

Rom 8.18-30: WHAT ABOUT ALL THE SUFFERING?

On Sunday mornings/afternoons this autumn we are looking at some of the questions people ask when we begin to talk to them about the Christian faith.

- So last Sunday we looked at the question: Can I really believe in God?
- This Sunday: What about suffering?
- Next Sunday: What about other religions?
- Then: ‘What’s so great about Jesus?’
- What about Adam & Eve?
- What about all the hypocrites?
- Is hell fair?
- Can we trust the Bible?
- Did Jesus have to be a Jew?

In other words this is a course dealing with basic apologetics.

I trust it is going to be helpful to Christians

But hopefully it will be of interest to non-Christians too. Indeed, I dare to believe that you could with confidence invite friends & neighbours to these services.

However, in one respect this course in Christian apologetics is going to be different from all other such courses. For instead of ranging across the Bible for answers, we are going to root all our preaching in Paul’s letter to the Romans.

So, last week, in answering the question, ‘Can I really believe in God?’ we looked at what Paul had to say in Rom 1.20: “Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen: they are perceived in the things that God has made”

This week the sermon will be rooted in Romans 8; next week Romans 3, etc

This week: ‘What about suffering?’

Probably the greatest stumbling block to believing in God is people’s experience of suffering. Why does God allow all this suffering and pain?

- Why does God allow a young mother to die of cancer?
- Why does God allow my best friend to be paralysed in a car accident?
- Why does God allow so many people to die in a plane crash in Thailand?
- Why does God allow volcanoes to erupt?
- Why does God allow tsunamis to wreak such terrible devastation?

Why God, why? How God a God of love allow such terrible suffering?

Some of the explanations, which Christians have given, make you cringe.

Only this week I heard of a story of a young boy who was killed in a car accident by a motorist who was drunk and driving well over the speed limit. A well-meaning Christian friend said to the sister of the boy: “God has taken him because he wanted another star in heaven”. What utter rubbish! How dare one attribute such an act to God! It wasn’t God’s fault – it was the motorist’s fault.

But why couldn’t God have stopped the accident? Why did he have to allow the motorist to drink too much? The truth is that we don’t live in that kind of world. We are not puppets on a string. God has given us free will – it is for us to choose which way we will go – and time and again suffering results because of our choices.

The Bible teaches that at the root of all suffering lies human sin – yes, even the pain and suffering caused by so-called natural disasters is often inextricably linked to our selfishness and our stupidity. E.g.

- We read of thousands dying in an earthquake, but then we discover that many of the houses in which people died were shoddy in construction.
- At this very moment people are dying of hunger in Darfur – that country is suffering from a terrible drought. But it is also suffering from a terrible war.

Time and again suffering and sin are inextricably linked.

Needless to say, we cannot always personalise sin.

My mind goes to the story of the man born blind, which we find in John's Gospel.

“Teacher, whose sin caused him to be born blind? Was it his own or his parents' sin?” Jesus answered: ‘His blindness has nothing to do with his sins or his parents' sins’” (John 9.2,3).

You can't always draw a direct link in that way. Otherwise how do you explain that in one particular earthquake a brothel was spared, but a church was devastated.

It doesn't work in that way. I have, for instance, no doubt that the spread of AIDS is connected with human sinfulness – if people stopped being promiscuous then AIDS would quickly stop being the threat it is. But you can't necessarily attribute the suffering of an individual AIDS victim to his or her sin.

Well, enough of generalities. Today I want to look at what Paul had to say about suffering – and since we are looking at Paul's Letter to the Romans, I want us to see what he has to say about suffering in Romans 8.

1. WE SUFFER

“We suffer at the present time” (8.18).

Paul had first-hand experience of suffering. He knew what it was like to suffer from a physical disability. We don't know what the precise nature of that disability was. In 2 Cor 12, for instance, he simply describes it as a **“thorn in the flesh”**.

Some passages in his letters suggest it might have been recurrent malaria – alternatively he may have been plagued by poor eyesight. We don't know.

All we do know is that it troubled him considerably. He prayed to God to remove it – but God did nothing about it.

He also knew what it was like to suffer as a Christian. Probably this is what he had in mind here. For in the immediately preceding verse he writes: **“We share in Christ's sufferings”** (8.17).

As a direct result of following Jesus, Paul knew what it was like to suffer.

So later in the chapter when he speaks of **trouble, hardship, persecution, poverty, danger and death** (8.35), he was almost certainly writing of his experience as a Christian missionary. OK, he hadn't experienced death itself – but on a number of occasions he thought he was going to be put to death because of his stand for Christ.

“We suffer at the present time”.

Whether our suffering is linked with our faith or not, the fact is that Christians are not immune to suffering. When a person becomes a Christian God does not promise to wrap us in a plastic bubble.

The health, wealth and prosperity teachers are wrong. Christians are as likely to get leukaemia, for instance, as anybody else.

2. THE WHOLE WORLD SUFFERS

“We know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain” (8.22).

When Paul speaks of **“all of creation”** groaning with pain, he is not referring to Christians and non-Christians alike, but rather he has in mind the sub-human world. Creation in its widest of sense **“groans with pain”**.

Well, perhaps not literally – I don’t think that Paul had in mind the rumbling of a volcano or the howling of a wild wolf. Paul is speaking poetically. But through the use of metaphor he is saying that there is something wrong with our world.

8.20: **“Creation was condemned to lose its purpose, not of its own will, but because God willed it to be so”**. Or in the more literal translation of the NRSV: **“the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it”**.

What has Paul in mind? You have to remember that Paul, with his rabbinic training, was steeped in the Jewish Scriptures.

Commentators are agreed that Paul is here referring to the Fall of Adam, which in the Book of Genesis is described as having an effect on the world of nature.

So we read in Gen 3.17 the Lord saying to Adam: **“You listened to your wife and ate the fruit which I told you not to eat. Because of what you have done, the ground will be under a curse”**.

The Bible describes the fate of the earth being bound up with the fate of humankind. And how true we now see that to be. The fact is that through our selfish stupidity – what the Bible calls sin – we have spoilt our world.

- Factories and cars belch toxic fumes into the atmosphere with the result that even the lungs of a non-smoker are lined with grime and dirt.
 - The Mediterranean is swamped with sewage: with the result that the south of France may be good for a suntan, but for little else.
- ‘The affluent society has become the effluent society’.

As human beings we were created to **“have dominion”** (Gen 1.26 NRSV) over the earth – but instead of acting as responsible stewards, we have raped God’s good earth. Yes, that is strong language – but what other language can we use once we realise that for the sake of a single edition of the *Sunday Times* 150 acres of forest must be destroyed.

“All of creation groans”.

3. SUFFERING WILL NOT HAVE THE LAST WORD

Yes, “**we suffer at this present time**” – but that is not the end of it.

Listen to the context in which Paul wrote these words: “**I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. All of creation waits with eager longing for God to reveal his children**” (8.18,19). There is a new world coming.

Paul does not just speak of world groaning in pain. He actually says: “**We know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth**” (8.22).

Even in these days when epidural and other drugs are freely available, childbirth is not always the most pleasurable of experiences. It is not for nothing that we speak of ‘the labour ward’.

But nonetheless many mothers are happy to have not just one child, but two, three, four or even more children – not because they are masochists, but because of the sheer joy of having children. There is life beyond childbirth.

And what is true of the pain of childbirth is true of the pain and suffering of creation.

One day our disjointed and frustrated world will be healed. One day our world will be liberated from death and decay.

Again, the Bible can only speak in poetic language.

- Isaiah speaks, for instance, of the day when “**wolves and sheep will live together in peace, and leopards lie down with young goats... even a baby will not be harmed if it plays near a poisonous snake**” (Is 11.6,8).
- Similarly the Book of Revelation describes the day when there shall be “**a new heaven and a new earth**”; when God will wipe away all tears from our eyes. “**There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared**” (Rev 21.1,3,4).
- A little later, the Book of Revelation says of the New Jerusalem: “**Nothing that is under God’s curse will be found in the city**” (22.3).

To echo John Milton, Paradise Lost will be Paradise Regained.

4. WE SHALL BE FREE

The Good News of Jesus Christ is that we shall be free from all the suffering and pain of this present world. Listen to Paul: “**It is not just creation alone which groans; we who have the Spirit as the first of God’s gifts, also groan within ourselves, as we wait for God to make us his children and set our whole being free**” (8.23).

The day is coming when we shall be set free from our physical frailty.

As Paul writes in 2 Cor 5.4: “**While we live in this earthly tent, we groan with a feeling of oppression... we want... to have the heavenly (body)... so that what is mortal will be transformed by life**”.

Our present bodies are weak, fragile, and mortal.

They are subject to fatigue, sickness, pain and death.

For those of you who are young this is meaningless: you take your good health for granted. Aches and pains are only something you get when the rigger scrum collapses on you. But as we get older, many of us become conscious of our physical frailty.

But our hope is not just freedom from our physical frailty – Christians long too for the day when they will be free from their sinful nature.

For Christians there is always a tension between the flesh and the spirit – between the new nature and the old.

Currently we experience a tension, an inner struggle between good and evil.

The Apostle Paul reflects something of this struggle when he cried: “**Who will rescue me from this body that is taking me to death?**” (7.24). To which he replies: “**Thanks be to God, who does this through our Lord Jesus Christ**” (7.25).

God through his Son will deliver us. The day is coming when we shall be truly free.

The day is coming when God will “**make us his children and set our whole being free**” (8.23)

What a wonderful hope is ours. In this respect I am reminded of the epitaph found on an old tomb: “*The body of B.Franklin, printer, like the cover of an old book, its contents turned out, and stripped of its lettering and gilding lies here, food for worms. But the work shall not be lost; for it will, as he believed, appear once more in a new and more elegant edition corrected and improved by the Author*”.

5. MEANWHILE, GOD IS WITH US IN OUR PRESENT SUFFERING

Yes, as Christians we have a wonderful hope to look forward to.

But we also have a wonderful God who through his Spirit is present with us in the here and now. “**The Spirit... comes to help us, weak as we are**” (8,26).

God does not leave us to cope in our own strength.

Indeed, Paul goes on to say: “**We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him**” (8.28).

Notice, Paul does not say “**all things work for good**”.

- The carelessness of a drunken driver, which robs a young family of its father or mother, brings anything but good.
- The abuse of a young child by an adult whose mind is warped doesn't bring any good.

There are things in this life, which are downright evil.

We cannot attribute suffering, pain and injustice to God.

Yet while all things may not work for good, God can be at work in all things.

And where God is at work, there good can come, however dark things may appear to be.

Yes, the “**all things**” in which God works and to which the Apostle Paul refers include the sufferings of v17 and the groanings of v23.

“**In all these things**”, Paul is saying, God is at work, bringing about good.

I.e. Even those things which at first sight may appear to be totally negative can end up having a positive purpose to play in the execution of God's eternal plan (so Nygren).

“*Nothing is beyond the overruling, overriding scope of his providence*” (John Stott).

We see that in the **Cross** of Jesus.

Never was there a blacker day in the history of the world than that First Good Friday. Evil did its darndest when men crucified the Son of God. None of those who stood at the foot of that Cross could have dream that that day could ever have been termed a "Good Friday". BUT out of that cruellest of acts everlasting good has come.

What was true of the Cross, can also be true of your life and mine.

Suffering and disappointment may not belong to the perfect will of God, but nonetheless God can use our suffering, he can use our disappointment.

However bleak life may seem, however unfair life may seem, with God the outlook is never hopeless.

6. THE GOD WHO IS WITH US KNOWS

“We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him” – and God knows too – he knows in the sense that he knows what we are going through.

In this respect let me finish with the words of a piece called ‘*The Long Silence*’. It is a little dated, but still very powerful.

At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God’s throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly – not with cringing shame but with belligerence. ‘Can God judge us?’

‘How can he know about suffering?’ snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. ‘We endured terror.. beating.. torture...death!’

In another group a Negro boy lowered his collar. ‘What about this?’ he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. ‘Lynched for no crime but being black!’

In another crowd, a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes. ‘Why should I suffer?’, she murmured. ‘It wasn’t my fault’.

Far out across the plain were hundreds of such groups. Each has a complaint against God for the evil and suffering he permitted in his world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that people (lit: men) had been forced to endure in this world. For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said.

So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most. A Jew, a Negro, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a thalidomide child. In the centre of the plain they consulted with each other.

At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever. Before God could be qualified to be their judge, he must endure what they had endured. Their verdict was that God should be sentenced to live on earth – as a man! Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind when he tries to do it. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge let him be tortured. At last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die. [Let him die so that there can be no doubt he died. Let there be a whole host of witnesses to verify it].

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled. When the last had finished pronouncing sentence there was a long silence. No one uttered another word. No one moved. For suddenly all knew that God had already served his sentence”

“In view of all this”, wrote Paul, “what can we say? If God is for us, who can be against us? There is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord” (8.31,39).

What about all the suffering? We can only guess the answers.
But there is one who knows – he not only knows, he has felt our pain. It is this God who **“in all things.. works for good with those who love him”** (Rom 8.28)