

Sermon Notes
by Jacques Boulet

Hope Beyond Suffering

Romans 8:16-25

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“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Rom 8:18; NASB)

1. Introduction

Good morning and welcome to New City Church Toronto. My name is Jacques, and I am one of the elders here. Those of you with a long memory will remember that I am halfway through a series on the book of Joel. In that series we are at the most exciting part of the book, and so, naturally, I have decided to preach something completely different today instead. Sometimes a preacher needs to preach a sermon for his own benefit. I trust, however, that this is not only for me, but for you as well.

To be precise, this is a sermon for those who need to hear a message of hope, some veritable Good News. It is a proclamation of the promise that we are holding on to when we trust in Jesus Christ, not only for forgiveness, but for eternal life. Let us pray.

2. Prayer for the Holy Spirit

Lord God, we give you thanks that in this beautiful, yet broken world you have preserved your holy Scripture for us to study. May you quicken our minds and open our hearts to better understand and trust the message of hope that we have in Jesus. May your Holy Spirit be active here to produce a response of faithful obedience in each of us today.

Everything for your glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

3. Sermon

(a) Anecdote regarding suffering

On July the 23rd I was witness to a sad and dramatic event. I was just outside the Eaton Centre at Yonge-Dundas Square surrounded by a sizeable crowd, and I watched two police officers, slowly and patiently, embody the coercive force of the law as they put a sixty year old woman in a police car. The small woman resisted with every ounce of her being. She yelled at them to let her go. Several times, she called them assassins and proclaimed to them that they were certainly damned to hell. When the doors of the car were finally closed I breathed a sigh of relief. A woman from the crowd came to me and asked me what happened. “My mom has schizophrenia,” I told her. “Ahh,” she said, “I understand.”

For one frustrating evening, those two police officers were pulled into the sphere of suffering that my mother and I have shared these last thirty or so years. An illness without a cure. A woman cut off from the world. A boy without a mother.

This is my story, but I know that others here could tell of their own pain, frustrations, or disappointments. And if not your own, then I am certain that each of you could tell the story of someone else's suffering.

It is no secret. Despite much that is good and beautiful to appreciate and enjoy, this world is not the way we would choose it to be. It has been "subjected to futility."¹ Not only the human beings in it, but also the animals, the plants, and all created things suffer together in the "bondage of corruption,"² awaiting deliverance. The Good News is that there *is* deliverance. Deliverance will come, it must come, because God has promised that it will. We await only the second coming of Jesus, the remaking of creation, and the resurrection of our mortal bodies. In that day everything will finally be as it is meant to be. But until then, we survive on hope of things unseen.³

(b) Intro by way of Rom 8:16-17

Choosing a passage to preach is often a kind of artificial task. For the most part sermons are limited to subsections of books, and in this case a subsection of a chapter. There is material that comes before and material that follows, and it is up to me to preach the message of this subsection without assuming that you know anything about the context that surrounds it.

Some of you will have noticed that I've pulled verses 16 and 17, which form the end of one paragraph, into our passage to complement it. It says there... (READ Rom 8:16-17)

There are at least two things worth noting here. First, the apostle Paul is talking about the "children of God,"⁴ and not just anybody. It is the children of God who will be co-inheritors with Jesus Christ. And who are these children of God? I could have added the rest of Romans 8 – or even the entire book – just to flesh out this point, but let's summarize it. Those people who have put their trust in Jesus receive free forgiveness from their sins. Those same people are "in Christ"⁵ by the simple fact that they are bound to Jesus through the Holy Spirit who comes to indwell every Christian believer. So, we can also say that "Christ is in you"⁶ if you have submitted yourself to God's authority.⁷ Read with me starting at verse 14. (READ Rom 8:14-18)

The second thing to note is that Paul takes it for granted that even the children of God will suffer in this present life. In fact, they must suffer. If they are to be glorified with Je-

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1. Rom 8:20
 2. Rom 8:21
 3. Rom 8:24-25; cf. Heb 11
 4. Rom 8:16
 5. Rom 8:1
 6. Rom 8:10
 7. Cf. Rom 8:7, 14.

sus, then they must suffer with Him. Suffering is not accidental, but is a necessary part of God's salvation plan.

But why? Why suffering? That may be the most common question in the world. I think most of us are disappointed to find that the Bible does not answer that question. The book of Job puts a form of that question directly to God, and God simply answers

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!” (Job 38:4–5 ESV)

and continues on in this vein. The implication is that God has God's plan, and we shouldn't expect to be privy to it, nor should we expect to be able to understand it. God is, after all, God, and much wiser than we will ever be. If there is suffering in this life, then we must trust that there is a good reason.

(c) Comfort

And so where is our comfort? It follows in the next verse of our passage, Romans 8:18. (READ Rom 8:18)

I have called this sermon ‘Hope Beyond Suffering.’ I mean ‘beyond’ in two ways. First, beyond, meaning after. The glorious state that we hope for lies after this present state in which suffering threatens to detract from our joy. If we desire to reach that beautiful future, then we must persevere in the present.⁸

I also mean ‘beyond’ comparatively. The substance of our hope is far better and far beyond the pain that we endure in this life. According to Paul, it isn't even worth comparing the two. The beauty, perfection, and eternity of that future life far surpasses anything that we can imagine, even the worst, most atrocious acts of violence inflicted by humans on other humans.

Consider this analogy. What happens when you divide something by infinity? You get zero. No matter how big the number you start with, it is still nothing compared to something infinitely large. So, let's say that you live a long life and reach the age of 95 – a ripe old age, far beyond the vast majority of people that have ever lived. What do you get if you divide 95 by infinity? You get zero. Ninety-five doesn't register at all compared to infinity. How about if we take the entire scope of human history, counting history according to when people started writing things down approximately 5000 years ago. What do we get if we divide 5000 by infinity? We still get zero. Five thousand is zero percent of the infinite. Even the whole scope of human history is barely a blip on the eternal timeline.

The apostle Paul insists that what awaits us is well worth waiting for. If you put your trust in this hope, you will not be disappointed.

8. Rom 8:25. The Greek has εἰ δὲ ὁ οὐ βλέπομεν ἐλπίζομεν, δι' ὑπομονῆς ἀπεκδεχόμεθα. The NASB is superior to the ESV: “But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it” (NASB). Cf. Matt 10:22; 24:13 where the verb is ὑπομένω.

(d) The significance of this present 'blip' and the subjection of creation to futility

As we move on, I want to be clear about what I mean by 'blip.' By 'blip' I mean short, in relative terms of course. I do not at all mean insignificant. On the contrary, this present life has enormous significance. This is the era of babies. Now is the time when people are being born and being adopted as children of God through their faith in Jesus. As far as I can tell, there will be no more births in the new earth.

One time, some Sadducees came to ask Jesus a trick question about the resurrection. They wanted to know whose wife a woman would be in the resurrection if she had been married to a series of brothers who kept dying without having any children. Jesus said this: "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven."⁹

I think marriage will be obsolete in the new earth because it will have achieved its purposes, one of them being the birth of children in a safe environment. The ideal scenario is that children are born to loving parents who instruct their children in the laws of God, and that those children end up adopted into God's family through faith in Jesus. But even outside of ideal marriages, people are still born during this time, and they still have the chance to respond to the Good News of Jesus, as long as we who know that Good News make sure to tell them about it.

It is with that in mind that we can read Romans 8:19-22. (READ Rom 8:19-22)

So often it is necessary to interpret a Bible passage according to the bookends of Scripture, namely the creation of the first heaven and earth in the book of Genesis and the creation of the new heaven and earth in the book of Revelation. The first and last chapters of the Bible give us a small glimpse into what God intended creation to be like and what the final creation will be like, and that glimpse can give us proper perspective on the intervening time when creation is somehow different from God's final plan.

Romans 8:20 gives us assurance that any differences between the actual earth and the planned earth are not accidental, as if God could not make things the way He wanted. Rather, everything is the way it is for good reason, since God "subjected [the creation], in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."¹⁰

Let's pay attention to the first bookend to gain perspective on what this means. In Genesis chapter two God creates Adam and Eve and puts them in a lush garden with two very special trees.¹¹ There was the Tree of Life. As long as humans had access to the garden they could eat from the Tree of Life and live forever.¹² There was also the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The fruit of this second tree was forbidden to Adam and

9. Matthew 22:29-30 (ESV)

10. Rom 8:20-21 (ESV)

11. Gen 2:9

12. Gen 3:22

Eve.¹³ To eat from this tree would represent the rejection of God’s right to decide what is good and what is evil. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve did eat from this tree. In so doing they were grasping at God’s status; they wanted to be like God.¹⁴

In their state of rebellion, God could not allow Adam and Eve to remain in the Garden. God wants loving and obedient children,¹⁵ but if humans refuse to obey then they cannot be God’s children, but they are rather “children of wrath”¹⁶ or children of the devil.¹⁷

God’s law is by definition what is good for us. To disobey God’s law is to willfully put ourselves and others in the path of harm. God, therefore, in His mercy, did not allow Adam and Eve to continue on a harmful path eternally, but cut short their chances to go wrong on their own apart from God. That is why God sent them out of the garden and posted cherubim to guard its entrance.¹⁸ But God did not stop there. This is what God said to Adam before sending them out:

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:17–19 ESV)

I believe the curse on the creation is also a “severe mercy.”¹⁹ On the one hand, the current creation is designed to be difficult to live in. This makes me think of Deuteronomy 8.²⁰ There Moses warns the people because he knows that when they get too comfortable they will forget God. He says:

“Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have got-

13. Gen 2:17

14. See Gen 3:5-6; cf. Phil 2:5-6.

15. E.g. 1 John 5:1-4

16. Eph 2:3

17. John 8:44; 1 John 3:8-10

18. Gen 3:22-24

19. This phrase is from the title of *A Severe Mercy* by Sheldon Vanauken.

20. See also James 1:2-4.

ten me this wealth.’ You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.” (Deuteronomy 8:11–18 ESV)

The fact that the creation is difficult to live in reminds us that we are dependent on God. It is this challenge and suffering that opens a window for us to see ourselves as we really are: frail, and in need of His mercy.

There is also another sense in which the creation is subjected to futility and decay. Since we humans are sinful, so much of our activity is damaging to creation. You can imagine how, if only creation could speak for itself, it would cry out for a change of tenants. “Forget these lousy and mean spirited humans. Get me some who are selfless and respectful!”

We and the creation are bound together in a common fate. We and the creation suffer frustration and decay, awaiting complete renewal of the creation and of our mortal bodies. After the final judgment the children of God will be revealed. We who trust in Jesus will be sent back out into creation, pure and holy. We will be given a second chance to treat it properly. And the creation itself will be renewed. No longer will it plague us with disease. No longer will we work it with sweat and agony. We will live in harmony, with each other, and with creation.

(e) Saved by hope

Read the final section with me starting at verse 22. (READ Rom 8:22-25)

Christian hope rests on the promises of Jesus. We believe that because God kept His promise to raise Jesus from the dead, thereby proving His great power and love, God will also fulfill His promise to purify us entirely²¹ and to give us new and imperishable bodies.²²

What is our hope if not a manifestation of the trust that we put in Jesus? And what is ‘trust’ if not another way to speak about the faith that we have? In other words, Christian faith bundles together these ideas: one, that Jesus offers the only safe road to God thanks to the saving blood of His sacrifice on the cross for our sins; and two, that thanks to this saving work we can and will enjoy eternal life as it was meant to be from the beginning. And all of it is gift. Free! All that is left to you is to acknowledge God’s Word; to take seriously what Jesus says when He proclaims, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”²³ The rest is done for you. As it says in Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (ESV).

Notice the tense, both in Ephesians and in Romans 8:24: “in this hope we *were saved*” – past tense. Those of you who trust in Jesus are already saved. The blood of Jesus is already effective for your forgiveness. The Holy Spirit has already been given to you as a down payment²⁴ of the full promise that is to come.

21. Cf. Phil 1:6; Jude 24

22. 1 Cor 15:42-55

23. Mark 1:15 (ESV)

24. Eph 1:14; cf. Rom 8:9-10

So stay strong in your hope. The next age, mysterious as it remains to us now,²⁵ is worth every difficulty that we endure in the present age. When speaking of persecution, Jesus said this: “it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.”²⁶ Our hope must endure from the moment we first believe to the moment we breathe our final breath.

And along the way, we have to trust continually that what we cannot see is in fact real. That is how faith becomes hope and hope becomes faith.²⁷ Because “hope that is seen is not hope” at all.²⁸ And at every point in the journey we have the Spirit to sustain us, especially when we are susceptible to fear and doubt.

As it says in verse 15: (READ Rom 8:15)

And also in verses 26 and 27: (READ Rom 8:26-27)

I want to conclude by impressing upon you just how important it is to share our Good News with those who haven’t yet heard. This age is set aside expressly for that purpose. Those people who hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ and are brought to the ‘obedience of faith’²⁹ will benefit, as we do, from the age to come. But those who do not trust in Jesus will have nothing worth hoping for beyond this life.

If you have not yet put your faith in Jesus, please ask yourself right now “Why?” Why don’t you want to share eternal life with us? Don’t you realize that you were made precisely for this purpose: so that you can be a child of God, both loving your heavenly Father and receiving every good thing from Him for years, and centuries, and millenia without end.

That is why Jesus, the Son of God, became like you and suffered what you suffer – so that you may be like Him: pure and without sin, a true child of the one and only, utterly holy God. Ask Him for forgiveness, and He will not refuse you.³⁰

(f) Scripture has the last word

Let me leave you with these words from Revelation and a prayer.

(READ Rev 20:11-21:8)

4. Prayer for faith and hope

Holy and merciful Father, thank you for your written Word. In it we have all that we need to build our faith and to sustain our hope. We pray, Lord, that you would make us like your Son Jesus, willing and able to endure the sufferings of this life for the sake of the

25. See 1 John 3:2.

26. Matt 10:22 (NASB); cf. Matt 24:13; Mark 13:13

27. Cf. Heb 11:1

28. Rom 8:24

29. See Rom 1:5; 16:26.

30. Cf. Matt 7:11 and esp. Luke 11:13.

world.³¹ Strengthen our faith so that we can persevere when we are weary. Grant us wisdom and compassion so that we may strengthen others with the comfort with which we have received from you.³² Assure us in our inner self by your Spirit that we are cherished children, and that the promise of free adoption is good for all. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

31. See Phil 1-3.

32. See 2 Cor 1:3-5.