

# *From Suffering to Glory*

Romans 8:18-27

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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<sup>18</sup>*I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>20</sup>for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; <sup>23</sup>and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup>For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

<sup>26</sup>*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup>And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (NRSV).*

## I

Many of us in this congregation know a thing or two about suffering. We've lived through car accidents that damaged major parts of our bodies. We've miscarried children. We've endured the surgeries, radiations, and chemotherapies of cancer. We've trekked through the desolate territory of cold, bitter relationships. We've sat beside people we love who have died too soon—or in some cases, not soon enough.

We have carried the burden of chronic depression, bipolar disorder, or another mental illness. We've wrestled with extreme sensory sensitivities. We've accompanied children who struggle to find their way. We've been wounded by the sting of racism and the massive unfairness of white privilege.

The apostle Paul also knew a thing or two about suffering. In 2 Corinthians 11:24-28, he catalogues the various ways life has brought him physical and psychological suffering.

<sup>24</sup>Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. <sup>25</sup>Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; <sup>26</sup>on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; <sup>27</sup>in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night,

hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.<sup>28</sup> And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.

The world we live is very different than the world Paul lived in, but both we and he have one thing in common: we have all had to contend with multiple forms of suffering.

## II

However, we and Paul have another thing in common too. We are both waiting for the glory that will be revealed to us. God's glory. A glory surpassing anything we've seen so far. Of course it's possible to catch glimpses of God's glory even now. At the front of our house on Meadow Ridge Drive, Jenny planted black-eyed Susans, a lovely flower with gold pedals and dark centers. If you drive by or walk by, you can see them from the road, and if you step close enough, you'll see bees and butterflies zipping from flower to flower. They're a tiny window into God's glory.

On March 18, 1958, Thomas Merton, one of great spiritual writers of the mid-twentieth century, was doing some errands in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. Louisville is an ordinary American city, with ordinary buildings, ordinary businesses, and ordinary people on the sidewalks. Suddenly Merton had what you might call a vision, or at least an insight, into the deeper reality of human beings.

"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud.... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize

this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”<sup>1</sup>

Maybe you know what Merton is talking about. Maybe you’re sitting at the dinner table with family or friends when a window opens, and you glimpse the truth about the people around the table: that their faces are shining like the sun. Tiny windows into God’s glory.

Such experiences are mere glimpses, brief moments when the veil of the world is pulled back and we see God’s glory shining through. Well, hints Paul in Romans 8, these limited experiences are windows into something much grander which is going to occur. In the future, God’s glory will be revealed to us like we’ve never seen before. In this future the children of God will shine in freedom. Our bodies will be adopted and redeemed. In Christ, creation will be set free from bondage. We’ll see a new creation in which everything old has passed away and all things have become new (1 Cor. 5:17). God’s glory will be revealed to us!

### III

These, then, are the twin polarities of Romans 8. We live in a world presently marked with suffering, but we look forward to a world that will be marked with divine glory. We groan in suffering; but we hope for the rainbow of glory to break out upon us. Now we suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune; but one day we shall gaze transfixed at the indescribable light of God’s holy glory.

We live on the cusp of two worlds, the world that is and the world that is to come. We walk on the edge of an old world which is passing away and a new world which will soon be born. We navigate between the already and the not yet.

If you’re like me, you might be tempted to choose one side of the polarity over the other. One option is to wallow in the sorrows of your present suffering and give up all hope. If that’s the route you take, maybe you become bitter, angry, or cynical. Or you choose the second option. You grab onto future hope and ignore the sufferings of this

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in David A. King, “Merton’s shining ‘epiphanies’ of light and insight,” *The Georgia Bulletin*, September 18, 2014, <https://georgiabulletin.org/commentary/2014/09/mertons-shining-epiphanies-light-insight/>, accessed July 29, 2016.

world. If you take this route, you might try to build a kind of fairy tale for yourself which has no roots in the present. You might become cold, aloof, or indifferent to the sufferings of others.

I think the better choice is to live somewhere in the middle of these two polarities—to keep one eye on our present suffering and the other eye on God's future glory.

#### IV

To do this, we need intercessory prayer. Intercessory prayer navigates between the present reality of suffering and the future hope of glory. Intercessory prayer is a way for us to see the sufferings of this world while also peering ahead into the new world a-coming.

Think of it this way. Suppose one of our fellow church members stands during the sharing, announces his wife Catherine has brain cancer, and asks us to pray for her. So during the congregational prayer, the deacon or the pastor leads all of us in praying for Catherine. We're doing at least two things in this prayer. First, we are acknowledging the reality of Catherine's brain tumor. We squarely face the fact of her present suffering. But second, we're hoping Catherine will have a better future. In our prayer we reach forward in time, as it were, and imagine a new world for Catherine in which her suffering is set aside and she is able to bask in the glory of God. In this new world, Catherine might be free of cancer.

That's one possible way for her to see the glory of God, but there are other possibilities too. For instance, Catherine's cancer might get worse until she eventually dies. However, in the last months of her life God comes to Catherine in the middle of her cancer and gives her an increasing awareness of God's own presence in the room. Catherine knows she's dying, yet even in her weakened state God blesses her with hints of divine glory. I know several people in this congregation who have died this way, with a sense that the glory of God was growing in them.

Here's another possibility. Years ago in a different congregation, one of the church's dear saints was dying in the hospital. Shortly before she died, I went to visit her. Her

mind was still sharp but her body was in serious pain. I asked her if she was able to pray. No, she replied. I asked what her sense of God was. None, she whispered, it feels like God has abandoned me. So I held her hand and prayed for her. That was the last time I saw her, so I don't know what death was like. Did God reveal a bit of glory to her before she died? I don't know. But I do know God will reveal mind-boggling glory to her at the resurrection of the dead.

## V

Sometimes it seems to us that intercessory prayer is like banging on heaven's door, trying to get God's attention, persuading God to act. But that's not the metaphor Paul uses. For him there is no heavy wooden door separating us from God.

For Paul intercessory prayer is more like a mind meld, thanks to the Holy Spirit. He says that when we pray, the Spirit comes along side and prays with us. The Spirit joins us as a companion in prayer and intercedes for us in language beyond words. During prayer the Spirit simultaneously connects with our minds and with the mind of God. The Spirit is a kind of conduit between our innermost self and God's innermost self. This means that the next time you pray, you can remember you are not praying alone. The Spirit is beside you, praying for you, praying for your family and friends, praying for peace and justice, praying for God's glory which will one day fill the whole earth. And if the Spirit prays for these things, then surely the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.