

Why Leukemia, Tornados and Terrorism

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Romans 8:17-25

And if children, then heirs--heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²³ 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.

Friday afternoon the church office got the call that Justin Scott was in the ER at Baptist Hospital. After visiting and praying with Justin, Tiffany, Bobby, and Tina it was reasonable to assume the diagnosis would be leukemia. It was. Arriving home later that evening and turning on a cable news channel we were struck with the developing news of another tornadic breakout in Oklahoma, Missouri, and Illinois where multiple ferocious funnel clouds destroyed property and took lives.

Almost two weeks ago in London two terrorists armed with a knife and meat cleaver killed and nearly beheaded a British soldier in broad daylight in the middle of the street. Afterward one of the murderers asked a passerby to video his statement. Hands bloodied with the victim's blood, he defended his actions and pledged that he and others like him will never stop fighting and that people like us will never be safe.

What do these three things have in common and why am I preaching about them? Let me first answer the "why I am preaching about these things" question first. It is these things that Satan uses to tempt us to doubt God's goodness, power, or even existence. I want to thwart and disrupt any plans of the enemy that he may deploy against any of you. It's things like these, leukemia, tornadoes, and terrorists that make us question God, especially when they happen to Christians.

I'm sure many of us have asked ourselves, why are Bobby and Tina having to go through this again?

Two children in less than a year afflicted with cancer seems more than a trial but some kind of cruel and unusual punishment. Why is God doing this or allowing this? Why is He not keeping our beloved brother and sister, as the hymn says, "safe from all alarm?" If He loved them as He says He does, why is He letting this happen to them? Maybe someone has said within their hearts, "If this is the way God treats His faithful, then I don't want to have anything to do with Him."

As these storms on Friday night were breaking out and I was watching storm chasers' video, I saw multiple tornadoes come down out of a bowl shaped cloud. The tornadoes seemed like horses in a gigantic merry-go-round popping up and down out of the cloud and touching the earth, destroying everything in their paths. I thought it so surreal, if not apocalyptic. I confess to you I thought, *Why Lord are you allowing this to hurt so many? Surely, Christians are in the path of some of these killer storms. Why let this happen to them?*

We also question God's leadership and goodness when corrupt men are allowed to do their dastardly deeds of evil? If God is sovereign why does He allow bombers in Boston to kill and permanently cripple the innocent? Why do planes crash into buildings and thousands die? Where is God in all of this moral corruption?

I want to give you a biblical answer to these questions, so that you are not tossed to unbelief when the demonic answer comes or when just the mere suggestion of these questions and their implications lead to doubt. That is why I am speaking about this today. I love you and want you to be armed against Satan's device of doubt.

We all need a good doctrine of suffering. We need a biblical understanding because nothing like suffering can destroy your faith or build your faith. Before the storm attacks, before the diagnosis is made, before sinners inflict their sin on you, I want you to have a foundation, a biblical doctrine of suffering.

Second question, what do all of these things have in common? Well, that is a question the Bible answers in our text.

The Apostle Paul is giving the Christians at Rome, and us as well, immovable and steadfast evidences to tie the assurance of their salvation to. So when cancer comes, or calamity hits, or corruption, from self or others, strikes, we will not be blown away. In this passage the proof or assurance of a Christian is not that a Christian doesn't suffer problems, it's that he does. In this passage, the proof of a Christian is not that he doesn't have children who contract disease, or have homes blown away by tornadoes or suffer the sins of other people. No, it's the opposite. The proof of being a Christian is that you do suffer.

I want everyone to hear me because the enemy and the world will give you a completely different answer and it will appear logical and it will feel like the right answer. But as I've been preaching lately, feelings are often wrong. God must have the final word. One of you counters and says, "But everyone suffers. Christians and non-Christians." Yes, that is true to some degree. But don't

forget that they are several Scriptures that discuss the relative ease sinners have in life. Some, not all, seem to go unscathed. Job recognized this,

“The tents of robbers prosper, And those who provoke God are secure in what God provides by His hand.” (Job 12:6)

David wrestled with it,

“For I was envious of the boastful, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pangs in their death, But their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like other men.” (Psalms 73:3-5)

The question is not if you suffer, but how you suffer. The Christian is to suffer in hope. Another way to say it is, the Christian suffers for a completely different reason than a man who is not a Christian and therefore a believer's suffering serves a holy purpose. This is what Paul is driving at in verses 17-18.

“and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. 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.”

Please do not shut down your brain and close your heart because you think you already know what I am going to say. You are making a wrong conclusion if you think, *Okay, what you're saying is the Bible says we just have to wait for glory and it will all be settled there.* No, that's not what I'm saying, nor is it what Paul is saying.

Our suffering is a proof of our identification with Jesus. It's one of the evidences that you have been born again. Which introduces the question, is the suffering persecution only? Someone might answer that only suffering in the form of persecution shows you are a Christian, because you suffer for His sake. But I could not agree with that answer. As we follow verses 19 and onward, Paul includes all suffering, not just persecution. Every time you suffer, every time you have difficulty, every time adversity strikes is a proof of suffering for Jesus, if you suffer the right way—if you endure with perseverance. The suffering that Paul lists gives us a wider scope than just persecution.

To prove that suffering is a proof of identity with Christ, the Apostle Paul shows us a bigger picture of suffering other than our own personal suffering. Another way to say it is Paul doesn't focus at one person's struggles with pain. He would not single out Bobby and Tina or Justin, he would not just single out the Christians in Oklahoma who had everything taken away from them through the storms this week. He does not look at one incident of pain and suffering, but pulls back and gives us a bigger perspective of suffering and thereby shows us how all suffering is a part of the equation.

So often when you are hurting you become the entire focus. That's all you can see. Paul says one of the ways you suffer correctly is by not just focusing on you. I'm not saying that's easy. I know it's hard. It's difficult to not focus on yourself when you're in devastating pain or problems, but self-pity, Paul says, is not how Christians are to respond.

So why do you suffer? Why do I suffer? Why leukemia, tornados and terrorism? Paul pulls back the curtain and shows the big picture and looks at creation.

I. CREATION'S DESTINY

That's a pretty big picture. You can't get much bigger than everything God has made.

*"For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God."
(Romans 8:19)*

He's talking about us suffering with Him, being glorified with Him and then the next thing he talks about is the universe, the material world and what God has made. He's saying—here is a proof and an explanation of why you and I suffer.

A. Creation's Destiny is Tied to Man.

Creation, he says in verse nineteen, is waiting for the day you and I appear as we really are. At this moment, you don't appear as you really are, you're still trapped in a fallen, sick, diseased body. But one day your body is going to be better than something on any fashion show walkway. You will make your appearance and you will be so beautiful that if you saw you the way you will be seen then, you'd be tempted to bow and worship you. We will be so beautiful, so amazing, so awesome. And creation is looking forward to that day because it's destiny is tied to us.

Creation was made for man; not man for creation.

God made this world for us. For our survival, for our pleasure, and for our instruction. It is to teach us about Him. This physical world is made for us, not we for it. Therefore, creation's destiny is very connected to man's destiny.

Creation was subjected to futility.

*"For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope."
(Romans 8:20)*

We will explain this futility and its purpose under our next heading, but let me say something briefly about it.

Paul uses the word *futility*. Some of the older translations use the word *vanity*. It simply means *purposeless*. That doesn't mean creation doesn't have a purpose. We know there is a purpose, even in its flawed state, but it's not the purpose God originally created. Thus, in this state of futility, creation is not living up to its original design.

When God subjected this world to futility, He no longer allowed creation to serve the purpose for which He originally intended.

At the same time creation was subject to futility, so was man. That is why I say creation and man's destinies are tied together.

B. Creation Was Not Always in This Condition.

At one time the universe and all that was made was perfect, and so were our first parents Adam and Eve. But as a result of their fall and disobedience they became less than perfect and something cataclysmic happened in creation that subjected it to be unable to live up to its purpose and original design. This is called the curse. Let's look more intently at the curse.

II. CREATION'S CURSE

“For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope.” Romans 8:20

A. Suffering is the Result of the Curse.

In verse 21 Paul calls this subjection to futility a “bondage of corruption.”

*“because the creation itself also will be delivered from **the bondage of corruption** into the glorious liberty of the children of God.” (Romans 8:21)*

Creation was cursed by God.

Do you want an answer for leukemia? Do you want an answer for calamities in nature? Here it is—suffering is a result of the curse. Creation was cursed not by man, not by Satan, but by God.

*“For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but **because of Him who subjected it in hope.**” (Romans 8:20)*

Whoever subjected it to futility also subjected it in hope. Now let me tell you man didn't do it and certainly the devil didn't do it. Only God. So God cursed the universe He made because man

was cursed.

Creation was cursed because man was cursed.

Sinful man had to be in an environment that reflected man's curse. When man sinned and disobeyed it brought consequences on mankind, and as a result man couldn't live in a perfect environment. So part of man's curse was that the world and environment in which God made man was also cursed.

“Then to Adam He said, “Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’: Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life. ¹⁸ Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, And you shall eat the herb of the field. ¹⁹ In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:17-19)

Both man and his environment are cursed.

This is the reason for leukemia and all disease and death.

This is the reason for tornadoes and all natural calamities.

This is the reason for terrorism and all manners of sin.

Not just terrorism, but every evil act is a result of this curse.

There are three kinds of suffering in this world. Suffering from cursed bodies. Suffering from a cursed environment. Suffering from cursed men. We cause most of our own suffering, don't we? Your own sins create a great deal of suffering. People sinning against you, sinning against society, these are the three reasons for suffering and this curse is going to last until Jesus returns.

This curse lasts until Christ's return.

*“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.”*

We are living in an age, “this present time,” cursed with suffering. Suffering is the norm, not the exception. We treat it as the exception, not the norm.

We get surprised when we get the phone call that somebody is in the hospital and may be dying of cancer.

We're surprised that relationships don't work the way we had dreamed. We are surprised when we lose our job.

We're surprised when floodwaters overtake us.

We're surprised when our children don't turn out the way we want them to.

We're surprised by all of the suffering when we ought to listen to the text and see that it's the norm—it's the curse of the present time.

Why do you consider that a shocking thing?

The reason suffering surprises you is because it is not what you were designed for.

We were not made for a world of suffering. You are a human being made in the image and the likeness of God. When God fashioned Adam out of the dirt and breathed into him, God designed him with the adaptability of suffering well. It was not in his DNA and it's not in yours either. You're not made to suffer.

Suffering is not part of the original design and therefore there is still a part of us that yearns for perfection. In this sense I'm not alone, we are all perfectionists.

Why then did God curse man? You can say it's because he sinned and you would be right. It's punitive to some degree, but I want to focus on the positive and not the negative in this message. I want to suggest to you that it's correctional, it's helpful, it's beneficial that you and I are cursed and in a cursed world. I want to give you five functional reasons for the curse in a believer's life. This has nothing to do with you if you're not a Christian, although I will make some application to you.

B. The Reasons for the Curse.

1. The curse gives us a vivid reminder of the terribleness of sin.

What Justin is experiencing in Vanderbilt hospital is a teeny tiny glimpse of just how horrible sin is to a holy God. We look at it and think, "Oh, that's bad." And yes, it's bad, but it's just a glimmer of how bad sin is to a holy God.

My daughter is an ever-living reminder for me of the curse. Some of you think that's cruel, but no, it's what God has done and it's, for me, a reminder of just how terrible God views sin.

I'm not saying when these things happen to us they are acts of God's judgment because of something you've necessarily done. God can do that, yes, but I'm saying it's the general curse

of it all. When twisters come dropping out of the sky and blow your house to a million little pieces and your life is shattered, it will be a horrific, stinging reminder of how bad sin is. We don't really realize how bad sin is? We pamper it, placate it, rationalize it, but when these seasons of suffering come we see better how terrible sin really is. We are reminded by the curse on sin how hideous sin is against God.

2. The curse tells us this world is not what we want to believe it is.

Suffering tells us that this world is not as good as we think it is, because we often think it's so wonderful that we never want to live it. Without suffering we would not hope for something better, we'd believe we already had it.

Let me give you an illustration of this, it's not a very good one but maybe it will help you.

We were designed to live in an atmosphere of oxygen and not water. If you were thrust into the environment of water, like a pond or swimming pool or an ocean, you might do all right for a brief time depending how long you can hold your breath under water. But eventually you would begin to panic and try to get to the surface. Why? Because you were not made to live in a watery world.

But we humans are adaptable creatures. We know we can't survive long without oxygen, so what do we do? We invent little canisters we can put oxygen in and put them on our backs and devise tubes that run from the canister of oxygen into our mouths so now we can go under water for extended periods of time. Then we go deep-sea diving, looking around we begin to be mesmerized by all the beautiful things we see. A whole new world opens up before our eyes. There are colors in fish we've never seen before, multi-colored, brilliant pictures of God's artistry swimming right before our eyes. There is the beauty of the coral reef as we look down. The color of the water is majestic and before long we like the environment.

We're having a wonderful time and everything is grand, we could do this all the time we think, until something happens. Our oxygen begins to run low and we get the signal. We stay a little bit longer and push it to the very edge, and then when we're out of oxygen, we scurry to the surface to get fresh air.

Although God made you for a perfect world, we begin to adapt to this imperfect world and before we know it we are enjoying our environment. We are fascinated by the worldly joys and pleasures it offers. We become mesmerized and attracted by money or notoriety or sexual pleasure outside of marriage and a thousand other attractions that this strange, foreign environment offers us. We like living in this environment until something happens. Suffering comes into our life and it reminds us that we're not made for this world.

Just like the oxygen tank, you're fine until you're running out and then you realize you're not made for this watery world. It takes suffering to remind us, and suffering often, that we're not

made for this place. We're made for a perfect place with God. That's what suffering does for the Christian. It tells us this world is not as good as it gets. It awakens us to why Jesus came. He came to take us out of this world and home with Him in His perfect and holy house.

Leukemia reminds us that we're living in a cursed world under the bondage of corruption.

Tornadoes jog us back into reality that this earth is not our home.

Evil actions of men remind us that we've all sinned and this is the consequence—fallen men acting like fallen men.

We shouldn't listen to the doubt of Satan that says, *If God is good He wouldn't allow this to happen.* No! You don't understand, Satan, we rebelled against God and suffering is a good thing because it reminds me this is not my home.

3. Without these things we would get too comfortable here.

Even with suffering we are too comfortable here, are we not? Even with all the pain and all the suffering, all the disease, all the devastation, we are too comfortable here. What do you think we would be like if there were none of these things? We would not want to go anywhere except right here. This would be our heaven.

4. Without suffering we become unbearably self-reliant.

Not only are we unbearable to God, but when we're totally relying on ourselves we become unbearable to others. We are conceited in our pride. Suffering causes you to recognize what is true about you, you are not sufficient. You are not able to handle all life throws at you and you must run to God in complete reliance. Bobby and Tina must now, all the more, rely upon God and that's not a bad place to be either.

Brothers and sisters in Oklahoma have more reason to trust in Christ than they did two weeks ago.

When others sin against me, I need to rely upon God for grace to forgive them.

When I sin I need to rely upon God's grace to forgive me.

I'm again reminded when I sin why I need the cross and He who died on that cross. Suffering and its effects on this world, the body, mankind, is an act of God's goodness, pleading with us to put all of our allegiance and trust and reliance on Him.

5. Without the curse of suffering we would love this world.

As Christians, we would love this world if there were no curse at all. The pain of an imperfect world causes us to see the world for what it is. It loses its luster and its grip on our hearts. Through many difficulties and trials, God weans His child off of the world.

III. CREATION'S HOPE

I want the sinner to listen. I said a few moments ago that the five reasons for the curse didn't apply to you, but here it does. God allows suffering in your life not for the same reason as the Christian, but to awaken you to the fact that you need a Savior. I'm still convinced that according to Scripture God doesn't allow sinners to always suffer and then they never wake up that there's something better. If they've got it all here this is all the heaven they will experience in their life. This is their best life now and that's a judgment, clearly, as we saw last week in Romans one. If God allows suffering to come into a sinner's life, then this is a blessing in disguise. My friend, if you're not a Christian and your world has been rocked, you've been devastated, please wake up and realize the pain is the mercy of God communicating to you that He has something much better. He is telling you that you need a Savior from sin, self and Satan. Thank God, He has not left you to your own devices, to seek your pleasures in this present age. He has awakened you by the use of pain. Let your misery foreshadow a day coming when all joys will vanish and nothing by eternal suffering will be present. Take advantage of this wonderful jolt back to reality.

A. Creation's Hope is Tied to Man's Hope.

“and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. 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.” (Romans 8:17-18)

“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.” (Romans 8:20-21)

“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.” (Romans 8:23)

Hope means something better is coming.

I'm saved from sin, but not yet from its presence. Something better is coming.

I'm given healing, but not yet a body that cannot get sick. Something better is coming.

I have comfort in the Holy Spirit, but He is the down payment of our inheritance. Something better is coming.

I have fellowship with Christ, but only through a glass darkly. Something better is coming.

I have some sweet times of communion with God, but they are interrupted, punctuated by times of feeling alone. Something better is coming.

We have great worship here, but we worship what we cannot see. Something better is coming.

The Christian life is a blessed life but it is incomplete on this side of heaven.

“But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away” (1 Corinthians 13:10).

This hope is centered in God.

“For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.²³ 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.” (Romans 8:22-23)

The earth and we have birth pains, which are different from the bondage of futility in verse 20. The bondage of futility is the curse but the earth right now is groaning as a woman would groan and travail in giving birth. So are Christians. We are groaning for our new bodies and to be home with God in heaven. The earth is groaning for that same thing. Paul says nature has birth pains, meaning it tries to recreate itself to its original design. That’s what spring is all about.

Spring is my favorite season because every spring the earth comes out of its sleep of death and comes alive. The flowers and colors are so beautiful but what happens? Summertime comes and so does the heat and drought. Much that was green turns brown and the death cycle sets in again. The earth tries to give birth to itself as a new creation but it fails.

A child is born healthy, good looking, has above average grades and we have hopes for that child but all of the sudden the doctor tells us the child has cancer. All of our hopes that we had placed in this young, vibrant, healthy life are gone. Birth pangs. Which leaves us with one thing, does it not? It painfully reminds us that we need God. Only God can bring about what we are longing for. Not your children, not your jobs, not the environment you created—your false reality, with all your possessions—your hope must be only in God. Birth pangs cry out trying to make things new, but they all fail. Only God can put us back together.

Hope motivates perseverance.

“But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.” (Romans 8:25)

I hate to keep using Victoria as an illustration, but this is where we live. Before she was born we had all these aspirations and dreams of what her life would be. She would be the only girl with two older brothers. But all of this was shattered the day after she was born when the doctor told us she didn't have much hope of her surviving and if she did, this is the way our daughter would be.

I'll never forget the agony of that hope being dashed, but it wasn't killed. My hope wasn't killed that day; Karen's hope wasn't killed that day because we still have a hope for Victoria that exceeds the bonds of this imperfect world. Our hope for Victoria is a new world, a land where sin and disease cannot infiltrate. Our hope for her is that one day Victoria and I shall sit down and converse about the things of God that I don't even know now but then she will be enlightened as I will be.

My hope is that one day, by the power of redeemed bodies that she will be able to talk with you, sing to you and carry on conversations that will dazzle your intellect. Why? Because hope makes me to persevere. I know something better is coming.

This is Paul's point all along. The purpose of suffering in the life of the believer is that it motivates perseverance or faithful endurance. It goes back to verse 17, "and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together."

You don't just suffer for Him you suffer with Him. He hangs with you to the end. Let us realize that whatever we have to endure in this life is not worthy to any comparison with the reward, the glory Christ will share with us. This is what verse 18 says.

Therefore, if you endure suffering without losing heart, then you prove beyond any doubt you are a believer and you will share in Christ's reward. Don't throw away your faith when suffering and difficulty comes. Don't let leukemia, tornadoes or the evil actions of men—or your own—cause you to throw in the towel. Instead fight the fight of faith. Fight it.

B. Both the Curse and the Hope is the Love of God.

The curses feed our hope and joy in God because it's only God who can work the pain of the curse to our good. Bobby and Tina have hope today because this cancer is causing them to look and rely upon Him, of whom it is said, nothing is impossible.

Each pang is a twinge of hope in the future joy that awaits us. That's why Paul calls these sufferings birth pangs.

I walked in hospitals enough to know that groans of pain are not the same. I've heard cries that were pangs of death. But I've also heard cries that were pangs of new life—birth pangs. The Apostle Paul says these are not death pangs but birth pangs. What Bobby and Tina are going through

are birth pangs—the end is going to be good. The tornadoes in Oklahoma for the Christian were a birth pang, not death pang. Every suffering the Christian endures is not pangs of death but new life, even when he is dying.

Therefore, you should not grumble or complain though you are tempted much to do so.

Suppose you had a registered letter from a long lost relative in Chicago who had died and left you his entire estate, which came to ten million dollars. On your way to Chicago to receive the inheritance your car breaks down a few blocks from the executor of the will's office. Do you think that, on your way to receive ten million dollars, the only thing on your heart and mind would be that your car broke down? Would you be griping and complaining about your car as you walk the last several blocks? There would be no remorse for that old car because now you can buy a hundred just like it.

Our God has promised us a vast inheritance. It is the same inheritance that will be bequeathed to our Lord Jesus Christ. Do not let leukemia, do not let natural calamities, or the sins of evil men occupy your mind or fill your heart with sadness and remorse only. Rather, let them turn your heart with joyful anticipation to the great inheritance and redemption that awaits you and I in Christ Jesus. Amen.