

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!

Life in Jesus - and Hope

(Romans 8:18-30)

Study #14

Introduction: The priceless commodity of hope...

Here at the beginning, let’s think together about hope. As much as any theme, hope inspires the poet.

Alexander Pope wrote, “*Hope springs eternal in the human breast.*” And Martin Luther King, Jr. famously and hopefully said, “*Only in the darkness can you see the stars*”

We could multiply such quotes (there are millions of them) and they are beautiful. But Pope also has this, “*Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed*” - words that are about as hopeless as any I have ever heard.

Hope in dire circumstances is courageous. Trust demotivators.com to come to the rescue with their dire poster advising us, “*Hope may not be warranted at this point*” as the buzzards circle overhead.

When we open our Bibles, we find realism - and we also find this same hope/hopelessness that is everywhere evident in our world.

There is despair in Job’s trials and in Ecclesiastes’ grim outlook on life and in Jeremiah’s laments.

And there is hope, even in the face of calamity. When Daniel’s three friends were threatened by King Nebuchadnezzar with the fiery furnace, they said, in effect, “*Do your worst, O King - our hope is in God.*”

This morning, we are continuing our study of the book of Romans again, today looking at one of the top three graces in the Christian life.

1 Corinthians 13 says that love is the best and starts off the list with faith. But sandwiched in between these two giants is the greatly under-appreciated commodity of hope.

Hope is a force that empowers as few other graces do. And it is a force that many of us may not put to good use often enough.

My hope today is that God will blow wind into the sails of our souls and cause us to be biblical realists who courageously set our hopes on what He has promised.

Today is our second Sunday in one of the highlight chapters of the Bible: Romans 8.

The Apostle Paul has just finished speaking about the glory of being adopted as God’s sons and daughters when he abruptly switches gears to address the troubled state of our world.

Hope for Future Glory

The Agony BEFORE the Ecstasy (v. 18)

Paul the realist

Paul was a realist. He took it for granted that we DO and WILL suffer in this life. And if anyone could write realistically about sufferings in this life, it would be Paul.

He would tell us of being pelted with rocks one day and of being shipwrecked another, of being rejected by both Jews and Gentiles and of being beaten by both crowds - all for living for Jesus.

Paul would have had very little patience with a Christian message that promised prosperity and ease. Paul's life was hard *because of his faith in Jesus!*

And frankly, it was hard because he lived in the first century where life for everybody was hard. (Archaeologists have discovered that very few people had A/C in the first century. All Internet connections were dial-up.)

And, if life was hard for Paul in AD 60, not much has happened over the last two thousand years to change that universal constant. Life is still hard, and we still suffer.

Sufferings - a universal reality

In many parts of the world, people are suffering unmercifully. In the Middle East and in perpetually violent and disease-ridden parts of Africa and in many third world countries lots of people are dying for lack of the basic necessities of life.

And if you and I are not facing exactly these hardships, we still know loss and failing health and physical pain and emotional heartache, to one degree or another, and often.

But, just as real to us as our sufferings are now is the certainty of our future glory with Jesus!

NOW - and the incomparable glories of THEN (v. 18)

[18] For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

There is no point trying to compare the two ages. It doesn't balance out. The glory of our future is waaaaay weightier than the hardship of the present.

Trust God. Our life in the new heaven and the new earth will be better than anything we can even imagine.

And yes, it is true that glory will be revealed TO US in Heaven. We will see God, and we will see Heaven's glories. But, glory will also be revealed IN US.¹

If you are a moon watcher, as I am, you may have noticed the full moon we experienced recently. It was full on nights that were cloudless. It was so bright that you could go outside and take a walk around without the aid of a flashlight.

But that's not because the moon was shining. There's no such thing as "moonshine: (☺)". The moon was only reflecting the glory of the sun.

In Heaven, you and I will radiate the glory of God. We will shine as the moon shines - reflecting God's splendor.

And Paul would have us remember that this glory is not ours NOW. The glory comes LATER, after this life is over.² And we long for that future glory. So does all of God's creation.

The Groanings of Planet Earth (vv. 19-22)

The creation's longings (v. 19)

[19] For the anxious longing of the creation³ waits eagerly⁴ for the revealing of the sons of God.

I have longings, deep desires. You do, too. In fact, we all do.

¹ This would be a perfectly appropriate way to translate the phrase in verse 18.

² That is the point of 2 Cor. 4:17-18, where Paul wrote, ***"For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."***

³ I don't believe that he is referring to angels, fallen or unfallen, or to people, either redeemed or lost. Rather, I am of the opinion that this verse refers to the non-rational creation, both animate and inanimate. I believe that included here is the cosmic physical universe, the inanimate earth, and the animal kingdom.

⁴ Paul is using the figure of speech called "personification" which gives human properties to a non-personal entity, in this case the natural world. Personification is a common figure of speech used in the Bible, and in all great literature.

After this (interminable?) sermon is over, you may be looking forward to a good lunch. Or maybe to school being out for the Christmas break.

Or your most pressing longing might be for deeper, more meaningful relationships with your spouse, or parents, or children.

So, what is it that the creation is longing for? It longs for the day when you and I, sons and daughters of God, are glorified. Until then, the creation suffers the curse of futility.

The creation's current futility (v. 20a)

[20] For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it...⁵

It is true that only Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden. But they impacted more than themselves. Among the collateral damage was the innocent bystander of the creation itself.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon writes,
***[1:4] A generation goes and a generation comes
But the earth remains forever.***

[5] Also, the sun rises and the sun sets;

And hastening to its place it rises there again.⁶

[6] Blowing toward the south,

Then turning toward the north,

The wind continues swirling along;

And on its circular courses the wind returns.

[7] All the rivers flow into the sea,

Yet the sea is not full.

To the place where the rivers flow,

There they flow again.

⁵ Some have seen Adam as the one who subjected the creation, and still others, Satan. Both of these views are to be rejected, though. It was God who put the creation under the curse.

⁶ When the novelist, Earnest Hemingway, sat down to write the book that most clearly demonstrated his own understanding that the existence of man on earth was nothing but futility and waste, he entitled that book The Sun Also Rises, from Ecclesiastes 1:5.

What a picture of futility and purposelessness! Repeating the same cycle over and over and over and over again.

Now, who doesn't appreciate the beauty of nature? We love the Texas Hill Country, with its occasional fall color, its rugged terrain, its wildlife, and its sunset vistas.

But go out into the wilderness and you'll also find cactus and rattlesnakes and scorpions.

The creation gives us devastating hailstorms and floods and killing freezes. As Ken Burns⁷ has reminded us recently, creation can give us drought and a dust bowl.⁸

There is an undeniable beauty to nature that is left over from the original creative work of God. But, that beauty is now scarred. The physical earth was to have been the ideal habitat for us. No longer.

Yet the creation's futility is not the end of the story. There is a hope for a creation restoration.

The creation's hope for freedom (vv. 20b- 21)

[20b...in hope [21] that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

The futile, hopelessly repetitive, unreliable, polluted, violent creation we now see is not the one that will be with us forever.

There is a bright and glorious future for God's creation.

Now, I honestly don't know what God has in mind for the creation when it is released from its slavery to corruption. But, it's kind of fun to speculate...

⁷ Referring to Ken Burns' PBS special series on the dust bowl.

⁸ A sign at one of the trailheads of Rocky Mountain National Park warning visitors to stay vigilant for weather changes reads, "The mountains don't care."

- Will every part of the globe be habitable?
- Will destructive storms no longer be a part of the weather cycle?
- Will the animals all be vegetarian?
- Will a relaxed lamb lie down with a hungry lion? (see Isaiah 11:6)
- Will there be no more mosquitoes, fire ants, or killer bees?

In the end, the natural world will not be annihilated. It will be restored to glory. And the glory of creation is tied to our glorification. It will be transformed into that which it was originally created to be - a fit home for the children of God.

Until then, though, the creation is a mess.

The creation's present "labor pains" (v. 22)

[22] For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.

Two thousand years ago the creation was suffering and groaning. It's still suffering and groaning.

Volcanic eruptions (Mount St. Helens; the Philippines' Mount Pinatubo) and hurricanes (Sandy and Katrina and Rita) only scratch the surface of the planet's wounds.

We have added to earth's battle scarring by countless wars, nuclear explosions (Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and accidents (Chernobyl and Japan, Three Mile Island), oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico and Alaska, pollution of waterways and so much more.

BUT (and this is important!), the earth is not going to self-destruct. What's more, we aren't going to destroy it. These groaning the earth experiences are not the planet going through the throes of dying. The groanings are birth pangs.

And who is it who will save the earth? Well, I'm not being political when I say this, but it won't be you and it won't be me.

We, of all people, should be the most conscientious stewards of the environment. We understand that the earth and all it contains belongs to the Lord.

So we conserve and recycle and compost. And of course we don't litter. But, all of the wise stewardship in the world won't reverse the trend toward corruption that is presently in place in the world.

One day the God who created the earth will save the earth, and set it free from its bondage to corruption into the sweetness of its ordained purpose. This is our Father's world - and He will redeem it!

Until that day, though, the earth will groan. And until our final redemption, we, too, will groan.

The Groaning of God's Children (vv. 23-25)

The groaning of believers (v. 23)

[23] And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit,⁹ even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

This groaning is not the grumbling that God's people have engaged in at their worst.¹⁰ Nor is it groaning "*among ourselves*" - something that has happened in groups with a strong gift for whining.

No, this groaning is nothing sinful or ugly. And despite the great grace that we have received in Jesus, we still groan "***within ourselves.***" Why?

Because we grow weary of the world's hassles and problems. We get discouraged over the injustice that is all around us.

Inside, we battle with weakness and with a tendency toward sin. Outside we battle a world overrun by death and decay.

⁹ Paul begins this final section by reminding us that we have received the first good spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit in our spirits. That is, we are saved.

¹⁰ Remember the Jews' grumbling in their wilderness wanderings. (Numbers)

So, in part, we groan under the burden of the problems of the present. But we also groan (and even more!) in eager anticipation of the glory that it to be ours in the future.

Yes, we are redeemed. Yes, we are saved. Yes, we are God's children. Yes, we are made new.

But the extent to which we are redeemed now is nothing compared to what our final redemption will look like! Theologians refer to this as the "already/not yet" of Christianity.

- "Already/not yet" means that while we have been redeemed by out of the marketplace of sin by Jesus' sacrifice (Romans 3:24), we have not yet experienced the full implications of that redemption.
- "Already/not yet" means that while having been reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5) through faith in Christ, we still look forward to a full embrace from God in Heaven.
- "Already/not yet means that, yes, we have been adopted into God's family (Romans 8:15). But, we have not yet fully experienced what it means to be God's daughter, God's son.

God has assigned a Day when we will finally experience our salvation to the full.

On that glorious day, not only will your soul be redeemed. You will also be fitted with a perfect body and a perfect mind not subject to disease or decay, temptation or sin.

And just as the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God, so we wait eagerly, not for death, but for life! We live in hope.

The hopeful aspect of our salvation (vv. 24-25)

[24] For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? [25] But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

We know what it is to hope.

You work, enjoying your job but looking forward to vacation time with the family. That time away keeps you going during crunch time.

You go to school, studying hard in hopes of the day you graduate. In fact, graduation motivates you to study in the middle of a tough semester.

I planted my winter garden a few weeks ago. My hope for a bunch of greens and broccoli keeps me fertilizing and weeding and watering.

Hope fuels faithfulness. Hope empowers us to courage at the beginning of a tough day.

Imagine that you are serving in the US armed forces and that you are captured by enemies. That is surely the dread of anyone in uniform.

Now, suppose that on the day of your capture an angel appears to you and assures you that you will suffer tremendously at the hands of your captors and will even be tortured over a period of years.

But then imagine that this angel also assures you that at the end of your imprisonment you will be released with no permanent injury and you will be restored to your loving wife and family and friends, and that your life will be richer and fuller than it was before.

Don't you think that the hope of final release and restoration would enable you to endure the suffering of your captivity? Yes!¹¹

THAT is the power of the hope that Jesus has given us for a life beyond this life.

You were saved in hope of an out-of-this-world future. But, when you received the gift of salvation, everything did not all of a sudden become perfect. You received only the "first fruits" of your salvation.

There is more to come. There is more to the promises of Jesus for abundance and fullness and joy and peace and life than THIS captive world and our inner lives groan.

¹¹ I am indebted to Bill Kraftson of Search Ministries for this powerful illustration.

When we fix our hope on the things God promises to give us our vision for what we can do for Him NOW expands. Our capacity for faithfulness to Him NOW grows.

For you, life may be difficult. Your cup just might be running over with trouble. God knows.

That's why He offers you a priceless gift - hope. It's when life is tough, when things appear hopeless, that hope emerges as an incredibly valuable grace.

So, hope for a glorious future is a powerful motivator for today. But it is also true that we can hope for a glorious NOW.

The Apostle Paul moves to urge us to consider our NOW life in Romans 8:28.

Hope for Present Transformation (vv. 28-30)

The Father's ALL THINGS Commitment to Us (v. 28)

[28] And we know¹² that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

The target audience of this verse

Love for God is the only reasonable response for anyone who has tasted the love that God has showered on them. And it is those who have been shown mercy by God and who love Him in reply who are in view here.

So, what is the promise of this verse? It is that God extends His goodness to His children, without apology and without exception.

¹² Paul is stating truth that he assumes is generally recognized in the church. Beginning with, "*And we know...*" Paul took it for granted that the general truth of this verse was universally understood by his readers.

The promise of this verse

Paul promises that God is committed to causing ALL THINGS to have a good effect on His children.

The verse doesn't exactly say that God is the One who causes all things.¹³ Paul says here that He is the one who lovingly causes the "*all things*" that come our way to work together for good.¹⁴

It is not that all things that come into our lives are what we would consider *good* in and of themselves.

Here, "*all things*" refer to successes and triumphs and pleasures AND to sufferings and hardships and tribulations.

Many of these "*all things*" are what we would call (and the Bible would also call) evil.

So we listen to the words of Romans 8:28 and marvel at the wisdom and the grace and the power of God who is able to take "*all things*" - both good and evil - and use them for our good.

Exhibit A...

In the book of Genesis, the final chapters are concerned with the story of Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. We see Joseph's favored status and his youthful arrogance, and his brothers' hatred of him.

We read about how his brothers sold Joseph into slavery to Egypt, and how he innocently suffered at the hand of Potipher's wife while he was employed by Potipher.

At the end of the story, when the brothers are all standing before Joseph who has risen to a place of prominence in Egypt, he speaks to those

¹³ That point is made elsewhere in the Bible.

¹⁴ There is considerable debate among scholars as to the correct phrasing of this verse. Should we read, "*God causes all things, which work together for good...*" or "*God is the One who causes the 'all things that happen' to work together for good...*" In either case, the sovereignty and power of God is either stated (the first option) or assumed (the second). Obviously, I lean toward the second option here.

brothers who had sold him into slavery, who had messed with his life, who had brought untold sorrow to him.

[Genesis 50:20] “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.”

Throughout time God has used both good and bad to fulfill His purposes in the lives of His people.¹⁵

It seems that there is no thing that God cannot turn to good. He even used the death of His Son on the cross - it is surely a bad thing to put to death the sinless Son of God! - to bring salvation to all who will trust Him for eternal life.

Paul’s words here in Romans 8 - **“working together”** - make us think of a tapestry, woven together in such a way that the end product is beautiful. The individual strands might not be so lovely, but He causes the strands to fit together for a stunning work.

And remember the scope of the promise. **“All things,”** even those which seem most confusing, even the most painful, will, in the end, result in **“good”** for us.

What is being expressed here is a truly biblical confidence in the loving sovereignty of God.

Now, let’s ask the question that verse 28 begs. In fact, until we answer this question, Romans 8:28 is not very helpful at all.

The question is, **“What is the ‘good’ that God is working all things together to accomplish in our lives?”** It is an important question, because the answer is not given in verse 28. There, the “good” is not defined. It is, though, in what follows.

The Father’s Sovereign Plan for Us (vv. 29-30)

¹⁵ In Philippians 1, Paul bemoans the fact that he is in prison in Rome. But, he is not devastated by this imprisonment because even there Paul sees the hand of God working through him to further the work of the Gospel.

[29] For those whom He foreknew,¹⁶ He also predestined¹⁷ to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He would be the first-born among many brethren[30] and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.¹⁸

Here we discover what specific *good* God is bending all things in our lives toward. He is using everything in our lives to realize a grand plan for each of us: that we would be like Jesus.

God has always wanted people to be conformed to His image. How did God create the first man and woman in the Garden? **“In His image and likeness”** (Genesis 2).

But the sin in the Garden ruined everything, including God’s plan to see humanity conform to the image of God. So, in response to our need and because He has never stopped longing for His people’s holiness, He sent His only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

So now we understand Romans 8:28 as Paul meant it. God works all things together in the life of a believer to conform him or her to the image of His Son. All things that happen to us help us on our way to mirroring Jesus.

Amazing. God wants you and me to be like His Son: loving, holy, joy-filled, and compassionate. His vision for you is that you would be the kind of person (like Jesus was) who draws people to God, who is powerful, whose character is solid.

That is a hope worth hanging our hats on! That is something to remember when the tough times hit.

¹⁶ Here, for the first time (but not for the last), Paul uses the word *foreknowledge*. I’ll not develop the thought much today. But we will zero in on foreknowledge and predestination and “calling” as we move through Romans 9-11. See the Appendix at the end of this manuscript for some brief thoughts on God’s foreknowledge.

¹⁷ Here, predestination is to conformity to the image of Jesus, not to eternal life.

¹⁸ Paul may be using what is called “the prophetic past.” Often used in the Old Testament, this device refers to a predicted event that is so certain of fulfillment that it can be described as having already taken place.

And tough times and trials do hit...

Often, relationships are not what we wish they were. Our past has left us with memories we want to erase and wounds we wish could be removed. Our families - extended and immediate - have needs we don't seem able to touch. Our good health comes and goes.

The depth of our character isn't all we long for and neither are our spiritual disciplines. Financially? Not so much...

Life is messy. Mine is and your likely is, too. Well, God intends to take these lives and transform them so that we look like Jesus.

Rather than respond with bitterness and resentment when some unwanted "*all things*" thing comes your way, instead, view it through the lens of hope.

In prayer, ask God to make you more like Jesus through this "*all things*" thing.

Don't resist the hard thing that has come your way. Trust in Him as you face it. Don't stiffen your neck and don't harden your heart.

When the "*all things*" thing hits, remain soft and pliable. Allow Him to shape you and mold you into someone who is looking more and more like Jesus.

Conclusion:

Within the next few weeks, many of us will begin our Christmas shopping. (☺). As we do, we may look for toys or tools or gadgets - things with movable parts that need to work. On those items we will hope for a guarantee. A money-back guarantee. A free replacement guarantee.

Guarantees are valuable, and part of the reason we value them is there is so much in life that does not offer a guarantee.

Here in Romans 8, God does not offer us a guarantee that our plans will all turn out the way we want them to. He doesn't guarantee that

business deals will always work out, that our kids will always turn out, or that the car won't break down.

But He does offer us a guarantee that is more precious than gold. A guarantee of a life beyond our wildest dreams beyond the grave and a guarantee that God is at work transforming us into the image of Jesus.

When you are flattened by life, what will move you to get back up and live for God again? What will blow wind into the sails of your soul to walk with Him after being burned a few dozen times?

It will be God's great gift of HOPE.

Appendix: God's foreknowledge

Sometimes in Scripture, "foreknowledge" refers to "knowing beforehand", as is the case where a prophet gains a prophetic glimpse into the future.

So, here, in verse 29, the word *might* refer to the fact that God knew beforehand who it would be who would love God and be called according to His purpose - that is, who would be saved.

But the word "know" often means "love," or even "choose." Frequently, in the Bible, the regular word for "knowing" someone is used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse between a husband and a wife (Genesis 4:1; 4:25).

Similar uses of "know" (in Hebrew and Greek) are found in Ex. 2:25; Ps. 1:6; 144:3; Jer. 1:5; Amos 3:2; Hosea 13:5; Matt. 7:23; 1 Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:19; 1 John 3:1. Also Romans 11:2, 5, 6.

And then, too, when God speaks of having chosen Abraham for special blessing, and to become the father of a great multitude, the word for "know" is used to describe that decision to choose Abraham.

In the present context, it seems to me that Paul is making more than the statement that God "knew beforehand" who would love Him.

In view of the fact that Paul equated the group that loves God with the group that is "*called according to God's purpose*," he is almost certainly emphasizing that those whom God "*foreknew*" are the ones on whom He had previously set His affection.

That is, Paul is referring to those whom God has chosen in Christ to be the objects of His love. It reveals the fact that salvation was initiated by God in His eternal loving choice.