

Secure in suffering

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[0 : 00] Good morning, family of KAC. I was admittedly a little bit anxious with the cases rising, whether we would move back to the library, but I'm glad that we're still able to worship together in person this morning.

A special shout out to some of the students from a Chinese systematic theology class that I teach. They've decided not only to come here to support me, they're at the back, but they've also just wanted to check out what an English service looks like and what other option than KAC. In the meantime, let us quiet down our hearts for the receiving of God's word. I remember that morning vividly.

The sun was smiling with radiance on the horizon. The sky was blue like the depths of the sea, gleaming like glass that had been polished by God himself.

It was a sign of a new day filled with exciting possibilities. On this same Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001, a young man by the name of Todd Beamer buckled onto United Airlines Flight 93.

[1 : 44] The plane reached altitude, and as many of us do when the plane reaches altitude, we settle into the delight of a pleasant flight.

And that's when it happened. Three men rushed into the cockpit, killed the pilot, and took control of the plane. And to make sure that no one would try to be a hero, one of the terrorists opened his sweater to reveal a bomb around his waist.

Fear, anxiety, and panic rushed into the plane like a tsunami.

People began frantically making phone calls, many to no avail. Yet somehow, Todd Beamer was able to reach GTE air phone supervisor Lisa Jefferson.

Our plane has been hijacked! Our plane has been hijacked. Next, he began telling her how much he loved his wife and his two little boys at home and the third child that they were expecting.

[3 : 14] Friends, he's thinking he might not make it out alive. That moment, Todd Beamer made a strange request.

Will you pray the Lord's Prayer with me? Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, that will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and glory forever and ever.

Amen. After the amen, Lisa heard these words, Y'all ready? Let's roll.

[4 : 32] Todd and a few other passengers charged into the cockpit and attempted to regain control of the plane. Next, she heard screams, commotion, silence.

The phone somehow remained on the line. Ten minutes later, a co-worker reported, United Airlines Flight 93 has crashed onto an empty field in Pennsylvania.

All 44 on board were killed, but no one on the ground was injured. Even for some of us here in Malaysia, we might recall sitting before our TVs and watching the World Trade Center crumble and fall apart.

But for most of us, this tragedy exists like a faint cloud on the distant horizon of our memory. While it has been almost 20 years and we have moved over the disaster of 9-11, in many respects, we still have our struggles today, don't we?

I suspect that many of us, like Todd Beamer, have settled at the beginning of the year into the flight of 2020. And out of the sky blue, it seems like our year, no, our life has been hijacked.

[6 : 21] The coronavirus took the world by storm and shook it upside down. Personal goals, routines, business plans, family, relationships, relationships, all of them hijacked.

And as we look around the political climate of our nation, we as Bible-believing Christians have the impression that our country has been hijacked.

where is democracy? Where is integrity? And where is justice?

Church, this morning we come to a section in Romans 8 where Paul deals with the challenging questions. While the promises of eternal glory and a spirit-filled life sounds rich and fulfilling, how does the Christian hope hold up against a world of sin and suffering?

In other words, how should we, Christians, in light of our status as heirs of God, and co-heirs with Christ, navigate our lives in a world full of brokenness and pain?

[8 : 00] Turn with me now to Romans 8, verse 18-27. Romans 8, verse 18-27.

verse 18. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

Verse 22. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

For in this hope we were saved, but hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

[9 : 32] In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. Our message this morning has two movements. Number one, patiently wait. for our future redemption. Number two, persistently pray for our current needs.

Let's bow our heads in prayer. Lord, we come to you as people of burdens, weighed down by the tragedies of sin and suffering.

We acknowledge to you that the New Testament hope sometimes sounds too detached from reality. We confess to you, God, when the challenges of life hit us, our tendency to run away from you, especially when we fail to find answers.

[10 : 55] We pray, Father, that the message this morning will help us understand how to hold on to you as we await our day of renewal.

In Jesus' name, amen. Let's begin by looking at verse 18. The key that connects this verse with the verse before is the word suffering.

Now, as we heard last week, all of us as children of God will share in Christ's glory when he returns.

That said, all of us will also have to share in Christ's suffering as long as we are here on earth.

How then can Christians persevere in a life full of brokenness? Well, Paul provides us a much-needed context in verse 18.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. In other words, if you were to put a scale and you put on one side our present circumstances and on the other side our future glory, the scale will tip so heavily in favor of our future glory that it's not even worth comparing the two.

[12 : 26] Now, notice here, Paul is not diminishing the realness or the pain of suffering. Instead, he's trying to tell us that suffering can never be explained if we only look at it from a limited earthly perspective.

It's as if in Lord of the Rings, the book ends with Gandalf dying in the mines of Moria. But we, as readers, know that that can't be it.

Surely, there's a better resolution. Surely, there's something that's coming in the end. But in the story, it seems like it's all doom and gloom.

And in the same way, we press on today because we know that surely there is something better at the end. We press on knowing that the glory will come and one day we will be redeemed.

But what exactly is this glory that is, to be revealed? Now, if I'm going to have to push through suffering, and I'm going to have to endure difficult circumstances, I better know what my reward is, and the reward better be something worthwhile.

[13 : 50] Well, according to Paul, this transformation that he's talking about is so transcendent and glorious because not only are we the ones who are waiting for it, because it's as verse 19 says, for the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

Like the psalmist, Paul personifies the creation as if mountains and hills, meadows and valleys are lifting and turning their neck to see if the promised day has come.

On this promised day, you and I will be transformed in our fullest identity as children of God, heirs with Christ.

You see, verse 20 tells us, for the creation is longing, the creation longs for this day of redemption because it has been quote, subjected to frustration.

Now, put your bookmark on Romans 8 or your finger, but turn with me now to Genesis chapter 3. Genesis chapter 3 verse 17.

[15 : 26] Right after the fall of Adam and Eve, Yahweh says to Adam, because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, you must not eat from it.

Cursed is the ground because of you. Through painful toil, you will eat fruit from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plants of the field.

So even though in Genesis 1, God declares all of his creation to be perfect and good. Humanity's fall into sin essentially spoil the perfection of God's works such that God himself condemned and turned on creation.

But even in the midst of all of these curses, there is hope. If we look back just a couple of verses before to verse 15, we come to face with the first gospel.

Yahweh says to the serpent, and I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike his heel.

[16 : 47] Friends, this is the first prophecy on Jesus' death and resurrection. Because on the cross, the devil will have temporary victory.

He will strike Jesus on his heel. But three days from his death, Jesus will rise from the dead and declare that the enemy is defeated.

He will crush the head of the serpent brutally. And it is amazing that in the same context God curses creation, he also gives all of the world hope.

In fact, if you turn back now to Romans 8, verse 20, you can actually write in your Bible Genesis 3.15 in the word hope.

hope. That's because, yes, the hope that was promised way back in the third chapter of the Bible is the hope that the creation is still longing for now.

[17 : 59] We read in verse 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

creation hopes that one day it will not die, hopes that unlike all the living things on earth, it will be free from decay.

This hope to be free from death will only come into fruition when you and I receive our glory as children of God.

And friends, that is a great news for us. because the same creation we adore, mountains and hills, oceans and beaches, the places we delight in, the places that give us a connection to God when we're there, none of this will be destroyed when Jesus returns.

Instead, the redemption that Christ brings is a cosmic renewal where the whole earth will rise and praise and enjoy freedom and glory with the Messiah.

[19 : 18] Just picture for me this glorious scene, picture with me where all of the created order comes into life to praise and rejoice in the presence of our Savior.

here. What a beautiful sight that is. Yet this reward will not come without pain. We read in verse 22, we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

For us to inherit this reward, we have to be like a woman who has to groan through the pain of childbirth until she gets to see the smile of a newborn.

In the same way, we have to endure in suffering before we receive our future inheritance. Now, the first few semesters of my undergrad were probably one of the toughest time, toughest stretch of my time in the States.

I remember several moments where culture shock, homesickness, academic pressure, made me wonder if I truly belong in Bible college or if I simply made a naive and impulsive choice.

[20 : 50] There were many times where I felt like giving up. Now, through all of that, there was one thing that kept me going. You see, growing up in the church, I've always looked at the pulpit with a sort of fondness and awe.

I remember, well, if you've been to any of the bigger Methodist churches, which is my background, you'll know that on one side of the platform, there's a spot for the quote-unquote liturgists, but then there's a special, even higher race platform designated for the preacher.

I remember as a teenager, right after I knew I was going into ministry, I would sneak into church during non-service hours to stand on that platform and to just picture what it would look like for me to preach and give back to the community that nurtured my spiritual growth.

Now, somehow, that was enough to keep me going through the most difficult times, and sure enough, I did get an opportunity to preach at my home church in 2016.

Now, even though the sermon was embarrassing, as most preachers would say about their first ten sermons, it was still a rewarding experience.

[22 : 17] But, friends, the kind of groaning described in this passage is not just a longing for some kind of personal ambition, not for the achievement of a goal or the fulfillment of a dream.

The longing that is mentioned here is in verse 23, not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship the redemption of our bodies.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on a minute. That's like a whole lot of theological jargon that begs to be unpacked in this verse. So, first of all, the term first fruits of the Spirit simply means that when you and I accepted Jesus, the work of the Spirit started in us.

and the same work that started in us will also bring us to completion at the end. In other words, the Spirit is both the, quote, first installment and the, quote, pledge that guarantees our salvation.

Like the new car owner who's driving his car out of the dealership, but he cannot wait for the day he finishes his payment. We, too, long for the day when we receive the full blessings of the Spirit.

[23 : 50] This, what we call already but not yet reality, reminds us that even though today we can address God as Abba Father, we can connect with him, we can pray, we can listen to his words, all of these realities is only a foretaste of the full enrichment we will have when we are reunited with him.

That the blessings of the Spirit that we have now is just a foretaste of the full meal that we will receive at the end of days.

In fact, Paul tells us in verse 24, in the next two verses, that waiting and forward looking are necessary components of the Christian life.

Verse 24, for in this hope we were saved, but hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

So, even though when we accepted Jesus, our righteousness was secure, there is and will always be a sense of incompleteness in this life.

[25 : 20] Truthfully, many of us can relate to this tension of living in a post-fall but pre-second-coming world.

And what I mean by that is our world is not as beautiful or innocent as the Garden of Eden, but it's also not as perfect or glorious as the new heavens and new earth.

We look at the Beirut explosion and the various forest fires in Australia and California. We look at the many ways we try to find meaning in life through our jobs, our education, our investment, and our reputation.

We look at the daily plagues of sin and pride and selfishness inside us even as we struggle to live a God-honoring life and we are left thinking there must be something more.

forever. This cannot be it. There's got to be something more fulfilling than what this life has to offer.

And in verse 25, Paul tells us, he encourages us, the fact that this hope is not seen is the guarantee that God is surely working something behind the scenes.

[26 : 50] The fact that we cannot see this hope tells us that it will certainly come true. And knowing this, we patiently wait for our future redemption.

Number two, persistently pray for our current needs. Persistently pray for our current needs.

The good news for you and I is that God didn't just throw us the rope of hope and told us to hang on to it while we swing between life and death. Quite the contrary, God has given us, Jesus has sent us a helper.

Verse 26 writes, in the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

in the same way as the first point that the future hope gives us strength to push through life. [27 : 59] The Spirit gives us help in our weakness. In the same way the future hope gives us strength to push through life, the Spirit gives us help in our weakness.

Now, the weakness that Paul talks about here is the general powerlessness that even Christians feel as creative beings living in between the future and the present.

Our quote-unquote creature leanness means that even as believers, we do not know how to pray as it is necessary.

Now, to be sure, Paul isn't saying we are totally clueless when it comes to what words to say or what style of prayer we should choose. Instead, the focus here is more on the content of the prayer, what we are to pray for.

The majority of the time, we as mere human beings do not pray according to the will of God. And that is why when we present our request before God, we follow Jesus' example and say, Lord, if it is your will, let it be done.

[29 : 24] Of course, this doesn't mean that we are in a state of passive obedience, mechanically following God's will like a robot. Actually, the Psalms give us a wide variety of human emotions.

Praise, lament, petition, and longing that are explicitly drawn out in prayer. But on the other hand, this also doesn't mean that we should try to ascend to God's level in order to understand and try to discern his will through some supernatural means.

friends, we do not have to find the solution because the solution has already been provided for us.

Verse 26 tells us the spirit prays with, quote, wordless groans. Now, some take the phrase wordless groans to mean the language of tongues, but that interpretation is unlikely because, number one, Paul is talking about the spirit's words, not our words.

And number two, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, verse 30, that the gift of tongues is restricted to some believers only. But the activity of the spirit's intercession, the wordless groans here, apply to every believer.

[31 : 01] believer. So the best way for us to understand the spirit's activity is to see him as a translator. Like a translator, the spirit works along us.

He takes our words of prayer and our ignorance of God's will and expresses them in a way that perfectly matches the will of God.

And what a great encouragement this is. Brothers and sisters, we do not have to feel hopeless because we are humans.

We do not have to feel in vain. Our prayers are in vain because we do not know the will of God. It is as Douglas Moose says, even when we do not know what to pray for, even when we pray for things that are not best for us, effective and powerful prayer is still possible.

And in verse 27, it tells us why. The spirit's intercession is effective because he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the spirit because the spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

[32 : 22] So we see here there is a congruence, a perfect harmony that exists between God who searches hearts and the mind of the spirit.

So when God looks into our inner being, he sees the spirit that dwells in us and intercedes on our behalf. According to Paul then, we have two intercessors.

In heaven, Jesus is an intercessor that stands between us and God. He defences against the charges of sin and condemnation that threaten to rob us of our salvation.

Jesus guarantees our righteousness as children of God in the day of judgment. But here on earth, we have the spirit as our intercessor who facilitates our conversation with our heavenly father.

Even as we face countless difficulties, even in the midst of a pandemic, we have various uncertainties, things, we can still pray effective and powerful prayer.

[33 : 46] And so knowing this, our response is simple. We persistently pray for our current needs. Now, truthfully, from the time I was assigned this passage up until maybe even this morning, there have been several instances where I simply did not feel like praying.

Sometimes it was because of physical exhaustion, but most of the time it's because of emotional or spiritual weariness.

Either God has not answered my prayers in the manner and in the time I expected him to, or I was simply upset and disappointed with God.

It's as if this passage says, I did not want to talk to him, nor do I know what to say to him. Now, in all of those situations, the words of Romans 8, 18-27, kept ringing on the back of my ears.

Preparing this sermon actually became some kind of spiritual formation, where I feel like I was compelled by the text to sit before God with all my frustration and to just say, Lord, I do not know what to say, but Spirit, help me in my weakness.

[35 : 21] brothers and sisters, why don't you pray?

Is it because the way God works has not perfectly matched up with the way you expect him to? Is it because the pain of living in a broken world has crushed you with disappointment that you are left tired and weary before God?

Is it because the weight of your sin has put you in such a position of shame that you dare not face God in prayer? On United Airlines Flight 93, with his future hijacked and taken away, Todd Beamer prayed.

On the plane headed towards his death, with the image of his wife and his two little boys, and the dream of welcoming a newborn daughter, utterly broken and shattered.

Todd Beamer asked a complete stranger, would you pray the Lord's Prayer with me? Friends, the answer to suffering lies on the cross.

[37 : 11] On the cross, Jesus secured our righteousness and everything that comes with our salvation, including our future inheritance in his kingdom.

We patiently wait for our redemption, knowing that a better day is to come, knowing that it will surely come true.

On the cross, Jesus saved us and sent us a helper, the Holy Spirit, who listens to us and assists us in prayer through every season of life.

The highs, the lows, the ones where you are performing well as a Christian and the ones where you feel like you're a failure, the Spirit reminds us and prays with us.

Therefore, let us patiently wait for our future redemption and persistently pray for our current needs.

[38 : 24] Let's pray. Father God, hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

For holy, holy is the Lord almighty who was and is and is to come. Father, this morning we want to focus on the fact that we are broken and shattered.

the fact that each day our expectations, our dreams, our goals do not line up with the way we expect him to. We acknowledge that many ways we have felt disappointed in our Christian life.

We have felt crushed when the things we want we do not get. We have felt ashamed when the enemy convinces us that our sin has convicted our guilt.

But on the cross it is redeemed. On the cross it is finished and we proclaim that in you we are secure in suffering.

[40 : 00] help us father as we live as pilgrims on earth to patiently wait for our future redemption.

And in the meantime help us even in our weakness to persistently pray for our current needs. In Jesus name Amen.