

When a Child of God Suffers

Rich Nathan
August 11 & 12, 2018
When Life is Unfair
Romans 8:14-27

I started a sermon series last week that I titled, “When Life is Unfair”. The reason why we’re going to be looking at this subject over the next couple of months is because it is obvious to anyone who wasn’t born yesterday that pain and suffering in this world are not evenly distributed. Some seem to go through a much harder time in life than others.

There is a kind of childish myth that many followers of Jesus hold onto. The myth is that if I accept Jesus into my life and I choose to live for him, I will be pretty much immune from hurts and disappointments, relational conflicts, illnesses and accidents that the rest of the world goes through.

A woman in our church named Lisa wrote this to me recently:

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I sometimes joke that I was born with the “scales of justice” over my head! All of my life, there’s just something deep within me that yearns for “fairness” in all aspects of life.

I invited Jesus into my heart at age 9 and was baptized within the following year - while attending a legalistic Baptist church with my family. During this time, I somehow grasped onto the concept that if you “do right”, God will bless you. So, I tried hard all my life to “do the right thing” so I could get God’s blessings. Unfortunately, this flawed belief set me up for the lowest, darkest and most “unfair” period of time in my life.

Like most girls raised in the 60s & 70s, I dreamed of a knight in shining armor to come sweep me off my feet and provide the life of my dreams – beautiful, chubby cheeked little children, the house with the white picket fence and a pretty tree and flowers in the front yard.

I fell for the first “knight” who wanted to marry me, at the young age of 19. During the year of courtship, I ignored some signs that I should have paid attention to, but I thought I was in love and God would bless us for “doing the right thing” by waiting to consummate our relationship after marriage.

On our wedding day, on the way to our reception from the church, he hit me for the first time. This led to a period of years where I was physically and mentally abused so terribly by this former Marine that I eventually fled in fear of my life with our two baby sons (aged 3 and 8 months) by stealthily out of the house one morning, while he was sleeping, after hiding garbage bags of our clothes out the back door. We fled to Choices, a domestic violence shelter for women. The boys and I stayed safely hidden there for several weeks, while the attorney I worked for filed a restraining order and divorce papers. I eventually received temporary full custody of my children from the Courts.

Over the years, I discovered that both of my sons had some serious medical and emotional conditions which required a lot of expensive therapy, medications and physical and psychological treatment. Often, we didn’t have health insurance and of, course, no way to pay

out of pocket costs. Again, God miraculously provided – not ahead of time, but always when we needed it. More than once, I sat crying and desperate in my car in the parking lot of the grocery store with my two little guys in their car seats in the back of the car, wondering how I was going to buy them food and milk and also pay for the prescription for antibiotics that I had just left the doctor’s office with. Another ear infection, tonsils needed to come out, psychological therapy was needed. It felt like there was no way out. I could barely make the rent and utilities – often robbing Peter to pay Paul – holding off the utility companies with small payments to keep the lights on. I started questioning God even harder. Fear of becoming homeless was all too real. I cried out in despair and anger. I felt like a drain on my family and their limited resources. How much could I take? As I railed at God about the unfairness of all of this, it continued to get worse. All of this time, I was also trying to keep my job while taking time off for sick kids, paying for daycare, dealing with their learning and behavioral issues at school and even at church. I actually was “laid off” and “let go” from some jobs, but each time, Jehovah Jireh provided more and better jobs, increasing my salary and experience each time.

There was also a really dark time that I considered that the world would be better off without us and I nearly drove us off a bridge once. That “fantasy” scared me and I finally sought some counseling for myself. Satan had me in emotional agony for years about the unfairness of God. **Why, when I had done “everything right”, was my life so miserable and wrong?** I had served God all of my young life, working in ministries in the church, attending church, praying, reading my Bible, honoring God... **how could He let this happen to me?**

Here is a beloved child of God who is struggling with the amount of pain that God has allowed in her life. Can any of you identify at all with Lisa?

We cannot explain all of the reasons why any particular person suffers at any particular time. But I do believe that the scripture gives us some handholds, some really healthy ways to respond to suffering and the unfairness of life. Even if we don’t fully understand why these things are happening to us.

Today, what I’d like to do is talk to those of you in particular who have become followers of Jesus. You are children of God. I know that not everyone here has become a committed follower of Jesus. At the end of this message, I’ll give you an opportunity to make a new or renew a commitment to Jesus. When you hear today’s sermon, you are overhearing a conversation that I’m having with those who have become committed followers of Jesus.

I’ve called today’s message, “When a Child of God Suffers”. Let’s pray.

I want to begin by looking at Romans 8:14-17

Slide Romans 8:14-17

¹⁴For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ¹⁵The 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.” ¹⁶The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. ¹⁷Now 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.

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Suffering as a child of God

Consider the extraordinary privileges of being a child of God. Paul tells us that if you are a child of God, you're a person who **is led by the Spirit of God**. You don't have to make your own way in life. You don't have to figure out your own path. God will lead you. God will direct you to make the right decisions. Not only do you get God's leading, God's direction, but if you're a child of God, **God's Spirit actually lives in you**. Not only that, **God's Spirit confirms in you that you're a child of God**. It's by God's Spirit that we cry "Abba, Father!" The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we're God's children. Not only that, we're **heirs of God**. Look at verse 17:

Slide Romans 8:17a

¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ...

When I read through the benefits and blessings that we read here of being a child of God, it almost reminds me of the reading of a will. I imagine a very wealthy grandparent or parent leaving their estate to a grandchild or a child. You come in and the attorney is reading the will. It's just one blessing after another. "You, my child, get my estate. You also get the country house. You get my car collection – including the Lamborghini. You inherit all my stock and my bank accounts and the yacht and the apartment in New York City. Oh yes, and we can't forget that you also inherit suffering."

Look at verse 17:

Slide Romans 8:17

¹⁷ 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.

The end of verse 17 comes as such a surprise. We would not expect in a paragraph like Romans 8:14-17 where we're talking about all of the privileges of being a child of God, being led by the Spirit, having God himself living inside of us, knowing that we know that we're children of God. We have the privilege of being able to call the Almighty God Father. The blessing of being an heir of God. We would not expect in a paragraph like that that we would be talking about suffering. But part and parcel of being a child of God in this world is not only the privileges, but also the pain.

Here's what we read:

Slide Romans 8:18-20

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope

Let me read again Romans 8:18:

Slide Romans 8:18

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

We read here about

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Suffering and the two ages

The Apostle Paul uses two words here that speak to us about the two ages or eons of this universe: this age and the age to come, the present and the future. This age is characterized by suffering. The next age is characterized by glory. This age is an age of agony. The age to come is the age of ecstasy.

How many of you are old enough to remember the old TV show that was on Saturdays, ABC's Wide World of Sports. There was an opening montage of various sports scenes. They would move from gold medal winning performances, people breaking through the tape in a marathon, boxers knocking out their opponents. Then they always showed the other side of sports – the defeats, the losses, the disappointment.

One of the scenes that they always showed was a guy who was going down the ski jump and somehow tripped. You'd watch him cartwheel down the ski jump and crash into the fence. Over it, the announcer would always intone, "Spanning the globe, bringing the constant variety of sports, the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat."

That's the characteristic of the two ages. The age to come speaks to us of the thrill of victory. This age speaks to us about the agony of defeat. The people of the Bible look forward to the age to come. In fact, the Jews had a word to describe what the world would be like in the age to come. The word they used was "Shalom".

Shalom described a world of wholeness, a time of contentment, a time of delight, where people are not always angry or irritated or annoyed and frustrated. Shalom means no more arguing or fighting or depression. Shalom is things working the way they should. Shalom is the world coming together rather than the world coming apart. A time where the world would live in harmony with each other. Not Jew against Arab and Hindu against Muslim and Protestant against Catholic and whites against blacks. Shalom is people living together in what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community. We experience true brotherhood and sisterhood in the human race.

The Old Testament Prophets looked forward to a day when people would walk again with God and would lean on God and trust in God. Shalom means healing for people's bodies and people's minds. No more cancer. No more heart disease. No more mental illness. Shalom means no more addiction, no more drug abuse, no more domestic

violence, no more school shootings. Shalom means strong healthy marriages. No more divorce. Strong healthy kids. No more loneliness. Shalom means long lives and an opportunity for all, satisfying work and beautiful art.

The Bible says that as a result of our first parents' sin, the shalom present in the Garden of Eden was lost. Here's what we read in Romans 8:20:

Slide Romans 8:20

²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, ...

Clearly, this is a reference to the judgment of God that followed Adam and Eve's disobedience. The ground was cursed. The man was cursed. The woman was cursed. Paul doesn't go through all the details of God's judgment or how it squares with the findings of modern science, but he sums it up by saying

Slide Romans 8:20a

²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration,

The word is translated "frustration". It means emptiness, futility, purposelessness, meaninglessness.

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Frustration = meaninglessness

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Suffering and meaninglessness

The book of Ecclesiastes talks a lot about meaninglessness in this life. The writer of Ecclesiastes regularly says, "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity." The problem of this age is not just the loss of shalom as a result of our first parents' sin. The problem of this age is not just suffering. What makes suffering so hard for the child of God is its seeming meaninglessness. If we could just understand why we or a loved one has to go through this, our suffering would be more bearable. Suffering is made so much harder when it makes no sense.

Over the course of this week our church did four funerals including the funeral of a 29 year old man who committed suicide and a 21 year old girl who OD'd. I did a funeral this weekend for a 40 year old wonderful husband and father of three who suddenly and unexpectedly died right after telling his wife how much he loved her on their 12th anniversary. We also had a funeral for a 61 year old member of our facilities team who died after a terrible fight with cancer. It's the seeming meaninglessness of suffering that make suffering so hard.

The Apostle Paul gives us some handholds, some healthy ways that we as children of God can respond to suffering so that we don't lose our faith in the midst of it. We can have a sense of overcoming. We cannot be survivors. We children of God can be overcomers!

What are the handholds provided by the Apostle Paul? The first handhold as a child of God is:

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Thinking as a child of God

Slide Romans 8:18

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

The words "I consider" are a translation of the Greek word

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Logizomai = I consider

It's where we get the word "logic". I consider, I think. When you're going through a hard time, that is not the time to indulge your feelings. You can't allow your feelings to take control. You may feel abandoned by God. You may feel that God is absent. You may feel hurt or disappointed or afraid or depressed. Paul says, Child of God, when you're going through it that's the time to really think about the precious promises of the gospel. Suffering in this age is just temporary. Glory is eternal. Sickness is just temporary. Healing is eternal. Separation through death is just temporary. Reunion with loved ones lost is eternal. Rejection and loneliness are just temporary. Welcome and love are eternal. When you, Child of God, are suffering, that's the time to think – think about the promises of God.

Whatever you feel, Jesus promised that He will never leave you or forsake you. He'll be with you until the close of the age. Nothing can ever separate you from the love of Christ. When the Lord returns:

Slide Revelation 21:4

⁴ 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

One of the handholds as a child of God so you don't lose your faith is **thinking**. And then there's

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Groaning as a child of God

Slide Romans 8:22-23

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ 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.

Paul speaks of various kinds of groaning in this age. Paul speaks about creation groaning.

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Creation groans

Slide Romans 8:22

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

You know that the death of Jesus on the cross for sin will one day impact all of creation. Paul writes:

Slide Romans 8:21

²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

The whole universe and everything in it – every tree, every plant, every bug, every rock, every hill, every animal, every fish, every star – the whole of our lives, not just our souls but our bodies, our relationships, our marriages, our family, our house, our garden, our music, the arts, entertainment, sports, our sex lives, ALL of creation is going to experience complete salvation. All of creation is going to enjoy the shalom of God through his son, Jesus Christ.

God has decided to rescue not only human beings or save our souls for heaven, but God has decided through his son, Jesus Christ, to rescue the whole universe – to fix and repair everything that is broken and out of joint. God in faithfulness decided not to scrap the world he made. When the creatures who God put in charge of the world turned their backs on him, namely us human beings, God decided to not scrap the world. He decided to save us, to save our planet and to save our universe.

Right now, the universe is not experiencing shalom. The planet itself is groaning. It's burning up with fire. It's convulsing with earthquakes. It's being destroyed by climate change. Creation has been cheated of God's intended purpose – to have all of nature

exist in harmony with God. One day the groans of creation will be answered by the return of Jesus Christ. Not only does creation groan, Paul says that **we** groan.

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We groan

Slide Romans 8:23

²³ 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.

Why do we groan? Because even though we are God's children now through our faith in Jesus, we are right now as it were, only half saved. If you are a person who at some point in your life reached out to Jesus Christ and you have said with all sincerity, "Jesus, save me. Come into my life. Change me. I give my life to you." The Holy Spirit comes into your life as a kind of down payment, a pledge of more to come.

But we don't have the full package now. Our salvation is not yet complete. We share creation's frustration and pain. Our bodies, the Apostle Paul says, have not yet been fully redeemed. We don't yet have our resurrection bodies. So we groan often in bodily pain – the pain of infertility, the pain of a bad back, the pain of a migraine, the pain of going through chemotherapy or an impacted wisdom tooth or chronic fatigue syndrome or being a paraplegic. Right now we groan bodily and we groan emotionally.

Where is the handhold in all this groaning? I understand how thinking can help us, but how does all this groaning help us? When we as children of God suffer, it's not just creation and it's not just we ourselves who groan, the Apostle Paul amazingly says this:

Slide Romans 8:26

²⁶ 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.

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The Spirit groans

Nowhere outside of Christianity would you ever have a statement like what Paul says in Romans 8:26. God groans with his creation. God who revealed himself in Jesus is so near to us that he suffers with his children. Where is God when we're hurting? He is nearer to us than a loving mother. You've heard parents say, "I can't bear to see my child suffer. I would so much prefer it was done to me." God doesn't just wish it was done to him. He took the suffering of the whole world upon himself at the cross.

God is so intimate with us through his Spirit that God aches with every assault. He weeps with every death. Jesus told Paul that when Paul persecuted the church in his

pre-Christian days he was literally persecuting Christ. His heart is broken with every disappointment. God himself groans. The Spirit groans over this planet. When we cry, God cries. When we hurt, God hurts. When we groan, God groans. Then, through us, the Spirit prays.

John Bunyan who spent 12 years in prison said,

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The best prayers have often more groans than words.

The Spirit helps us, Paul says. The Spirit intercedes for us. The Spirit groans for us and through us.

I did a funeral this weekend for a long-time member of our congregation. He was 40 years old. He was married with three young children. He and his wife and family went to the beach just a week and a half ago where he and his wife were going to celebrate their 12th anniversary together. Ryan and Christin were enjoying watching their kids play happily in the sand. They were side by side. They had a sweet conversation. Ryan turned to his wife and kissed her and told her he loved her. She said all was perfect until it wasn't. She looked over at him and he looked funny, his eyes were rolled back, he was gasping for breath. It appears that he had a heart attack suddenly at age 40.

Christin called 911 and then something inside of her began to groan. She said that the only thing she could say over and over and over again was "Jesus". Sometimes in times of distress we don't know what to say, we don't know what to pray, but the Spirit groans inside of us and calls out the precious name of Jesus through us.

The handholds as we suffer as children of God – we think, we groan and we wait. In giving us handholds so that when we as children of God suffer we don't lose our faith, the Apostle Paul speaks to us about waiting.

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Waiting as a child of God

Slide Romans 8:22-25

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ 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. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

As we live between the ages, as we live in this time between suffering and glory. The picture that comes to my mind is that, especially during times of suffering, we find ourselves in God's waiting room. When we or a loved one experience life's unfairness, we ought to say to ourselves, "**Right now, I'm in God's waiting room.**"

Have you ever sat in a hospital waiting room waiting for a doctor to come out and give you the news concerning a family member or a friend? Are they going to make it or not? The Apostle Paul says that when you're in God's waiting room there are two ways to wait successfully. He tells us that we need to wait eagerly.

Slide Romans 8:23

²³ 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 need to wait patiently.

Slide Romans 8:25

²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

If you'll give me permission, I'll reverse these as I close today. What does it look like to wait patiently?

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We wait patiently

A doctor recently posted a blog in which he talked about the uncomfortable experience of sitting in a surgical waiting room in support of a patient. Not as the physician breezing in to deliver the news, just as a human being desperate to hear what's going on with a loved one. The doctor said that there are three things he discovered in the surgical waiting room.

He said:

- **Solo waits seem longer than group waits.** It's hard to wait alone. If you have support – family, friends, church – the waiting is easier. Any of you who are going through a hard time, the hard time is much worse if you allow yourself to be isolated. Solo waits are much harder than group waits. You need to connect with the church. You need to push yourself to be involved in a small group or recovery group. That's the first thing.
- The second thing is that **unoccupied time feels longer than occupied time.** Sitting and staring at a clock makes things so much worse. But having friends to talk to, doing some work made the wait bearable. We need to be productive even while we're hurting.

- **Anxiety makes waiting seem longer.** Going through all the “what ifs” makes things so much harder. We should give our anxieties to the Lord.

A member of our congregation named Jeffrey suddenly found himself victimized by chronic fatigue syndrome after a very bad case of mononucleosis. He said the way that he’s dealing with his chronic bodily infirmity is he is keeping himself occupied. He’s helping out with his three grandchildren. He said that he was blessed to help his granddaughter in first grade crack the reading code this past winter. He helps his wife with her elderly parents. He helps teach English as a Second Language here at our Community Center to immigrants and refugees. He still works part-time. He continues to fellowship. He doesn’t allow himself to get isolated. He casts his cares on the Lord every morning. His time with the Lord, he said, is the foundation for him being able to endure what’s going on in his body.

The Apostle Paul says we need to wait patiently and we need to wait eagerly.

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We wait eagerly

Slide Romans 8:23

²³ 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.

The Apostle Paul wrote about eager waiting back in verse 19 when he said,

Slide Romans 8:19

¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

The Greek word here for eager expectation is derived from the word “Kara” which means “head.” We need to wait with our heads raised and our eyes fixed on a point on the horizon from which the expected answer is to come. You picture someone standing on tiptoe or straining their necks, leaning forward.

Inside God’s waiting room, whether you’re waiting for the repair of a broken marriage or the repair of a broken body or the possibility of romance to come into your life or justice to come, we can occupy ourselves in the meantime. We can wait patiently while doing good for those around us. Casting our cares on the Lord, not allowing ourselves to get isolated. But we also need to reach forward into the age of glory. We need to strain toward God. Even now, bring a little bit of that future age of glory into this age. Help me to taste tomorrow’s bread today. Let your kingdom come. Your kingdom of glory into my present suffering.

Whatever the reasons I'm going through this, I'm not going to allow my pain to obscure your glory. Come, Lord Jesus.

When a Child of God Suffers

Rich Nathan
August 11 & 12, 2018
When Life is Unfair
Romans 8:14-27

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