

Holy Spirit, our Intercessor

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God's Greater Story / Suffering; Hope; Holy Spirit / Romans 8:18–27

- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We've been looking at the big picture! The greater story of the presence and work of the Triune God. We have seen Christ, our Deliverer, rescuing us from our sin. We have seen God, our Father, claiming us as His children. Today, we see God, the Holy Spirit, at work in our lives. To see the Holy Spirit, however, requires a wide-angle lens.

In Psalm 139, the psalmist asks, "Where shall I go from your Spirit?" In answer, he meditates on the places he might go. If he goes up to the heights of heaven, God's Spirit is there. If he goes down to the depths of Sheol, God's spirit is there. If he goes to the farthest parts of the sea, even there God's Spirit guides him and holds him fast. The Spirit of God overwhelms the psalmist. He sees the Spirit every place he goes. And so it remains for God's people today.

Look to the heights of heaven and you can see the Spirit. In Genesis, the Spirit of God hovers over the face of the waters. High in the heavens, the Holy Spirit hovers. Time begins and creation takes shape. Look to the farthest reaches of the sea and, again, you can see the Holy Spirit. The disciples gather together for prayer in a house in Jerusalem and suddenly the Spirit does more than hover over the world; he descends into it, in a flash of flame and the wildness of the sound of wind. He fills mouths with speech and hearts with wonder, clothing God's people with power from on high and sending them forth in mission to the ends of the world. In the highest heavens you can see the Spirit. In the farthest seas, you can see the Spirit.

Today however, as we contemplate Paul's letter to the Romans, I'd like to take to you one more place. Not the highest heavens and not the farthest seas. No. The place to which I'd like to take you to is a hallway. A hallway in Florence, Italy, in the Galleria Dell'Accademia. Here, voices are hushed and sounds are silences. There is little to hear in the place. But there is much to see.

This hallway is part of a museum and, as you stand there, you are surrounded by four unfinished pieces of stone. It is as if time itself has been frozen. An artist was working but stopped in the middle of the work, leaving four pieces of marble. The edges are rough. The stone is misshapen. These rocks look like they have been cut from the quarry and dragged to

this place. And yet, emerging from these blocks of stone are the beginnings of figures. Some have no faces. Others are missing arms, hands, feet. Yet you can clearly see the beginning of four figures. They are slaves. Prisoners. Begun by Michelangelo but never finished. His work had been frozen in time. What they once were, rough blocks of marble, is gone. What they will be, beautiful sculptures, is not yet here. Instead, we stand here in the hallway in the midst of an awkward moment. The past is gone and yet not gone. The future is here and yet not here. We can see the future, slowly taking shape, and yet the past is painfully with us, as figures appear before us locked in the stone.

In our text this morning, Paul invites us into a hallway like this. HE asks us to see how we are caught right now in the middle of God's greater vision and work. Paul begins by saying:

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the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Suffering and glory held together in this moment. Like rough hewn stone, our present world is filled with suffering. God had originally formed a beautiful creation. Wherever one looked, one could see the fingerprints of God and it was beautiful and good. Adam and Eve, however, brought suffering into God's creation. They disobeyed God and brought God's curse into the world. "The day you eat of it, you shall die," God had said and now God came and subjected the beauty of creation to the bondage of decay. Such punishment was set in stone and only God could free his creatures and bring about a new creation. The beginning, just the beginning of eternal life. Like first fruit foretelling a future harvest, Jesus Christ is the promise of a new and never-ending life. God has begun his work, and like this glimpse of figures in stone, it is only a matter of time before the full glory of God is revealed.

So Paul writes to the Romans to help them stand in this painful moment. And his words come to us to help us stand here today. In Christ, we have been made into children of God. This is sure. This is certain. His death has destroyed the power of sin for you and his resurrection has brought you the promise of a new creation. Yet what we are is not fully seen and experienced in this world. Take a deep close look at God's people, Paul says, and you will see a people, imprisoned and suffering, groaning because they desire to be free.

So we stand, awkwardly positioned between the sufferings of this present world and the glory yet to be revealed. And in this place, the apostle Paul asks us to meditate on our situation and to trust in the work of the Holy Spirit.

To meditate on our situation is like taking a good close look at these figures in stone. If you look closely, you will see that each of the figures Michelangelo carved is different. One is young. Another is older and bearded. One slowly awakens and another is busy working, bearing his burden in the heat of the day. While each of them is different, one thing remains

the same. All of them are slaves. Young or old, working or sleeping, all are slaves in the eyes of this world.

So, too, for God's people. If we meditate on our situation, we can see deep suffering among God's people. In America, Christianity used to be a strong cultural force. Not anymore. Public prayer is not allowed in schools, it's not allowed at High School Graduations or Football games. The Christian Church is attacked on many sides during this Covid-19 era. We are attacked from within if we obey the government and go to virtual worship services. We are attacked from those in government, public health, and the general population if we open up even with all the proper precautions in place. You'll hear in the news, from politicians and public health people, that you can gather in protests but not in worship. People are damaging churches. Nativity scenes used to be in public places in December. Don't forget marriage and life have been redefined by the government. There are politicians that want to force Christians and their organizations to fund abortions and do "marriages" for the GLBTQ community. The connection between Christianity and the American culture is all but dead. We are marginalized. We are pushed further and further away from public notice, written into smaller and smaller corner of the public square. Such experiences are frightening. It looks like we are losing strength, like we will not survive. Some might even wonder if God has abandoned us. Unfortunately, some American Christians have confused the power of God with the powers of this world. To them, the strength of God and this church are directly related to the strength of America as a Christian nation. Now, as American culture has turned against Christianity, Christians can begin to wonder about the love and blessing of God. Has God abandoned his people? How can we be God's people, the Church, in a non-Christian nation? To such a situation Paul's words offer hope. Listen to the apostle Paul for he offers you, today, God's love and blessing in this letter.

Paul knew the suffering status of Christians in the world. In Rome, Christianity was not a legal established religion. It confronted barriers to the expression of its faith. Christians sought to worship one God in a city that had many gods. Christians sought to confess Jesus is Lord in a city that confessed Caesar is Lord. Christians worshipped a person who had been associated with insurrection, was publicly tried and condemned and crucified. This suffering Jesus ruled over a suffering people. Christians were marginalized. Pushed off to the side. They were populated by slaves rather than powerful rulers. Soon, they would experience persecution. They would carry their dead into caves and tunnels carved under ground and hold worship service there in the dark, in the place of the dead.

"If I make my bed in Sheol," the psalmist cries, "You are there." When persecution shoves you into the darkness of death, into that place where you open your eyes but you cannot see God, God is there. That is Paul's message. The Spirit of God is there, even in the darkest places of death. Open your ears and you will hear him. You will hear the Spirit of God, crying out in this place with you. Crying out for you.

This is what Paul is revealing to the church in this letter. The Spirit of God cries out for God's people. The world is groaning as it awaits the revelation of the sons of God and the new creation. God's people are groaning as they are locked in positions of slavery and rejection by this world. But the apostle Paul reveals one more thing. He opens our ears so we hear one more groan. The groaning of the Spirit, who is interceding for you.

Paul writes:

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26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. 27 And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

In these words, Paul joins groans with a glorious vision.

On the one hand, the Spirit intercedes for us with groans too deep for words. There are times when we are at a loss for words. The suffering we have seen in this world, the longing we have for the new creation is so strong and so deep that we cannot find words to express it. What do you say when you go to a child's funeral? You stand there, next to her parents, your heart filled with groans that words cannot express. What do you say when your wife tells you the doctor said it was cancer? How do you respond when an earthquake strikes or a tornado destroys your neighbor's home? The broken edges of this fallen world cut deep and language itself is limited. It is too short to reach down and touch sorrow much less grab a hold of it and put it into words. We have trouble speaking to one another, and even more trouble speaking to God. At moments like this, Paul asks us to listen. To hear the groaning. The Spirit takes our suffering and puts it into prayer.

The groans of the Spirit, however, are joined to glory. The glorious desires of God for his people. For all creation. You know, one of the interesting things about Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures is how he approached carving figures into stone. Michelangelo believed that his work as an artist was to liberate figures from the stone. Rather than carving figures into stone, he saw himself as freeing these figures from the marble. Through his work is unfinished, we can catch glimpses of his larger vision, his master plan. The larger glorious vision of these figures was there in the artist and, only through time and effort and the removal of stone, piece by piece, did that vision slowly come into being.

In a similar way, Paul talks about the glorious vision of God seen by the Holy Spirit. Paul says that "the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God". The Spirit knows not only the deep mysteries of suffering. The Spirit also knows the deep mysteries of God. God's vision of a new creation. You have been joined by baptism to God's new creation in Christ. God is at work in him. He is shaping our lives, forming our faith, working in small and sometimes painful ways as he continues his promise to bring about the kingdom. We cannot see this plan of God.

We cannot see his overall design. Sometimes, we can't even see the smallest carvings he does as leads this world to that day of the new creation. But the Holy Spirit is our Comforter and Counselor. The Spirit knows the mind of God and the Spirit knows the suffering of God's people. And, as Paul proclaims, the Spirit joins these two into prayer. Groans and glory are held together by the Spirit for us in prayer. When we stand before God, frozen in time, living in this world and yet sure of another. When we experience suffering and find ourselves not sure how to put all of this into words, the Spirit himself speaks for us. He brings our petitions to the throne of the Father. Our suffering touches God's glory in the words of the Spirit and we trust his work because of God's love made certain for us in the death and resurrection of his Son.

I invite you one more time into the hallway of the Galleria dell'Accademia. Note that these sculpture are displayed in a hallway, not a closed room. This space is a corridor where people pass from one place to another, and, at the end of the hallway, stands a work of remarkable beauty, Michelangelo's David. No longer is this figure a slave encased in stone, but now he stands, in glorious freedom, the freedom of a man of God.

How much greater is that glory of David's son and David's Lord. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Ruler of a new creation. In him, God the Father will bring all things to completion. He is the one who stands there, ruling over all at the end of this world and the beginning of the new creation. Paul can barely see this, but he knows that it is there and so he offers us hope. Hope that lives and breathes through the prayers of the Spirit. Although we suffer in this world, we are heirs of the next. The Spirit knows the mind of God and hears our cries and prays for us according to God's will. Christianity may have lost cultural power in America, but it is not losing spiritual force. God is alive! He rules over creation. He sees your life, he knows your suffering, and he has sent his Spirit to be here for you. He listens to your groans, he sees God's greater vision, and puts your life into prayer according to God's will. So, wherever, you go into this world, your are never far from the Spirit. At home, at work, falling asleep or rising in the morning, the Spirit sees and intercedes for you according to the will of God.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

- › Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.