

Romans 8:18-30 - Three comforts in sufferings

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Date: 15 February 2026

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[0 : 00] Page 1135, and it's Romans chapter 8, starting at 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. 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 firstfruits of the Spirit, groan 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.

[1 : 13] 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. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called.

Those he called, he also justified. Those he justified, he also glorified. Great, thank you, Robin.

Let's pray as we come to God's word. Let's pray. Gracious God and our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your word to us this morning.

[2 : 24] Well, there's many things to distract us from listening and hearing your word. We pray, please, that you might be at work this morning by your Spirit.

We pray, please, that you would help me to speak truthfully and clearly and faithfully, and that all of us would listen and hear your voice in your words, that we might be, as it puts it here, transformed into the likeness of your Son, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Now, the Christian life in the book of Romans could be summarized as being union with Christ.

Union with Christ. Now, I know that's probably not a phrase that you use. You may have never even heard it before. But it is a really helpful summary of what it means to be a Christian.

It underlines this fact that being a Christian is not just being someone who kind of likes Jesus. It's not even someone who believes in Jesus. I mean, they do believe in Jesus in that sense, but not just believe that he existed.

[3 : 30] It's not even someone who goes to church or someone who has a Christian heritage or Christian parents. Instead, a Christian is someone who, and this is it, right, who by faith is counted by God as having union with Christ, being in Jesus.

So much so that what Jesus does is what is done for them. So that Jesus' death becomes their death.

Jesus' resurrection becomes their resurrection. His sacrifice for sin is counted as a sacrifice for their sin. His righteousness is counted to them as their righteousness.

Now, listen, I kind of read books quite a lot in the week and read theological books. These are the kind of language that I use, and I know you don't, perhaps.

But let me just say to you, union with Christ is brilliant. It's brilliant. I hope you see that. It means, doesn't it, that things like righteousness, forgiveness, resurrection, glory, all of these things that we're interested in, we possess them not because we earn them, right?

[4 : 38] We possess them because Christ possesses them, and he possesses us. That's the glory and the wonder, isn't it? But I want to show you this morning that there is another aspect to our union with Christ.

We kind of brushed over it last week. It's there in chapter 8, verse 17. Let me read it to you. Have a look down at it. Now, if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. If indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. Here it is. Union with Christ means also sharing in his suffering.

And notice exactly how it's put. It's not just, oh, life might be hard in some kind of arbitrary way. Rather, we share with Christ in his suffering.

Literally, the word there is to suffer along with. Not because our sufferings themselves make atonement for our sins. That work has been done and completed in Christ.

[5 : 40] Everything that needed to be done to save us has been done by him. But the point is this, that Jesus became the perfect saviour through suffering.

And so we suffer to be made like the perfect saviour. I realise this is not a great sell for being a Christian. Maybe you're not a Christian this morning.

And you're thinking, this sounds utterly terrible. Union and communion with Jesus sounds great if you're talking about victory over death or power over sin or eternal glory.

But now you're saying it involves communion with Christ in suffering. Suffering along with Christ sounds awful. I mean, it does sound awful, doesn't it?

So bad that lots of people gloss over it. You could go to lots of different churches. You could go to churches in London today and they will tell you that to become a Christian is to be victorious over all suffering.

[6 : 37] Or that if you're a good Christian, that will mean that you're kept safe from suffering. But that's not what Paul says here. Instead, he says, union with Christ brings communion with Christ in suffering.

I think it's just worth stopping here just for a moment and say, if you're a Christian this morning and you're suffering and life is particularly difficult and you think somewhere in your mind, I'm suffering because I'm a bad Christian.

God is making me suffer because I've let him down. My diagnosis is a punishment because of things that I've gotten wrong. My poverty is payback.

Then listen, what you need to hear. Let me say this gently. You need to hear that is not true. It's not true. Jesus was the perfect believer in his father, right?

Utterly faithful. And he suffered. And we suffer along with him, not in payback, but in union with him. So think about the suffering of Christ.

[7 : 45] What were the sufferings of Christ? Well, for a start, Christ suffered the brokenness of the world, didn't he? He was born into poverty. He escaped his own country as a refugee under threat of his life.

He worked very hard for very little money. He doubtless had to learn to swing a hammer as a carpenter in the way that everybody learns to swing a hammer, which is how? By hitting your thumb more than once.

He knew what it was to be hungry, to be homeless, to be weary. He lost friends. He wept at their gravesite. He knew human weakness, the frailty of a fallen human body, like we all do.

But it didn't end there, did it? Because he also suffered, not just the brokenness of the world, but he also suffered because of who he was. Because of who he was in his person.

He was misunderstood, misrepresented, betrayed by his friends. He was despised and rejected, flogged and crucified. So Paul says, expect the same.

[8 : 47] Union with Christ will mean communion with Christ in his suffering, in the brokenness of this world. Jesus was not sheltered from the brokenness.

And neither will you be. We will get sick. We will face uncertainty, hunger, poverty, grief. We ourselves will die.

But like him also, in union with him, we will have communion with him in his suffering for being a Christian. You will, if you're a Christian, be misunderstood, misrepresented, betrayed even.

You might lose a job. You might lose a friendship. You might lose the country that you wanted to live in. You might lose your life. Because union brings communion, not just in glory, but also in suffering.

Now, I realize that's very gloomy. But what I really want you to see this morning are three comforts. Three great truths. Three realities that we need to remember as we share the suffering of Christ. [9 : 54] And these three comforts come from verses 18 to 25. So let's look at them together. Comfort number one. Comfort number one. Future glory is bigger than present suffering.

This is where Paul starts. So if you look down at verse 18, he says, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

In other words, Paul says, like, put these things in the balances, right? Present suffering over and against future glory. And it's not just that kind of future glory tips the scales so that on balance it's probably going to be roughly okay.

No, rather future glory breaks the scales. It's in a totally different category altogether. The comparison is not worth it. It's just not possible.

Literally, the language here is that this is an unworthy comparison. Future glory is in a totally different league to present sufferings.

[10 : 56] This is like the Arsenal football club playing the kids at Paddington Rec. Yeah. It's completely unfair. The kids at Paddington Rec would run them ragged.

It's an unfair comparison. But Paul doesn't stop there, does he? Instead, he goes on to explain why. Look down at verse 19, you'll see that he tells you that the whole of creation is waiting for the glory of the children of God to be revealed.

In other words, in the suffering of our world, it's not just us that are aching for something better. In fact, all of creation is aching along with us, hoping for the day when Christ returns in glory and his children, who look and suffer along with the rest of the world, are revealed.

Now, remember, Paul's point here is to show how big future glory is. Look down at verse 20 and see how Paul expands this some more. 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.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Now, notice carefully what's been said here.

[12 : 17] This isn't a comment on environmentalism. Paul isn't saying it doesn't matter if you slash the rainforest or put plastic in the ocean or pump the atmosphere of CO2. No, his point is that decay and weakness is in creation because of God's decision.

It has been placed there. And so glory for creation is still future. It's still ahead of it. It is still awaited. And that, he says, is an indicator of how big glory is. In other words, think about it like this. Think about a majestic mountain range, right? Or maybe a deserted Caribbean beach with the turquoise sea just lapping at the shore.

Or think of the brilliance of a coral reef with multicolored fish swimming around. And Paul says, listen, for all of the breathtaking beauty of all of those things, actually what you are seeing is something that is in bondage and is groaning.

The true beauty of all of those things is yet to be seen and be revealed. All of those things are really like, you know, if you walk around Queen's Park or something now in the winter, it's muddy, there are puddles all over the place, there are no leaves on the trees, there's no flowers in the flower beds.

[13 : 38] Because it is waiting for spring. And Paul says, listen, there's a sense in which all of creation at the moment is in its winter, waiting for the spring of God's glory, when the children of God will be revealed.

You know, Jamaica's blue mountains are brilliant, but not half as brilliant as they will be. The great barrier reef is currently holding back its beauty.

The golden sunset which takes your breath away is still hiding its true majesty. Because future glory is so weighty, so real, so physical, that you can only just glimpse it in the beauty of the world right now.

Creation is groaning and waiting for its freedom. Can you imagine it? I don't know whether you've ever been to those places, whether you've ever seen a view that just takes your breath away. Well, Paul says, listen, glory to come is like that having your breath taken away, but only bigger, more glorious.

There's another side to this as well, isn't it? Because just as creation groans and waits, so do we groan. Look down at verse 23. Not only so, as in not only is creation groaning, but we ourselves,

who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

[15:04] 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. I wonder if perhaps these verses don't need very much explanation at all.

We all know, don't we, this ache for life that we have. This desire to be rid of suffering. That sense that we all have that life is over too quick. That we were made for more.

Death has arrived too quickly. Death and suffering robbes of life. And we hope for more. I wonder if you could just think with me about how this works.

You know, Paul is not in any sense trying to minimize your suffering. Life is hard this morning. Paul is not saying to you, listen, just pull your socks up. It's going to get better. Stop being sad.

He's not saying that. Rather, what he's telling you is to say, listen, don't forget that glory is a future thing, not a past thing.

[16:04] Glory is still ahead. It's not behind. You've not left it behind. And future glory is so brilliant that your present suffering will just seem like a blip on the timeline of eternity.

I don't know about you, but I think my sort of hardwired... Oh, hello. It's brilliant.

I asked him to do that so you'd all just have a little breather, right? I don't know about you, but I think when I'm finding life difficult, my hardwired sort of instinct is just to run to ideas of escape.

Life is short, isn't it? We know that. So surely the best thing is just to kind of run away and live life to the full, whatever that might look like. You know, indulge in experiences, travel, live in a nice home, get a nice view, get some good pictures, escape to the country or escape from the country.

I'm sure you all have a version of that. Maybe it might be slightly different to mine. I think for mine, it's probably... I just run away and live somewhere in the Scottish mountains away from it all, just me and my dog, no mobile phone, right?

[17:27] Perhaps for you... I don't mean to upset my family, but just me and the dog. But perhaps for you, it's like a beach or I just want to be somewhere where the sun is shining and I can feel the warmth on me away from the cold.

But I think what I'm... In those moments, what I'm thinking is that present suffering can be outweighed by present pleasure.

Yeah? I'm seeking to medicate myself for the challenges and the difficulties of life now in some kind of pleasure or comfort now.

And Romans 8 says, listen, Steve, stop being so shallow. There is a deeper, richer comfort to come. Why would you look for a temporary escape in a groaning creation when you can have an eternal one in a creation that's no longer groaning, in a body that's no longer groaning?

It's not to mean I don't think that it's wrong to go away on holiday to a beach or the mountains. But it is wrong to think that that's an adequate answer to the suffering of this life.

[18:41] If you think that you have not understood. You know, maybe I could put it this way. You know, the glory of Barbados or Jamaica or the West African coast or the Isle of Skye is just simply not enough to compensate you for the suffering of this life.

The suffering is too deep and that solution is too shallow. What you need is future glory. And future glory, available only through union with Christ, is bigger than present suffering.

Secondly, we do not suffer alone. This is what we looked at with the children, isn't it? Look down at verse 26. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. We saw earlier that creation is groaning and we are groaning.

And now we find that God the Spirit is also groaning. Three groaners. And in the midst of our suffering, he draws near and prays with wordless groans, verse 26.

[19:48] And the point is, as we saw before, that we're not suffering alone. We are joined in our suffering by the Spirit who dwells in us and who advocates for us, speaks for us.

He gives a voice to our groan, even as he groans with us, seeking relief and comfort from our Father in heaven. Verse 27 puts it like this.

This means, doesn't it, that in the midst of suffering for the Christian, even when you and I, we don't have a clue what to pray.

I don't know whether you've ever felt that. Where you just don't even know what to pray. You open your mouth and you're not even sure what words to say. All you can do is just groan. Still, the Spirit

of God knows.

He knows the mind of God. So he knows exactly why we are where we are. He knows exactly what's happening. He knows exactly what God's design is for us. And secondly, he searches our hearts so he knows us.

[20 : 53] He knows exactly what we feel. He knows exactly what we're longing for. He knows exactly what's going on in our hearts. And then with all of that information, the divine information and the information from us, what does he do?

He prays in perfect alignment with the will of God. Prayers that will always be answered. A number of years ago, I had a friend called Gary.

He used to be a quick fit fitter. You know what a quick fit fitter is? Remember those adverts, We're the Boys Trust, yeah? And they jumped in the air? Yeah, he was one of them. And he suffered from years of bad health.

His marriage failed. He had a difficult relationship with his children. He lived alone in a small flat down the road from me. And he mostly drank just to kind of forget his pain.

On his journey through life, he met a Christian who had shared the gospel with him and walked him through Mark's gospel. He became a Christian. But in becoming a Christian for Gary, the suffering didn't end and his addictions didn't go away.

[22 : 03] His marriage didn't heal. His kids still only got in touch with him when they wanted his money. But I think for all of Gary's struggles, the greatest, he would have told you, was loneliness.

That feeling that he had no one cared. Gary would have spells in hospital where no one would visit him. He'd be in pain or just in his own mess.

And he had no one to press the buzzer for him. No one to say, please, can you help my friend? In the end, Gary died on his own in his flat.

I turned up a few days later. I stood outside and wondered why there was no answer. He'd been found by a neighbor. But in the times that I spent with Gary, this is the comfort that we would talk about.

This is what would bring a smile to his face and a tear of joy to his heart. It's, listen, you feel alone, but you're not alone. You're not alone.

[23 : 00] God, by his spirit, is with you. In the darkness of the night, in the loneliness of the hospital bed, in the absence of friends or family, when the list of people who have betrayed you is so long, still God will never let you, has never let you go.

In the groans of his pain as he moved from his bed to his chair, in the half-silent plea just for help in the middle of the night, all of that was heard. All of that was understood.

All of that was picked up by the spirit who dwelt in him, taken to his father in heaven to ask just for what he needed. How about you?

Do you feel alone? Does your suffering cut you off from people? People that you loved and cared for? Maybe you feel this morning no one really knows your pain, no one knows your anxious thoughts, no one knows the trouble that wakes me in the middle of the night.

I never speak about it with anybody. Well, here is comfort. If you're a Christian this morning, if you are in union with Christ by faith in him, then whatever it is, whatever it might be, you are not abandoned.

[24 : 14] God is with you and not just kind of passively with you. God is actively with you by his spirit in your heart. And the point is here that the father in heaven, your father in heaven, is fully briefed on your situation.

There's not a groan that you have that he's not heard. There's not a tear that you have shed that he's not counted. There's not a sleepless night where you've tossed and turned in bed, worried and anxious that he's not noticed.

There's not a moment that you've been away from him. Because all of it has been brought to his attention by the spirit who dwells in you and prays for you. So take comfort.

Future glory outweighs present suffering. And you are not alone. You are not alone. Comfort number three. Our suffering is good for us.

Our suffering is good for us. Verses 28 to 30. This is the final comfort. It's probably the best known, isn't it? Have a look down at verse 28. Let me read it to you. And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

[25 : 25] Now notice carefully how this verse works. This is not a promise, is it, that everything works out in the end for everyone. It's not a kind of flippant, don't worry, it will all be all right. It's not that, is it?

Rather, this is a specific promise for those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. In other words, this is a promise not for everyone, but for Christians.

And the promise for the Christian is that in all things, not just in some things, but in everything, specifically here, including the suffering that we might right now be facing.

All of this in the final analysis will work for our goods. Now what is good there? Well, good in the context of Romans 8 is not a temporary good, but it's an eternal good.

It's the good of a glorious new creation. It's the good of being conformed to the image of his son. So the promise is not, you will always understand your suffering.

[26 : 30] Oh, I know I'm suffering this, so I might learn that. It's not promising that. It's not promising that you will always see the lessons that you need to learn from every difficult thing that happens. Rather, the point is that in eternity, you will see that it was all good.

All came together for the good purpose that God is working towards. So whilst I might never know why I got sick, why I lost that job, why I had to suffer in that way, still in glory I will see that I am transformed.

And the suffering of this life now was instrumental in it, in God's wisdom. Now, of course, you will only think that this is a comfort if you are persuaded that being made like Jesus is that good, right? If you don't think being made like Jesus is really good, then your suffering will always seem out of proportion. This is the statement that by faith says, I would rather suffer now to be like Christ than I would be to be in comfort now and left in my sin.

And that's the challenge, right? Because if you remember from Romans chapter 7, it's not so much that we just slip into doing a few things wrong. The problem, the challenge for us as Christians is that even though we're in union with Christ, we still have this old nature that hears it, it loves to sin.

[27 : 51] It loves it. And to suffer is to lose it. To sacrifice our reputation.

To lose our pride. To say goodbye to our independence. To miss our selfish dreams. And God says, that is good. That is Christ-like.

That is glorious. And it's not purposeless. It's not meaningless. Rather, every tear and every pain is designed by God not to destroy me, but to grow me into Christ's likeness.

And here's the thing. How can God make such a promise? How can God make such a promise?

What is the assumption of Romans 8, 28 about the power of God?

What is it implying about God's involvement in your life and your circumstances if you're a Christian this morning? Look down at verse 29 because that explains it. It starts with the word for, which means it's the reason. Yeah?

[28 : 51] This is the reason that verse 28 works. For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son. That he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

And those he predestined, he also called. Those he called, he also justified. Those he justified, he also glorified. This then is how this incredible truth works out.

You cannot have the consolation of verse 28 without the sovereign power of God, verses 29 and 30. You might want it, but you can't have it. But God can work all things for your good because he is sovereign over all of your life in all of its detail.

Work through it with me. First, you see, don't you, that he foreknew you. Which doesn't mean just that he kind of knew about you, right? Knowing in the Bible implies way more than that. When Abraham knew his wife, it means more than just he knew about her, right?

This is God entering into a relationship with you eternally. Before you knew, he knew you. And then in that foreknowledge, he predestined, literally pre-decided.

[29 : 59] God's decision before your decision. He chose you to conform you to the image of Christ, to Christ-likeness. So that Jesus would have many siblings.

Next you hear that he called you to belong to him. Again, not just in a general way. Hey, anyone want to have faith in Jesus? Not that. No, a specific way. Hey, you, Steve, Robin, whoever it is, come, follow Jesus.

I've chosen you. Maybe it is this morning that he's calling you right now. You know in your heart. You hear him. Come, follow me.

You belong to me. I knew you before time began. I predestined you and I'm calling you right now. Don't resist him.

And in responding to that call, we see that we're justified, declared not guilty in Christ, and then glorified. Foreknown, predestined, called, justified, glorified. And so it scans, doesn't it, of course, verse 28 is true.

[31 : 07] Of course, my suffering is in his hands, working for my good, because God has been eternally invested in my salvation. He's worked all things to bring me to this point.

Suffering, sin, the devil himself is not able to stop the eternal counsels of God. Who could? Another friend of mine was called David.

He was a big, big guy, right? He was strong. He was capable. David could build almost anything. He worked as like a fixer and a mechanic for a mission agency, getting supplies into some of the most difficult countries in the world.

He would drive through different war zones. He replaced gearboxes on Land Rovers at the side of the road. And he'd love to tell you the stories kind of over and over and over again.

But David got sick, got cancer. And he was determined, right? Really determined that he wouldn't be defeated by it. So he lost his mobility.

[32 : 14] And so he got a mobility scooter on the NHS or whatever it was. And that wasn't quite good enough, so he adapted it, right? So he cut it in half. He lengthened its chassis.

And he made it so that it could go off-road, so that he could still go on the trails that he quite liked to go on. He'd sleep in the back of a van that he parked his mobility scooter in and go off to wild places.

But eventually the point came that he couldn't do that anymore. And in my last conversation with David, he said, I'm so strong. I was so strong.

I had things I wanted to do. I had people I still wanted to help. I'm weak and I'm dying. I spent a lot of time with him in the days before he died.

And we looked at these verses more than once. Because the truth is, he was never strong. Before the cancer, with the cancer, he was never strong.

[33 : 16] It was always, only, ever the Lord. Jesus doesn't need you. He doesn't need me. He doesn't need my strength. I need him.

I don't hold on to him. He holds on to me. He stands behind all of my successes. And he designs all of my weaknesses.

In order that I might be conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus. That I might be with him in glory. Can I say to you, if you're a Christian this morning, please take comfort.

Future glory is bigger than anything you're facing right now. God is with you by his spirit and has not left you on your own. And suffering, as painful and as difficult as it is, is ultimately that we might be like his son.

For our good and his glory. Let me pray. As I close. Heavenly Father, we thank you.

[34 : 35] That in the midst of our suffering, we are comforted by thoughts of future glory.

By the reality of your presence with us by your spirit. And of this conviction that all things work together for our good. Lord, please.

I pray especially for brothers and sisters in this room who are really suffering this morning. May they know your comfort. I pray for people in this room who don't yet know the Lord Jesus.

May they hear your call this morning. To be united with Jesus by faith. So that his blessings are their blessings. Forgiveness.

Righteousness. Glory. And even suffering. We praise you. That you hold us and keep us.

[35 : 37] And will not let us go. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.