



**Temple Baptist Church**  
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**Suffering and the Saints:  
A Soft Pillow for a Weary Head  
Romans 8:12-39**

Over the past few weeks, we've been thinking together about the theme of "Suffering and the Saints." From the lament we find in Psalm 13, we've seen how we can pray honestly to God in the confidence that He will answer us according to His own character and will. Through Job's experience, we've seen how God helps us reframe the issue of our suffering to help us see it from a different perspective. From Paul's teaching in Romans 5, we've seen how even though God sometimes works in mighty ways to deliver His people from suffering and trials, often, maybe even most often, He chooses to grant us "the miracle of endurance."<sup>1</sup>

A different perspective can help us tremendously, and endurance is exactly what we need in our trials.

But sometimes in the midst of our toils and tribulations, we simply get tired and weary. We need *rest*. We need *something to sustain us*. We need *something to strengthen our hope*. Where do we find it?

***Searching for rest***

If circumstances begin to improve, we might find some rest and encouragement in that. We see the light at the end of the tunnel. Hope is rekindled. Things begin to look brighter. We perk up emotionally and spiritually.

But sometimes the light at the end of the tunnel turns out to be a train. And sometimes the tunnel just stays as dark as it ever was.

What do we do then? Can we really depend on our shifting circumstances to kindle hope, to sustain us, to give us rest when our spirits are so weary?

Many people, especially those who are "fixers," turn to psychology and self-help. They think that if they can improve their skills or understand their situation better, they can deal with it more effectively. And to some degree, these things can help us.

But there are some things we face in life that neither psychology nor self-help can do much with. We may be able to change *ourselves* a little, but we can *never* really change *other people*. And sooner or later, no matter how well-intentioned or determined we may be, our own strength and moral reserves simply aren't enough. Any hope that our self-help successes may have kindled fades into hopelessness as our efforts begin to flounder and fail.

What about family and friends? Faithful family and friends can indeed see us through many hard times. Our family of faith (our church family) is a wonderful comfort to us in times of trouble. And the support of all of them is priceless. And yet even the closest family and most steadfast friends can help us only so far. There are some things that no other human being can do for us. They can give us spiritual guidance, spiritual support, and to some degree spiritual

comfort. But they cannot give us spiritual *rest* in the midst of the weariness of our trials.

Where can we find such help and rest, then?

Paul tells us in our text for today.

I've read this passage to dying disciples and later to their bereaved families. I've seen suffering saints cling to it in times of trial, and rest their faith in it when it seemed as though they were too weary to go on, finding that as Moses promised the tribe of Asher in Deuteronomy 33:25, "**as your days, so shall your strength be.**"<sup>2</sup>

I've found comfort and confidence in this text in my own trials, especially when I didn't understand what God was up to in my life or my family's life.

And this morning, in this world that's filled with heartache and sorrow, fear and frustration, disasters and destruction, it comes to us as God's word for today.

### ***Finding rest***

Paul lived in a world that was hostile to the Christian faith. In addition to the suffering that's the common lot of humanity because of sin in the world, he often suffered for his faithfulness to Christ and for preaching the gospel.

Our trials may be different from Paul's, but they're no less real. So maybe the confidence he expresses in this text can have something to do with us too.

We actually pick up Paul's line of thought in verse 12. His **therefore** indicates that he's basing what he's saying here on what he's already said about Christ's having done for us what we could not do for ourselves, delivering us from sin, forgiving us and setting us free to live in Him, giving us the hope of resurrection, and dwelling in us through His Holy Spirit.

All this, Paul says, should impact the way we live. We are no longer obligated to the flesh—our old sinful nature—to live according to its ways. Rather, by God's Spirit in us, we are to put to death the misdeeds of the body, since all those **who are led by the Spirit of God . . . are sons of God**, and should thus live like Him.

A word about **sons**—Paul is *not* excluding females here. He's talking about a legal standing. While in our culture today sons *and* daughters rightly have equal standing under the law, that wasn't the case in Paul's day. He goes on to use the metaphor of adoption, specifically adoption *as sons*, to show how *God has adopted us into His family as full heirs of all that He has given to Christ*.

This Spirit God has given us is **the Spirit of adoption** rather than **a spirit of bondage** that makes us fall back into **fear**. By this Spirit we cry, "**Abba! Father!**" (**Abba** was the special term that a child speaking Aramaic would use to address his or her father—like our "Daddy" or "Papa"—and the term that Jesus used to address God the Father). When we call God our Father, or Abba, it is the Spirit bearing **witness with our spirit that we are children of God**. And since we are His *children*, we are His *heirs*—**heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ**, His only begotten Son.

All this sounds wonderful, doesn't it? Until Paul adds the qualifier: **if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together** with Him. Sharing in His suffering is the prelude to sharing in His glory. For Paul, suffering is *integral* to the Christian experience.

But suffering doesn't *define* the Christian experience! Because as Paul goes on to say here, *this present suffering isn't worthy to be compared with the glory to which we are heirs*. Even the very creation itself is waiting with eager expectation for the completion of our salvation in the resurrection. The creation was subjected unwillingly to futility and frustration because of human sinfulness. But God subjected it in hope—the hope that **the creation itself will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God** (8:21).

The creation groans as with the pains of childbirth under this burden and in this hope. But not just the creation—**we who have the firstfruits of the Spirit** (the presence of the Spirit is the earnest or the downpayment on God’s promise) also groan inwardly as we await the finalization of our adoption **through the redemption of our body**—our resurrection at the last day!

That’s our hope, and we wait for it patiently. And when we consider our present sufferings alongside that hope, *they pale in comparison*.

But it’s still tough, and Paul knew that well.

So he points to how ***likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses***. There are times that we just don’t know what to pray for or even how to pray. But in those times, *the Spirit Himself prays for us, making intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered* (8:26). He knows our hearts and minds, and God’s mind and will, and prays for us **according to the will of God**.

But there’s more. As the Spirit intercedes for us according to God’s will, *that will is a part of God’s great eternal purpose*. Paul says that we know by experience that God is working **all things together for good** for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

And what is that purpose? It’s our eternal good—*that we will be made like Christ*, culminating in our own resurrection when we receive a glorified body like His. God’s purpose is *not to make us “happy”* or to give us everything we want from the world’s perspective. His purpose is *to make us holy*, and to give us all things with Christ in eternity!

God has started it, and He will finish it. No matter what happens to us, God is working in it to bring us to glory—to being like Christ. This is *not* a naïve optimism or Pollyanna outlook; it’s a holy confidence that *takes suffering seriously* but looks at it *from the perspective of God’s eternal purpose* rather than time’s tunnel vision that tries to make us see nothing else. Paul points to God’s *foreknowledge, predestination, justification, and glorification* of His children to emphasize that it’s all God’s doing from beginning to end, and that what He has initiated He will bring to completion!

So, Paul says, **If God is for us, who can be against us?** It really doesn’t matter if anyone is, so long as **God is for us**, because there is absolutely nothing in all creation that can separate us from His love in Christ Jesus!

So with all this, Paul expressed his deep conviction that *God is working out His eternal purpose in believers*. We know that God is on His throne, that He is ultimately in control. Though not everything that happens to us is good, He is working *in* everything for our good. Not everything that happens is His will, but He is working His will *in* everything that happens. Even though we don’t always understand His ways, we know that as His children we can trust Him always to work for our ultimate eternal good and His glory.

### ***What God is doing***

Many years ago, I read somewhere that in ancient times a goldsmith practiced a very precise art. He would purify his gold by heating it beyond its melting point. As he would sit by the cauldron stirring the gold, the dross and impurities would rise to the top. He would very delicately skim them off, careful not to take any of the gold with them. The way he would know the gold was completely pure was when he could look over into the pot and see a perfect reflection of himself!

Isn’t that something like what God is doing in our lives?

In his little book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis put it another way. Borrowing a parable from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish minister and writer George MacDonald, whose work had been so influential in Lewis’ thought, he wrote:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building up a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.<sup>3</sup>

When God is working in us to make us like Christ, He is indeed making us into a whole new creature! And that can sometimes be very painful, and very tiring.

When you're physically or mentally or emotionally tired, I mean really tired, worn out from a long hard day or week or month, there's nothing quite like being able to lie down and rest, is there?

Isn't it the same when we're weary and worn out from the trials and tribulations of life and the ways God is working through them in us? We need *spiritual* rest and refreshment. *We can find that rest in the conviction that God is working out His eternal purpose in Christ in us, no matter what we're going through.*

And that, my brothers and sisters, is, as I heard another preacher put it many years ago, “a soft pillow for a weary head.”

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. John Eddins, my Systematic Theology professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Scriptures quotations are from The Holy Bible, New King James Version®.

<sup>3</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), 174.