerly waits' is 'apekdechomai'. It is used seven times in the New Testament, each time to refer to Christ's return.

When God finished His Creation during the six literal days, it was a good Creation, but today it is a groaning Creation. There is suffering and death. There is pain, all of which is, of course, the result of Adam's sin. It is not the fault of creation. Note the words that apostle Paul used to describe the condition of creation: suffering, futility, bondage, corruption and birth pang.

Why did God allow all of creation to suffer because of human sin? It doesn't seem fair to the rest of the world. They didn't do anything wrong against the Lord. It is because the Lord put them under the subjection of humans. If the Lord didn't allow the rest of creation to suffer like humans, they would be superior to humans.

Genesis 1:26 Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

However, this groaning is not a useless thing. Paul compared it to a woman in labor. All the pain of labor will end when the baby is delivered. One day creation will be delivered, and the groaning creation will become a glorious creation. We believers should not focus on today's sufferings, rather we look forward to tomorrow's glory.

Isaiah 11:6-9 beautifully describes this glorious redemption of creation in that day:
Isaiah 11:6-9 "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, The leopard shall lie down with the young goat, The calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little child shall lead them. 7 The cow and the bear shall graze; Their young ones shall lie down together; And the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, And the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. 9 They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord As the waters cover the sea.

C. BELIEVERS GROAN

Romans 8:23-25 Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. 24 For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.

We're stubborn people. Without pain, we would never feel the need to be saved. Without a judgment passed against us, we'd never know we had transgressed God's standards. In this sense, we're like sheep – we need to be prodded by pain for our own safety. The pain of living in a cursed world pushes us toward Christ. And our hope of ultimate redemption and a renewed world helps us endure.

However, our groanings are like those of a pregnant woman – painful in the present time but with the hope of a glorious outcome. The pregnant woman receives her baby and we will receive our heavenly inheritance.

We Christians have tasted of the blessings of heaven through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This makes us want to see the Lord Jesus all the more, receive a new body, and live with Him and serve Him forever.

Philippians 3:20-21 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.

Meanwhile, we wait and hope. But what hope?

Titus 2:13 looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ

If you are not waiting for the rapture by our Lord Jesus Christ anxiously, you have to examine your spiritual condition right now. If you are not waiting for His return, that means either you don't care about His return because you are not His follower or you are putting more emphasis in this life than Jesus our Savior. Any born-again Christian would and should eagerly wait for Jesus' return to get us out of this world. If you are not a born-again Christian, you don't have that blessed hope the Bible talks about. An eternal damnation is waiting for you by your own choice.

D. THE HOLY SPIRIT GROANS

Romans 8:26-27 Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes

intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. 27 Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

Creation groans. We groan. Even the Holy Spirit groans which means that He prays for us to the Father when we're in too much pain to voice our own needs. Like when we lose our loved ones or possessions; when we're numbed by tragedy; when we don't even have the strength to look heavenward.

Let me put it this way: When you were kids, you played hard and hurt yourselves. You cried. Your mom came along and kissed the owiee and held you close to her bosom. While you still were sobbing, your mom talked to you with her soothing voice and even sang a song. For some unknown reason, your hurt was not so bad. Oh, it was still there, but you could endure somehow.

The Holy Spirit who resides in the hearts of the believers of Jesus Christ taught moms how to do that as He has done it to all the hurting Christians. While we cry out to Him, He holds us close to Himself and prays for us to the Father in heaven according to His will. And somehow, your heart is renewed by His love, you receive new strength by His presence and you are encouraged by His faithfulness.

God is concerned about the sufferings and trials of His people. When Jesus was ministering on earth, He groaned when He saw what sin was doing to mankind according to John 11:33. Today the Holy Spirit groans with us and feels the burdens of our weaknesses and suffering.

But the Spirit does more than groan. He prays for us in His groaning so that we might be led into the will of God. We do not always know God's will. We do not always know how to pray, but the Spirit intercedes so that we might live in the will of God in spite of suffering. The Holy Spirit shares the burden. What a comfort He gives!

E. APPLICATIONS

- 1) The sufferings we have to endure in this life cannot be compared with the eternal glory we will share with Jesus in heaven.
- 2) The pain of living in a cursed world pushes us toward Christ. And our hope of ultimate redemption and a renewed world helps us endure.
- 3) The Spirit intercedes so that we might live in the will of God in spite of suffering. The Holy Spirit shares the burden.