

## Context Matters – Lesson 6 – Romans 8:28

Romans 8:28 is one of the most quoted Bible verses, and one of the most precious sources of comfort in times of trial and confusion. In past instances of my “Context Matters” series, I have often turned the preconceived, misunderstood meanings on their head. In my final sermon of the series, I’m not going to do that – but I do hope that I leave you with a razor-sharp understanding of the meaning, scope, and limit of this powerful verse.

What is the context of Romans 8? Let’s read it together:

### The Backdrop: Suffering Exists

*8:16 The Spirit himself bears witness to our spirit that we are God’s children. 8:17 And if children, then heirs (namely, heirs of God and also fellow heirs with Christ)—if indeed we suffer with him so we may also be glorified with him.*

*8:18 For I consider that our present sufferings cannot even be compared to the glory that will be revealed to us. 8:19 For the creation eagerly waits for the revelation of the sons of God. 8:20 For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly but because of God who subjected it—in hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage of decay into the glorious freedom of God’s children. 8:22 For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers together until now. 8:23 Not only this, but we ourselves also, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our bodies.*

### Our Faith in the Darkness

*8:24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, because who hopes for what he sees? 8:25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with endurance. 8:26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how we should pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with inexpressible groanings. 8:27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes on behalf of the saints according to God’s will. 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose, 8:29 because those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that his Son would be the*

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*firstborn among many brothers and sisters. <sup>8:30</sup> And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified.*

### The Application:

*<sup>8:31</sup> What then shall we say about these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>8:32</sup> Indeed, he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, freely give us all things? <sup>8:33</sup> Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>8:34</sup> Who is the one who will condemn? Christ is the one who died (and more than that, he was raised), who is at the right hand of God, and who also is interceding for us. <sup>8:35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will trouble, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? <sup>8:36</sup> As it is written, “For your sake we encounter death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” <sup>8:37</sup> No, in all these things we have complete victory through him who loved us! <sup>8:38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor heavenly rulers, nor things that are present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>8:39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

### I. Suffering Exists

#### a. Suffering is necessary for glorification (vs. 17)

- The servant is not greater than the master.

1. John 15:19-20 *“Because you do not belong to the world, but I chose you out of the world, for this reason the world hates you. Remember what I told you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”*

#### b. Suffering is a built-in aspect of the universe (vs. 19 – 3 important things things!)

- Creation was subjected to futility as a judicial decree of God. (vs. 20)

1. Ματαιότης – BDAG: *“Futility, emptiness, transitoriness, state of being without use or value.”* Same word used in Ecclesiastes.

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2. God is the one who subjected it. (KJV, ESV, NASB “*him*”, NET “*God*”) [Probably not referring to Adam, but God – even if it does refer to Adam, it’s still ultimately referring to God]
3. The subjection to futility is a judicial decree.
  - a. Gen 3:17 *“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.”*
  - b. Rom 5:12 *“Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin.”*
  - c. Jer 12:4 [Jeremiah asks] *“How long will the land mourn and the grass of every field wither? For the evil of those who dwell in it the beasts and the birds are swept away.”*
  - d. Jer 12:11 [God says] *“Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard; they have trampled down my portion; they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness. They have made it a desolation; desolate, it mourns to me. The whole land is made desolate, but no man lays it to heart.”*
4. Futility, corruption, groaning, and suffering of the world and in our lives is a result of God’s response to sin. It was a judicial act and not a natural consequence.
  - a. The second law of thermal dynamics (entropy), that there is a built-in running down of all things is not an accident and was not part of the original design of the universe.
- Creation’s suffering has both a beginning and an end. (vs 20)
  1. *“Creation was subjected to futility... in hope that creation itself will be set free...”*
- All of creation, both creation – and we – are involved in this futility.
  1. We all groan and suffer – *all of us.*
    - a. (vs 22-23) *“For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers together until now. Not only this, but we ourselves also.”*

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- b. John Piper *“Don't overly personalize your suffering. Don't assume that this is some particular punishment or result of a particular sin. Search your heart in the time of pain. Let it make you serious and vigilant and humble. But don't add misery to misery that is not intended. The whole creation groans. It is a general divine decree on the whole world. And Paul's point is: even the precious children of God must suffer with Christ in it.”*
- c. But – That suffering must be viewed in light of hope.
  - (vs 20) *“Creation was subjected to futility – in hope that creation will also be set free.”*
    1. ἐλπίς – BDAG *“the looking forward to something with some reason for confidence respecting fulfillment, hope, expectation”*
  - (vs 18) *“Our present sufferings cannot even be compared to the glory that will be revealed to us”*
  - (vs 23) *“We groan inwardly as we eagerly await.”*
  - Paul views the reality of suffering in the light of our hope. We must never fail, then, to view our own sufferings in the same light.

### II. Faith Born in the Darkness

#### a. Hope exists only in the darkness.

- (vs 24) *“For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, because who hopes for what he sees?”*

#### b. Endurance is born out of hope.

- (vs 25) *“But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with endurance.”*
- Many translations use *“patience,”* but is more than that!
  1. ὑπομονή - the capacity to hold out or bear up in the face of difficulty, patience, endurance, fortitude, steadfastness, perseverance.
  2. It is a Greek word that resists a one-word English translation.

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3. F. Hauck, TDNT: *“The concept of the courageous endurance which manfully defies evil. Unlike patience, it thus has an active content. It includes active and energetic resistance to hostile power, even with no assertion of the success of that resistance.”*
  4. William Barclay, New Testament Words: *“It is not the patience which can sit down and bow its head and let things descend upon it and passively endure until the storm is passed...it is the spirit that can bear things not simply with resignation but with blazing hope. It is not the spirit which sits statically enduring in the one place but the spirit which bears things because it knows that these things are leading to a goal of glory. It is not the patience which grimly waits for the end, but the patience which radiantly hopes for the dawn.”*
  5. Chrysostom calls *hupomone* *“a root of all the goods, mother of piety, fruit that never withers, a fortress that can never be taken, a harbor that knows no storms. It the queen of virtues, the foundation of right actions, peace in war, calm and tempest, security in plots and neither the violence of men or the powers of the evil one can injure it. It is the quality which keeps a man on his feet with his face to the wind. It is the virtue which can transmute the hardest trial into glory because beyond the pain, it sees the goal.”*
- These beautiful words, these beautiful concepts, hope and endurance, all born solely out of the darkness, suffering, and futility of creation cursed through sin!
    1. Ecc 3:11 *“God has made everything beautiful in its time.”*
  - And so we see now a turning of Paul’s argument towards good things now, that are working out of the bad – the very melody that will crescendo in Romans 8:28. But we’re not quite there yet, because Paul wants to remind us of something else –
- c. We are not alone in the dark
- (vs 26) *“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”*

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1. Darkness has fallen over creation, but we are not alone. We have never been alone. In [verse 16](#), the Holy Spirit is confirming the believer's adoption, He is also here in [verse 26](#) helping us in our weakness and interceding in our very words of prayer in moments of suffering.
  2. The Holy Spirit is no stranger to the dark – we first meet Him in [Gen 1:2](#) hovering over the surface of an empty, dark, formless earth. He was there in the darkness of pre-creation and we see that He is here with us in the darkness of fallen creation, groaning with groans too deep for words in response to the groaning of God's children. God is with us! He sees us, and he knows us.
  3. (Vs 27) *“And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes on behalf of the saints according to God's will.”*
- d. Now we're at our verse and we'll look at the way it's built. This is nothing short of the crescendo of a great symphony. Look at what music Paul has written through the Spirit!
- Vs. 22 *“For we know the whole of creation groans and suffers.”* Suffering exists, it is a built-in reality of the universe, BUT!
  - Now matched up against vs. 28 *“And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”*
  - How, Paul?? How do we know this??
  - Rom 8:29 *“because those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. <sup>8:30</sup> And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified.”*
  - While suffering is a built-in element of the universe, this is not an inescapable verdict because of the divine decree made before the universe was even created. There was a plan and there was a calling outside, over and above, the broken system, that makes all that suffering not worth comparing by Paul. That gives Paul – and all believers – reason to hope, confidence to endure, patience to bear, security to trust, and courage to defy pain.

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- And for a moment the writer, inspired by the Holy Spirit, gives us that eternal glimpse outside of time, the eternal now that connects foreknowledge and predestination before time, justification inside of time, and glorification at the end of time.
- It's the beauty of what theologians call "*The Already/Not Yet*" that is a wonderful mystery of our faith. We, as believers, are waiting for something that in a very real sense is a done deal already.
- e. The Application: Ammunition; "*What then shall we say about these things?*"
  - The truths of Romans 8 arm us against that darkness and broken world, and have very solid reminders for us when the darkness begins to feel more real than the hope.
    1. No one is against us in any way that matters. (vs 31)
    2. God will not withhold anything that is necessary for us. (vs 32)
    3. No one can accuse us in any way that sticks. (vs 33)
    4. No one can separate us from the link that God has forged. (vs 35-39)

### III. Close: What do we need to know about Romans 8:28?

- a. First Romans 8:28 is a promise for believers.
  - It does not just say, "*And we know that all things work together for good.*" "*It's all going to pan out in the end*" is not a view for everyone. It applies only to the specific group Paul names: "*for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*"
    1. To be blunt, *abject pessimism is a right and proper view for the unsaved.* Things are not working out for the *unbeliever's good.*
    2. Martin Luther calls Romans 8 "*a comfort to fighters*" for the spiritual against the flesh. *For the unsaved, there is no such fight.*
    3. Rom 8:6-8 "*For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it*



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cannot. <sup>8</sup> *Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.* <sup>9</sup> *You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.*”

- a. It is a lie that all religions lead to the same God. It is a lie that those who deny that Jesus Christ is God can still worship the true God. It is a lie that you can say some magic words or pray a prayer and live a completely unchanged life and expect all things to work together for your good. Romans 8:28 does not apply to those who do not love God.
  - b. John 14:15 “If you love me, you will obey my commandments.” Good works do not save you, but are the fruit of a saved heart. And Jesus says quite clearly, that obedience to God is the natural outflow of genuine love.
    - i. John Piper gives a helpful understanding of this issue: *“First, Paul does not mean that you go in and out of loving God, and if you have a bad experience when you are loving God it turns for your good, and if you have a bad experience when you are not loving God it turns for bad. We know he doesn’t mean that because he clarifies ‘those who love God’ with the description at the end of the verse: ‘those who are called according to [God’s] purpose’. This calling is not something that happens over and over. It is the effective, once-for-all work of God to call me from death to life, and from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, and from enmity toward God to loving God. The calling into love and faith is once for all, and so love for God is the mark of the truly called person — all the time. Of course, our love for God has moments of intensity and moments of weakness — just like every other love relationship we have. But in those who are called, love for God is what defines them. It’s the abiding condition of our hearts — whether strong or weak.”*
- Let’s be careful how we encourage others with Romans 8:28. For the unbeliever, their hope must be in the Gospel first. But perhaps the suffering they face is meant to put them in your path to share the greatest hope we have: that Jesus suffered the worst on our behalf.
- b. Second, Romans 8:28 is a promise that *all things will be made good*, not that all things *are* good.



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- i. American theologian RC Sproul: *“Romans 8:28 is one of the most comforting texts in all of Scripture. It assures the believer that all ‘tragedies’ are ultimately blessings. It does not declare that all things that happen are good in themselves but that in all the thing that happen to us God is working in and through them for our good. This is also firmly grounded in His eternal purpose for His people.”*
  - ii. Joni Eareckson Tada, an evangelical Christian author, speaker, and artist, is a quadriplegic who has been confined to a wheelchair for more than 40 years. When people ask her why God allows suffering, she often says, *“God allows what he hates to accomplish what he loves.”*
  - iii. Let’s not confuse what God works into good with being good. He may, and often has, used our sin and others’ sin to be turned into good for our sanctification, or to further His ends, but He is not the author of sin, or the condoner of it. His hatred of sin is evident with the pouring out of wrath upon Jesus, and for the judgement we read about that subjected creation to futility. We must be loving, careful, and delicate when we talk to others about how the sin, pain, and harm against them could be used by God.
- c. Lastly, Romans 8:29-30 reminds us and defines for us what “good” God is ultimately working to accomplish.
- i. (vs 29-30) *“Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. <sup>8:30</sup> And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified.”*
  - ii. The “good” that God might work out may be temporal (Joseph in Genesis, Job) or it may not (any Christian martyr).
  - iii. It is always eternal. The “good” that God is working all things toward, is conforming His people into the image of His beloved Son, through sanctification and ultimately, *glorification*.

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Close:

Hope that is seen is not hope, but God has given us a powerful glimpse in Romans 8. In it, God acknowledges not only that suffering exists, but that He is the one that subjected the universe to its current state of misery, *because of sin*. However, for the believer in Jesus Christ, we eagerly and confidently hope for the re-making of creation and of our own hearts, minds, and bodies through the power of a God who has pre-planned redemption, is currently working it out, *and who will bring it to completion*. And in the here-and-now, that God is with us, helping us, and empowering us to love Him and each other through the pain and suffering.

1 Pet 4:19 *“So then let those who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator as they do good.”* We do well to do so. Let us pray.