

Why We Do Not Lose Heart

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[0 : 00] Many, many years ago, when Elizabeth and I went to work in Nigeria in 1972, everyone seemed to be reading the little post-colonial novel, *Things Fall Apart*, by the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe.

And that title says it all. And what was true for Nigeria then seems also to be the case in our own day. Things and people do fall apart. In fact, science recognises this. It's called the second law of thermodynamics.

And it teaches us something absolutely obvious. And after the service, you can do the experiment for yourself. Just don't touch that cup of coffee for half an hour and you'll discover that hot things cool down.

Applied generally, this means that instead of things naturally improving, they have a tendency to deteriorate. If decay is inescapable, then in this world, suffering is inevitable.

And don't we know it as our world is locked in the icy grip of a pandemic? And we Christians bear our share of pain. And perhaps this morning, you feel that you have had more than your share of deterioration, suffering and even inescapable spiritual conflict.

[1 : 29] I don't know if it's any encouragement to you, but there is nothing new in this. St. Paul knew it well enough.

But, and it's a very big but, he was able to say that he did not lose hope. He did not lose heart. The reason for his and for our optimism is that the struggle between good and evil, between God and the devil, has been won at Calvary and in the garden tomb.

St. Paul states the principle clearly in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 and verse 16, where he writes, So, because of this, we do not lose heart.

Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. But perhaps nowhere in the Bible is this encouraging principle more clearly expounded than in our passage for today.

Romans 8, verses 18 to 30. Let's summarize Paul's teaching in this section with three main thoughts.

[2 : 42] First of all, we'll see that eternal glory outweighs temporary suffering. We'll find it then, verses 18 to 25.

And then in the next section, verses 26 to 28, we will discover that the spirit's strength compensates for our weakness. And then finally, verses 28 to 30, we'll be encouraged by the fact that God's total control works for our good.

First of all, then, eternal glory outweighs temporary suffering. Verses 18 to 25. Let's start off with a very basic fact.

And the fact is this. Everyone faces suffering. Sometimes it seems interminable and we long for relief.

Nor do we need to go through our front door to find suffering. Parents agonize over their children. Children worry about their parents. Husbands fear for their wives and wives their husbands.

[3 : 53] For some, bad health drags them down. If not their own, then that of a loved one. Life's limitations grow as age increases. And we face the frustrations of being unable to do what we once took for granted.

And all these things, and many others as well, we don't have time to run a list. All these things stoke resentment. And then on top of these natural events, we live with spiritual tensions.

Of course, the Bible tells us to wait on the Lord, to renew our strength and to mount up on eagles' wings. But so often our wings seem clipped and we struggle to rise against the drag of temptations and our own spiritual and moral weakness.

On top of this, some Christians face hostility. Some Christians face hostility, even persecution, and sometimes from those they most love.

The sufferings that Paul had in mind when he was writing Romans 8 include all these. And to them, they ask that we bear our share of the accumulated burden of imperfection under which the whole creation groans.

[5 : 13] And what a huge burden of guilt and frustration and grief and sorrow is in that groan.

And that's how it was for St. Paul personally. To flip back to 2 Corinthians 11, verses 23 to 28, he spells it out.

He says, I've worked harder, been in prison more often, been worked times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me 39 lashes.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled on many long journeys.

I have faced danger from rivers and robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas.

[6 : 16] And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers and are not. But I, and I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I've been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food.

I have shivered in the cold without enough clothing to keep me warm. Then besides all this, I carry the burden of my daily concern for all the churches.

Yes, Paul knew the reality of suffering. So if suffering and pain weigh so heavily upon us, as it did on Paul, and our suffering will, of course, be different ways.

If it weighs so heavily on us, as doubtless it does, then what is there to put on the other side of the scales? How can we counterbalance it?

And Paul's answer is here in verse 18. He speaks of the glory to be revealed to us. Now, that word glory is a weighty word.

[7 : 35] It actually comes from a root which means weight or substance. When Paul uses the word glory, he's thinking of weightiness, the weight of glory.

And he's saying that our anticipation of the glory which transforms us compensates for any amount of suffering.

We may feel burdened with trouble, but look at it like this. God is busy burdening us with glory.

Now, usually when we think of glory, we think of God. But when God thinks of glory, he thinks of us. If our primary purpose is to glorify God, then he thinks much of glorifying us. So we read in verse 30 how this plan of his works out.

[8 : 40] Those whom he justified, those whom he brought to himself, forgave and incorporated into his family, he then glorified.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 2 and verse 7, Paul describes the gospel like this. He says, it is the secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for his glory.

No, that's not what he says. He says, it's the secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

So to help us bear our burdens, God allows us to feel, I love that American word, to heft, to get some idea of the secret weight of glory.

For our benefit, some Christians at different times in the history of the church have been let into the secret of just how substantial that glory really is.

[9 : 48] Let me give you one example, a story that comes from the days of the Welsh Revival of 1904. There was a farmer called Thomas John, and he attended a Sunday morning meeting in a meadow where David Morgan led thousands in prayer for those who were to preach God's word all across Wales and indeed across the world that day.

After the meeting, a man stopped Thomas John said, what a glorious sight it was to see thousands praying with Mr. Morgan.

Did you ever see anything like it, Mr. John? Utterly overawed, Thomas John thought for a moment, and then he rushed away, replying, I'm going home.

How awesome is this place? My flesh is too weak to bear this weight of glory. Now, rarely do we see, do we feel glory as Thomas John did that Sunday morning.

But those who have tell us of its wonder to encourage us. That glory is for us.

[11:07] So, says Paul, compare your sufferings to that weight of glory. Put your burdens on the one side of the scales and put the coming glory on the other and see how comparatively light are your present sufferings.

Seen in the right perspective, not only are our present sufferings relatively light, but they are also momentary.

They may seem to drag on, but they will come to an end. Because of this, we do not lose heart.

And the second reason why as Christians we need not lose heart is that the spirit's strength compensates for our weakness. We see that in verses 26 and 28 back in Romans 8.

A little earlier, verses 21 to 23, we read that all creation complains of the burden of decay and corruption under which it struggles.

[12:15] And we struggle under it too. But the Christian's groan, the shared groan of creation, but the Christian's groan is not a moan.

It is not something negative. It's a positive longing and yearning for the better things that we've been promised. As we've seen, the word glory acts as a kind of summary of all those beautiful and wonderful realities that God has promised for us.

And we need to see what we have already got. Already our sins are forgiven. And our guilt is atoned for.

And there is much else that we have received from God. But there is more. There is always more. We are promised resurrection. We are promised the transformation of our bodies and the perfecting of our souls.

So that in that new resurrected body with perfect souls, we may inhabit a redeemed earth, a renewed and a redeemed earth.

[13:24] The home of righteousness. Our renewed minds, when we engage them, long for this. We yearn for it. But we don't find it easy to know what to ask God for.

We find very often we cannot express our longings in words, which is why we just groan. And it is precisely when we reach inarticulacy, when words won't come, that the Spirit helps us.

In this, as in every part of our life, we are reminded that without him we can do nothing. You remember Nehemiah telling the people who were building the walls of Jerusalem that their strength and skill, important though it was, was inadequate to do the job that they had been given.

So how then was it to be accomplished? God reminded them through Nehemiah and he reminds us. It's not by might. It's not by power. It's not by strength.

It's not by skill. It's by my spirit. And that is a great general principle that Paul here applies to a very specific area of our lives.

[14:42] Our prayers. When words fail us and confusion muddles our minds and we don't know what to say or how best to say it, we mustn't think that anything's going wrong.

The Holy Spirit fully understands what is in our hearts. And to him, our groan is as fluent as the most carefully crafted petition.

He knows precisely how we feel and he interprets our groan, our groans, our sobs, our whimpers to the Father.

At the very, very least, this means that the Lord can pick sense out of our confused prayers.

But much more than that, it reminds us that, as is the case with every need we have, the whole Trinity comes to our aid.

[15:48] As the Father comes to assist us, so he brings with him the Son and the Spirit too. The Son is our advocate and our spokesman in heaven.

The Spirit too is our advocate and our spokesman, but resident in our hearts. And the Father's loving heart is ever open towards us.

Once again here, we find ourselves involved in another exercise in the comparative weight of things. Now, into the one side of the scale, we put our weakness, our inability to express ourselves, the inadequacy of our understanding.

And into the other side of the scales goes the perfect intercession of the Spirit and the work of Christ on our behalf. And the eternal matchless love of the Father towards us.

And when we do that exercise, we discover that the scale drops with a resounding clunk on the side of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

[17:01] And knowing this, we do not lose heart. So if eternal glory outweighs temporary suffering and the Spirit's strength compensates for our weakness, then thirdly, we see how God's total

control works for our good.

Verses 28 to 30. There's a certain royal couple who are grabbing the headlines at the moment who think they've had a raw deal from the British press.

Perhaps they have. I'm not getting into any opinions on the matter. But it is certainly no worse than the appalling reputation given to the doctrine of predestination here in Scotland.

If you doubt it, read Donald MacLeod's article, Scottish Calvinism, a dark repressive force, question mark. Predestination has suffered ridicule by its enemies and misrepresentation by its friends. It has been confused with the do of fatalism and accused of robbing life of its spontaneity and freedom. But that is not at all how the Bible presents God's sovereign rule.

[18 : 28] In fact, the word predestination is only mentioned four times in the New Testament, and it is always linked to God's love and protection.

Let's scan over those verses. In Acts chapter 4 and verse 28, the disciples were feeling vulnerable. Not long before wicked men had conspired against Jesus and had come for him.

The enemies of the church seemed all powerful, and even Jesus appeared weak in their clutches. But it wasn't like that at all. What had happened to Jesus was not the result of any weakness on his part, or the result of human intrigue, injustice and cruelty, but it was precisely what God had predestined to take place.

Seeing this, therefore, the disciples did not lose heart. Their prayers were confident. So then, Acts 4, we read this prayer. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

What happened? And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

[20 : 04] Now, let's turn to Ephesians chapter 1 and verse 4. And we see how Paul uses the truth of God's predestinating wisdom and power to give his readers further reassurance.

We read, in love he predestined us to become his adopted children in Christ Jesus. And then a third reference, in verse 11.

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his own will.

And finally, fourthly, back to Romans 8 and verse 28. God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love him.

Now, how counterintuitive and utterly amazing is this? Let me briefly raise two questions, especially in connection with Romans 8, 28.

[21 : 14] God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love him. First of all, what is meant by all things? Surely, we say, not bad things, not wicked things, not sinful things, not errors and mistakes, my own and others.

Yes, even those. It means, in fact, that nothing in heaven or earth or hell is outwith God's control. And therefore, nothing can frustrate his good and perfect will. When he promises to answer our prayers, our prayers will be answered. When he encourages us to pray his kingdom will come, it will come.

When we pray that his will will be done on earth as in heaven, so it will be done. Evil is subject to his power and ultimately serves his holy will without him in any way being complicit in it or tainted by it. Nothing can thwart God's plan to extravagantly lavish his love upon his children. Now, John Newton, who seems in our day to be famous for writing one hymn, in fact, wrote many.

[22 : 38] And if you know anything of his life, you know that he lived a very checkered life. And eventually he came to see that because God is in control of everything, nothing could harm him or harm us.

And so another very fine hymn that he wrote are these words. Since all that I meet shall work for my good, the bitter is sweet, the medicine is food. Though painful at present, will cease before long. And then, oh, how pleasant the conqueror's song. All things. But then we must also ask what is meant by our good.

All things work together for our good. And we can easily misunderstand what Paul is saying here. He is certainly not saying that God works everything for our comfort.

Or our convenience. Or our ordinary happiness. As we have noticed, pain and suffering, trials and difficulties are inescapable realities.

[23 : 45] What it does mean that everything is made to work for our ultimate good as God defines good.

In other words, if you want one phrase to encapsulate the idea, our eternal salvation. All things work together for our good.

All things work together for our eternal salvation. Everything assists in our glorification. See it there in verse 29. Those terrible things listed in verse 35 work out for our salvation, preparing us for an eternal weight of glory.

And we see this supremely in the case of Jesus, who understood perfectly the importance of taking the long view. Of living in the light of eternity.

And so in the book of Hebrews, we read that he, for the joy set before him, endured the cross and despised the shame. So to sum up, eternal glory outweighs temporary suffering.

[25 : 01] The spirit's strength compensates for our weakness. God's total control works for our good. No matter how hard a time we might be passing through right now, or what struggles we may face in the future, the triune God loves us and is actively bringing us safely through to ultimate glory.

God is at work weaving together the various strands of our lives to produce a perfect pattern. Now we see only the underside of that work, where the picture is obscured by many a tag end and a loose thread.

But when we finally see the picture from above, we will appreciate the splendor of incredible artistry. This idea brought much comfort to the Dutch Christian Corrie ten Boom during her years in the Nazis Ravensbruck concentration camp, where she lost her sister.

For Corrie, the truth was very well expressed in a little poem called Life is But a Weaving, which speaks to us in our trials too, in the midst of a pandemic.

Just three verses from it. You probably know them. Not till the loom is silent and the shuttle cease to fly, will God unroll the canvas and reveal the reason why the dark threads are as needful in the weaver's skilful hand as the threads of gold and silver in the pattern he has planned.

[26 : 37] He knows, he loves, he cares. Nothing this truth can dim. He gives the very best to those who leave the choice with him.

And so we conclude by fixing our focus on our great God as we join together in the song, How Great Thou Art.

How Great Thou Art