

## The Meantime of the Gospel

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Romans: The Gospel of God Series

Romans 8:18-27

I want to begin with a story from a pastor named Max Lucado, a very popular Christian writer, from his book titled The Eye of the Storm.

### The Eye of the Storm by Max Lucado

*Chippie the Parakeet never saw it coming. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage; the next he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over.*

*The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said "hello" when "sssopp!" Chippie got sucked in. The bird owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie – still alive, but stunned.*

*Since the bird was covered with dust and soot, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held Chippie under the running water. Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do...she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air. Poor Chippie never knew what hit him. A few days after the trauma, the reporter who'd initially written about the event contacted Chippie's owner to see how the bird was recovering. "Well, she said, "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore –he just sits and stares."*

How many of you have felt like poor Chippie at some point in the last few years? You've been vacuumed up, drenched and blow dried and you don't sing much anymore. You just sit and stare. Maybe some of you feel like poor Chippie today as you listen to this message.

We've been studying Paul's letter to the Romans all fall. If you've been listening to these messages, we've seen that Paul says some amazing things to people, who have put their trust in Christ for salvation. For example, he says, Christians have peace with God.

Romans 5:1 (NIV)

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

Christians have access to God and his grace.

Romans 5:2 (NIV)

...through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

Christians will never face condemnation.

Romans 8:1 (NIV)

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,

We won't face condemnation now; and, we won't face condemnation when we stand before God on the Day of Judgment.

Christians will be raised from the dead.

Romans 8:11 (NIV)

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

Christians have been adopted into God's family and given the Spirit of Sonship.

Romans 8:15–16 (NIV)

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

Christians are heirs of God.

Romans 8:17 (NIV)

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.

In light of these incredible statements about what we presently possess – we're the sons and daughters of God; we're heirs of God; we have the Holy Spirit in us; we have access to grace – in light of all of these incredible statements, we are surprised by Paul's statement about suffering. How can those, who have been set free from the law of sin and death, die? How can God's very own dearly loved children suffer? Why is it that if

you've trusted in Christ and you are a saved person, you still have to deal with so many disappointments and so much heartbreak?

In the text that we are looking at today the Apostle Paul explains that while God's salvation has begun in us, it is not yet completed. We live between what God started by adopting us as his children and what God will finish when he raises us from the dead. Right now we have access to God's grace; in the future we will see God face to face. How do we live between the times between the first coming of Christ and his second coming? How do we live, in other words, in the meantime so that we don't end up feeling like Chippie the Parakeet – we don't sing much anymore. We just sit and stare.

I've called today's talk, "The Meantime of the Gospel." Let's pray.

Romans 8:18–27 (NIV)

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. 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.

Let's look at Romans 8:18:

Romans 8:18 (NIV)

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

Paul is telling us here that suffering and glory belong to two different ages, two different eras. He speaks in Romans 8:18 about the present sufferings. And then he speaks about the coming glory. Biblical writers talked about two different ages – this age and the age to come. This age is characterized by war and violence, by sorrow and heartbreak, by disappointment and frustration. The age to come is characterized by joy and fulfillment, peace and security, fellowship with God and perfect relationships with each other. Jesus came to introduce something of the age to come – the age of healing

and wholeness, peace and satisfaction. He came to introduce that into the present age. The age to come begins in us when we receive Christ. But it is not completed until the Lord returns.

So how do we live in the meantime, between the beginning of our salvation and the completion, between the first and second coming of Christ? The Apostle Paul suggests in this passage what life in the meantime looks like. He tells us, first of all, that there is groaning in the meantime.

### Groaning in the meantime

Paul speaks about three groans that characterize the present age. We read about creation groaning in v. 22.

Romans 8:22 (NIV)

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

We read about Christians groaning in v. 23.

Romans 8:23 (NIV)

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.

And we read about a third groan, the groan of the Holy Spirit in v.26.

Romans 8:26 (NIV)

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.

Three groans – the groan of creation, the groan of Christians, and the groan of the Holy Spirit. This age is an age of groaning. Let's look at this.

### Creation groans

Romans 8:20–22 (NIV)

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.

Why does creation groan? Paul here is speaking about the non-human part of creation – the plants, animals, rocks, trees, rivers, planets, moon and stars. He says all of this non-human creation is now groaning. Why?

Charles Cranfield, a New Testament scholar, answered the question about creation's groaning this way:

*And, if the question is asked, "What sense can there be in saying that the sub-human creation – for example the Matterhorn, or the planet Venus – suffers frustration by being prevented from properly fulfilling the purpose of its existence?", the answer must surely be that the whole magnificent theatre of the universe, together with all its splendid properties and all the varied chorus of sub-human life, created for God's glory, is cheated of its true fulfillment so long as man, the chief actor in the great drama of God's praise, fails to contribute his appropriate part.*

Until human beings are properly lined up with God, in other words, until we human beings are able to overcome all of the alienations – our psychological alienations, ourselves where we feel bad about ourselves, our relational alienations where we are divided off from each other and struggle in our relationships at work and family, all the ethnic and national conflicts, until relational alienation is overcome, until our alienation from nature is overcome from our own bodies, the sicknesses we experience, the problems with environmental exploitation, and until our spiritual alienation is overcome, our separation from God which is sin, until all of these things are healed in the second coming of Christ, creation itself won't reach its goal because the crown of creation, human beings, have not fulfilled our appointed destiny.

Let's pause and consider the scope of what Paul is saying about salvation. Three times the Apostle Paul mentions the creation.

Romans 8:19 (NIV)

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

Romans 8:20 (NIV)

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope

Romans 8:21 (NIV)

...that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

And in v. 22 the Apostle Paul mentions the whole creation:

Romans 8:22 (NIV)

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

You know, its not often that we hear Christians express the gospel message in terms of what it means for the whole creation, the whole universe and everything in it – every tree, every plant, every bug, every rock, every hill, every animal and fish, star and planet – the whole of our lives; not just our souls, but our bodies, our relationships, our marriages, our families, our work, our house, our gardens, our home decorations, our minds – all of creation, Paul says is going to experience salvation. Only this enormously big gospel, a gospel that involves restoring and rescuing everything everywhere that can help you when you are going through what Paul calls “this present suffering.”

Let me put it this way. If you ask many Christians in America, “What is the gospel?” they might say the gospel is this: Human beings have sinned, but God send his Son into the world to die for sinners. And if we trust in Christ and ask him into our lives one day we will live forever in heaven with God. The Apostle Paul says that may be at the center of the gospel message, but that’s not the whole of the message. The circumference of the message is much bigger than anyone of us as individuals, the saving of our individual souls for heaven. If the gospel doesn’t cover the entire universe, then why do we Christians feed hungry people as we do in this church and in tens of thousands of churches in America and across the world. Why do we do that?

Why is this church involved in sending a medical team to the Philippines, or in helping children to go to school in Zambia. Why do we work in a leper colony in Zambia? Why do we have medical researchers in our church, who are working to find cures for various physical and emotional diseases? Why do Christians care about being honest whether we’re selling houses, cars, or working for a company doing home repair? Why do we care about what our counsel is to someone? Why does anything, other than telling people to accept Jesus into their heart, why does anything else matter? Why isn’t everything else irrelevant?

Because the gospel affects all of creation. Because God put into motion a rescue operation through his Son, Jesus Christ, to not only rescue human beings, but to rescue the whole universe, to fix and repair everything. God decided to not scrap this universe. And when the crown of creation, human beings, turned our backs on him, he decided to save it.

So every bit that you do right now – every act of charity, every kind word, every honest day’s work, every bit of integrity that you exercise, every bit of environmental care and stewardship – it all contributes to the saving of the universe.

But not only does creation groan, but:

## Christians groan

Romans 8:23 (NIV)

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.

We saw before that Paul in v. 18 speaks about the present sufferings.

Romans 8:18 (NIV)

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

What is Paul talking about when he refers to the sufferings of this age? Let me tell you what he is not talking about. In the United States some of our middle-class Christians have such a poor grasp on what the Bible is referring to by “present sufferings,” that we American Christians actually make up suffering for ourselves.

I think during this time of year about the so-called “Christmas wars.” There was a letter to a local newspaper recently in which the writer said that he is putting retailers this Christmas season on notice that he’s only going to shop at stores in which the clerks wish him a “Merry Christmas,” instead of “Happy Holidays,” or “Seasons Greetings.” He said, “Run a holiday sale, and I will drive right on past to the next store that wants my Christmas business, unless stores are willing to acknowledge that this season is Christmas. I won’t shop there.”

I read that letter; and, I’ve heard these kinds of sentiments regularly expressed on Christian radio. I thought a number of things could be said about the secularization of Christmas, but saying “Happy Holidays,” or “Seasons Greetings,” would not be at the top of my list. Probably at the top of the list would be turning Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Christ, into an excuse to buy more clothes, boots, jewelry, iPhones, iPads, Gameboys, to load up our already-over-stuffed houses and over-indulged families.

The problem of turning Christmas into Exhibit A of secular consumerism and secular materialism is not going to be cured by a sales clerk wishing you Merry Christmas as you buy a new Gameboy console. The problem of spending hundreds, or even indeed, of spending thousands of dollars to celebrate Christmas is not going to be alleviated, if the story pipes in “Oh Little Town of Bethlehem” while the clerk rings up your sale instead of “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus.”

I am not sure that doing business only at stores that say “Merry Christmas” really honors our Savior or his birth. Paul speaks about “present sufferings,” I don’t think he’s referring to having to endure “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas.” What is he talking about?

There is suffering of so many different kinds in the present age. For the Christian we could break up our present suffering into suffering of three kinds. First, suffering because we have forsaken Christ.

Suffering because we have forsaken Jesus

Many times we Christians encounter great difficulty and, indeed, suffering because we've broken ranks with our Lord. We've stopped following our Commander-in-Chief. We've separated ourselves from God and we are off doing our own thing.

Friends, how many times have you suffered because you decided that you had a better plan for your life than the plan of Jesus. And so you entered a relationship; or you made a financial decision; or you followed a vocational path that you knew was not God's will for you. But you decided to do it anyway. And then you suffered for it. Sometimes we suffer because we've forsaken Jesus.

And we suffer because we follow Jesus.

Suffering because we have followed Jesus

Matthew 5 talks to us about that. Jesus says:

Matthew 5:11 (NIV)

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Sometimes we suffer because we follow Jesus. I think about husbands who get down on their wives because their wives are Christians. Or wives who get down on their husbands because they want to follow Jesus more closely. Because the wife or husband wants to read their Bible; because they want to do what scripture tells us to do – they want to go to church; they want to tithe; they don't want to join in sin anymore the way they used to. I think of folks who have had friends turn their backs on them because you've made a Christian commitment; because you are not doing what you used to do, or saying what you used to say. And so you are seen as an extremist or you are put in this really little box of being judgmental, or hypercritical, when you are none of those things. Suffering because you follow Christ - I certainly think of our brothers and sisters around the world, who are suffering in Iran, in North Korea, in Saudi Arabia, in Egypt because they follow Christ.

Sometimes we suffer because we've forsaken Christ; sometimes we suffer because we follow Christ. Sometimes we suffer even as we follow Christ,

Suffering even as we follow Jesus

Even though you are following Jesus, even though you are praying, even though you are reading your Bible, even though you're tithing, even though you are endeavoring to walk closely to Christ and with Christ, you are still suffering.

I think of financial trials – you're laid off; your car just died; you don't have a car. You have unexpected dental bills, or unexpected medical bills. Maybe your suffering is vocational. You can't find a fulfilling job; you've been laid off; the market is glutted in the field you've studied for; they've eliminated all jobs that you are qualified for; you're working for a terrible boss; you're always overlooked for promotion. Your struggle could be physical. You have an illness. You can't get pregnant. You've got a long-term chronic disease.

Your suffering could be relational. You've been slandered. Your spouse has cheated on you. You've been stabbed in the back. You've been misinterpreted. You have a kid who is rebelling, or parents who are ill. Your small group is collapsing. You've been dismissed from a ministry role that you love. Sometimes we suffer even as we follow Christ.

Christmas may make you groan this year because a loved one is gone. Maybe you are alone. You are separated from your family. You are single, or you are divorced. Holidays, for many, are a groaning time.

And then we read about:

#### The Spirit groans

Romans 8:26 (NIV)

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.

Why would the Holy Spirit groan alongside of the groaning creation and the groaning church? Paul writes about the groaning Holy Spirit. Some commentators have resisted this. They've said, "No, the Holy Spirit could never groan. He causes us to groan." But that's not what Paul says. It is absolutely the case that creation groans and we groan because we are in a state of imperfection. We're in a state of fallenness. The Holy Spirit is perfect. Why would he groan?

He groans because he so identifies with his children's suffering. He so shares the pain of his world and of his church. the Spirit's heart is so tender that he groans along with the rest of the groaning universe.

Friend, is that the way you think about God? Do you imagine in your mind that the Lord groans when you groan? That the Lord might shed tears when you shed tears. Psalm 34

says that the Lord is near to the brokenhearted. Isaiah 63 says that in all of our distress, he, too, is distressed.

The reality of creation's groaning, of our own groaning, of the Spirit's groaning – this reality of groaning should color our Christian lives. These three groans should keep us from the kind of rah-rah-superficial-everything-is-wonderful syrupy and sappy substitute for real Christianity. For the Christian, our joy is always mingled with groanings in this broken, fallen, suffering present age. The church always ought to be a groaning church in the midst of a groaning world.

How do we live in the meantime? As we live between the first coming and second coming of Christ; between salvation begun and salvation completed? We wait.

#### Waiting in the meantime

Look at vv.23 and 25:

Romans 8:23–25 (NIV)

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...But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

We wait eagerly

God always asks his children to wait. In fact, some of the greatest saints in history waited. I think of Father Abraham, who had to wait until he was 100 years old before he had a child. I think of Moses, who waited 40 years on the backside of the desert until he was restored to leadership among God's people. Now is a waiting time.

Wait? We don't want to wait. This stupid computer; this website is taking so long to load, I've been staring at the screen for 3 seconds. When is this video going to download? Wait? Forget about waiting. I waited in my car with the heated seats outside of Starbucks for at least 2 whole minutes waiting for my non-fat, no whip caramel macchiato to be served up. What is the barista's problem? I want my drink and I want it now and I want to get out of here.

But God's way of getting us ready for the new creation life is to make us wait. It is not just a dull passive resigned waiting, the kind of waiting that you might see in an airport terminal when the airplane is delayed for four hours. People just flopping over their seats, college students lying on the floor using their backpacks as pillows, listening to their iPods.

Our waiting is not the waiting of resignation. Paul calls it an eager waiting. It is an expectant waiting. We are waiting in hope. It is an intense waiting. It is what the psalmist talks about in Psalm 130:5,

Psalm 130:5 (NIV)

I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope.

This picture is of people who have the duty right now to watch on walls through the night and they are waiting for morning to come so that they can rest. Or maybe the city is being besieged and these people are standing on the wall, waiting for morning and for help to come. The psalmist says my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning. It is an eager waiting for the Lord. The apostle Paul says something similar when he wrote to Titus in Titus 2:13.

Titus 2:13 (NIV)

...while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,

Do you find yourself eagerly waiting for Jesus to show up in your life, this kingdom to be manifested in some way – in a healing, in a deliverance, in a loved one’s salvation, eagerly waiting for the new creation, eagerly waiting to see God?

But we know we can’t have it all right now, so there is a patient waiting.

We wait patiently

Romans 8:25 (NIV)

But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

We can’t get ahead of ourselves. The devil always comes along and promises people more than they can have right now. And he shatters us with disappointment when his false promises don’t happen. The devil comes and whispers in Christians’ ears: You can have your body totally healed right now all the time. You can have a perfect marriage. You can have a perfect dating relationship. You know, the Bible says you shouldn’t have any financial problems. There is prosperity for everyone all of the time. And when these things don’t happen, then the devil whispers in your ear: where’s your God now? You’ve been abandoned by God. Where is your God now. God doesn’t care about you. God is a liar. God won’t keep his promises; he doesn’t keep his promises to you right now. Throw in the towel! Give up! Christianity doesn’t work for you!

Friends, God never promised you or your loved ones that you or they would have no problems. This world is not yet fully redeemed. Our blessed hope – Jesus Christ has not yet come back. And we ourselves right now are only half saved; we’re only partially

restored. The reason we need to wait not only eagerly, but patiently is so that we don't fall prey to the devil's lies that we can have everything right now. Waiting, patient waiting is one of the ways, one of the main ways that God gets us ready for his coming kingdom. He knocks off all our proud insistent demands – you've got to give me this right now, or I won't love you; I must have this now, or I won't obey you. - all of the pride, all of the independence in our lives. He shapes us through patient waiting.

What does patient waiting look like? What are you called to in the meantime? I think of this cardinal virtue of Christians that is just simple perseverance, not quitting. In Winston Churchill's last public speak when he was in his mid-80's, he was helped to the podium because he could barely walk. Several thousand people were waiting to hear Sir Winston Churchill speak. He stood there for what seemed like eternity. It was obvious that he was struggling. He was old. People wondered if he needed help. Finally, the old lion gained his voice and, just as he had with wartime England, he screamed out with a booming voice: "Never give up! Never give up! Never, never, ever give up!" And then he turned around and sat down. Several thousand people instantly leapt to their feet because they knew they had witnessed the coming together of a life and a message which gave the message such authenticity.

In the midst of the present suffering, never give up, never, never, ever give up! Don't quit. Persevere. Patiently wait.

Paul speaks of groaning in the meantime; waiting in the meantime, and hoping in the meantime.

#### Hoping in the meantime

Romans 8:23–25 (NIV)

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.

How do we live in the meantime? We live in hope. Hope is at the foundation of life. Hope is at the foundation of any good marriage. Hope is the way we human beings get through difficult things – the loss of a job, painful marriages, romantic breakups, severely disabled or ill children, the failure of ministry. It is hope that carries us forward. Hope is the way that we human beings live and don't just survive.

Romans 8:18 (NIV)

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

This verse is very similar to a statement the apostle Paul makes in another letter in 2 Corinthians 4:17 where he writes this:

2 Corinthians 4:17 (NIV)

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

What the apostle Paul is saying is that when I weigh on a scale my present sufferings, or my loved ones' present sufferings, or even this world's present sufferings, even though they seem so unbearable, so heavy, so overwhelming, nevertheless, compared to the eternal weight of glory that will be revealed in us, these sufferings are light and momentary. They aren't light in themselves. They are heavy in themselves. They are horrible in themselves. But they only become light in comparison to something much weightier – the glory that you or your loved ones, or this world is going to experience.

We must never think about suffering in isolation. We Christians must always compare it with the glory to be revealed.

Do you ever think this way or allow God's future, God's kingdom to impact your mood right now? Do you ever say to yourself: Yes, I am going through a terrible time right now. We are going through a terrible time right now. But this season, this year, this decade, this is a blink of an eye compared to eternity and this suffering is like a grain of sand on the scale compared to the weight of glory that is going to shine through me, that's going to shine through my family, that's going to shine through this universe.

Again, it doesn't mean that the present circumstances don't hurt a lot. It doesn't mean that you don't shed real tears or experience real grief right now. But our knowledge of the future sets our tears and our grief in a context of enormous hope. Let me explain what I mean.

Let's say that you are going through a difficult patch with one of your children right now. Maybe you are encountering incredible teenage rebellion. The relationship with your child is very strained. They are lying to you and they are using drugs. They are sexually active. Maybe your child has gotten involved with a really bad crowd. They've gone off in a bad direction. But if you knew that this was just a season that your child would turn fully to Christ, that your child would turn out to live for Jesus and to love Jesus with all their hearts when they got to adulthood, it would be a lot easier to go through your present time with peace and with joy.

Maybe you discover a weird lump or growth. Maybe the doctor has discovered a tumor in your breast or your uterus. You are going in for some tests. If you knew that it was all going to work out; if you knew the results of the test ahead of time, that it was going to be nothing, wouldn't you be able to experience peace and joy right now?

See, this is Paul's argument. That the present suffering can be endured, more than endured, it can be triumphed over when you have the end in view, when you know what's coming, and what's coming is that Jesus always reserves the best things for last.

How do we live in the meantime? We groan, we wait, we hope, and we pray. The Apostle Paul speaks about praying in the meantime.

### Praying in the meantime

Romans 8:26–27 (NIV)

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.

The Apostle Paul talks about the Spirit helping us in our weakness. Literally, he joins with us to help. He bears the burden alongside of us. The picture is of a person who is carrying a huge weight and the Holy Spirit comes alongside of us and says, "Here, let me carry that with you. I'm not going to carry it all, but I will assist you so that the weight doesn't crush you."

Have you ever experienced that, friend? It is the joy and mystery of the Christian life. Often when we anticipate suffering we think there is no way I could ever get through this. There is no way I could keep going. There is no way I won't quit. I'm so fragile and weak. I would have been crushed by the weight of that particular trial.

But as you begin to walk, step by step, left foot, right foot, left foot, have you ever experienced the Spirit coming alongside and helping you? And you felt, "My goodness, I didn't collapse. I'm making it through."

One way the Spirit comes alongside of us is that he helps us to pray. Paul says that we don't know what we ought to pray. We don't know what we're talking about. We don't know how to pray, or what style to pray in. Should we get down on our knees, or stand up? Should we scream out or pray silently? He's talking about that we don't know what we ought to pray. Sometimes we don't know what the content of our prayers ought to be.

Maybe you have an elderly relative, who is suffering from advanced dementia, or suffering from painful cancer. What do I pray? Maybe you have a friend, who is in a horrific marriage – it's abusive; their spouse is abusing drugs; it is just a dreadful situation; what do you pray, especially if they want to stay in that relationship? Someone asks for prayer and they're suffering the consequences of their own bad decisions – they are in debt; they are unhealthy; there is a conflict and you know that they are part of the conflict and they say, "Pray for me."

In this life between the first and second coming of Christ we often don't know what to pray. Our failure to know what to pray is not overcome in this present age. It is part of our weakness. It is part of life in this present world. When we are face to face with God, we will know fully, even as we are fully known. But now? We're struggling for discernment, for wisdom. What is the mind of God? Paul says that the Spirit knows the mind of God.

I find it incredibly encouraging, friend, that along with my own feeble prayers, the Bible assures me that there are two others interceding on our behalf – one who is interceding is already in heaven. Jesus Christ, as our great High Priest is interceding for us. And the Holy Spirit sent here to this world, the Spirit who lives in us, is praying to God the Father on our behalf. The Father sends the Son and the Spirit to join together with us as we live life in the meantime. Let's pray.

## The Meantime of the Gospel

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Rich Nathan

December 14-15, 2013

Romans: The Gospel of God Series

Romans 8:18-27

### I. Groaning in the meantime

A. Creation groans

B. Christians groan

1. Suffering because we have forsaken Jesus

2. Suffering because we have followed Jesus

3. Suffering even as we follow Jesus

C. The Spirit groans

### II. Waiting in the meantime

A. We wait eagerly

B. We wait patiently

### III. Hoping in the meantime

### IV. Praying in the meantime