

May 8 Lesson 10 (NIV)

FREEDOM FOR THE FUTURE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Romans 8:18–30

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Romans 8:18–30

ROMANS 8:18–30

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 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.

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.

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. ²⁷ 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.

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

KEY TEXT

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.—Romans 8:18

GOD FREES AND REDEEMS

Unit 3: Liberating Letters

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List ways in which the Holy Spirit is active in the lives of believers.
2. Give an example from Scripture where the Holy Spirit interceded for believers.
3. Write a prayer to thank God for his presence during a difficult time.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Against the Odds
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Present Sufferings (Romans 8:18–25)
 - A. Glory to Be Revealed (v. 18)
Pain and Reward
 - B. Great Expectations (vv. 19–25)
Adoption
- II. Present God (Romans 8:26–30)
 - A. The Spirit's Help (vv. 26–27)
 - B. The Supreme Plan (vv. 28–30)

Conclusion

- A. Hope for the Future
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

AugustusAw-gus-tus.

CaesarSee-zer.

Gaius OctaviusGay-us Ok-**tey**-vee-uhs.

JuliusJoo-lee-us.

MichelangeloMahy-kuhl-an-juh-loh.

RaphaelRaf-ee-uhl or Rah-fahy-el.

TiberiusTie-beer-ee-us.

Introduction

A. Against the Odds

Voyager 1 entered interstellar space on August 25, 2012. Scientists estimate, based on its performance, that the space probe will continue operating and gathering information until 2025. When it runs out of power, *Voyager 1* will drift off into deep space, losing momentum every second until it comes to rest somewhere among the stars.

Included in *Voyager 1*'s payload is a gold-plated audiovisual disc with pictures, audio recordings, and scientific data. Although the odds against encountering intelligent life in deep space are overwhelmingly low, this record was considered important enough to be included. As Carl Sagan said, "The spacecraft will be encountered and the record played only if there are advanced spacefaring civilizations in interstellar space. But the launching of this bottle into the cosmic ocean says something very hopeful about life on this planet."

In the midst of suffering, the hope of restoration and glory can feel as miniscule as the odds of *Voyager 1* encountering intelligent alien life. What gives us confidence in hope? Our text today gives us the answer.

B. Lesson Context

The apostle Paul was involved in several important mission trips, the last of which was his trip to Rome for a hearing before the emperor. The book of Acts ends with Paul awaiting this trial (Acts 28:30–31). Rome was a destination he had desired for many years (Romans 1:13), but not necessarily in the status of prisoner!

The letter to the Romans includes Paul's understanding of the Old Testament background for the Christian message, the nature of Christian salvation based on the atoning death of Christ, the centrality of faith as the only path for human salvation, the relationship between Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds in the plan of God, and several other matters.

All this makes Romans both the most challenging of Paul's letters to understand and the richest depository of what he calls "my gospel" (Romans 2:16; 16:25). The basis and reality of being justified by faith is the subject of Romans 1–4 in general and 3:24, 28 in particular. Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17 to set the tone for the entire book: "the righteous will live by faith."

This means that faith—complete trust in Jesus—is the only way that eternal life may be found. It cannot be earned by obedience, although obedience is important. It is not inherited by ancestry, although this is not unimportant (see Romans 3:1–2; 9:4–5). True life, eternal life, the life of salvation, is only found in trusting God to save us through his Son.

Abraham, the great patriarch of the Jews, was justified by faith (Romans 4:3, quoting Genesis 15:6). Thus the idea of faith in God as the core element of one's life is not a Christian innovation. Such faith is to be the foundation of our relationship with God. This was intended as central in the pre-Israel period (Abraham), in the nation of Israel itself (Habakkuk), and now is so in the church.

In Romans 5–8, Paul lays out the implications of Jesus' death and resurrection. Through Christ, the reign of sin and death has been overthrown by righteousness and grace (Romans 5:21).

With the reign of sin and death defeated, believers are free. New life in Christ also means freedom from bondage to the law (7:1–6).

Romans 8 brings these various elements to a climactic resolution. There is “now no condemnation” for those “in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). What the law failed to do, God himself has done through Jesus (8:3). Righteous living is enabled by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in those who have faith in Christ (8:9–10).

All these wonderful truths, however, raise a painful question: Why do suffering and death still wreak havoc? Paul indicated the likelihood that Christians would suffer for Christ’s sake. Paul encouraged the Roman believers to keep the big picture in mind: we are “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17, not in our printed text).

I. Present Sufferings

(ROMANS 8:18–25)

A. Glory to Be Revealed (v. 18)

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

Paul was trained by the respected Jewish teacher Gamaliel (Acts 5:34; 22:3). So for Paul to *consider* was for him to draw on both his faith in Christ and his vast knowledge of Scripture. His thoughts are not to be taken lightly.

Paul was careful to put *our present sufferings*—whatever their causes—in proper perspective. Jesus’ resurrection initiated a new era of salvation and restoration (see lesson 9). Because God’s faithfulness to his salvation promise has been revealed (Hebrews 1:1–3), suffering of any kind pales in comparison to *the glory that will be revealed in us*. Forms of the word *glory* occur here and in Romans 8:21, 30 (see below), further defining what believers have to anticipate. The path of suffering ends with being glorified with Christ and with all who have traveled the same path.

B. Great Expectations (vv. 19–25)

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

Creation includes anything and everything God has made (see Romans 8:22, below; compare its use in 8:39 [not in our printed text]; Colossians 1:15; Revelation 3:14). Here it refers to the entire created world with the exception of *the children of God*. While the adoption of believers is a present reality (Romans 8:14–15, not in our printed text), this fact can be obscured by the troubles of living in a sinful world. The suffering that results from our fallen world can further conceal the reality of redemption that is already present (8:17–18).

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

Following Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden, God cursed the ground as part of the humans’ punishment (Genesis 3:17–18). Through no fault of its own, creation was thwarted from flourishing and *subjected to frustration*. (The verb form of the Greek word is translated “became futile” in Romans 1:21.)

The phrase *the one who subjected it* could be taken to refer to Adam as the reason for the curse rather than to the power behind the curse. This would be in error, although the thinking behind the supposition is sound: because humanity was to exercise wise rule over creation (Genesis 1:26–30), the fall revealed that people were not up to the task. As a natural outcome of humanity’s foolishness, creation suffers. Its caretakers fell into sin and were no longer capable of exercising proper dominion. However, in context it is clear that God is the one who subjected creation to futility.

20b–21. 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.

In the midst of the curse, God made a promise: “I will put enmity between [the serpent] and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15; compare Romans 16:20). Creation, despite its suffering, has reason for *hope*! The crushing of Satan’s head was good news not only for all who put faith in Jesus but for all of creation.

Bondage to decay further defines the “frustration” of Romans 8:20a (above). Since human sin resulted in creation’s fallen state, only when the *freedom and glory of the children of God* is finally and fully gained will *the creation* be released from the curse as well. The Greek word translated *glory* (compare Romans 8:18, 30) can be interpreted in two ways: as an adjective to describe *freedom* or as a noun standing on its own. This second option would explicitly refer to believers’ status as being glorious rather than experiencing a glorious liberty. This goes beyond restoration to a fulfillment of God’s plan for people. The fate of creation is inextricably tied to God’s fulfilling his promises to those who have been adopted into his family (Galatians 4:4–7).

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

Childbirth is painful (to say the least), but the healthy infant who is born brings immediate joy. The analogy captures a common first-century Jewish belief: that as the salvation of God drew near, conditions on the earth would worsen progressively, like the contractions that get worse and worse until finally the baby is born. Portions of Daniel chapters 7 and 9 helped shape this expectation. Jesus also spoke of the difficulty of the end times, both concerning events that were near at hand and others that would continue until his return (Matthew 24; John 16:1–11, 31–33). His disciples continued to speak of the troubles that would be seen before Jesus’ return ended this age (example: 1 Timothy 4:1–3). All that pain, though, is meant to result in joy for the world. It is not a vain struggle.

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.

Firstfruits as a concept comes from the Festival of Harvest, also called the Festival of Weeks (Exodus 23:16a; 34:22a; Numbers 28:26–31; etc.). The people would make sacrifices to the Lord of the first grains they gathered. This expressed thanks for God’s providing the harvest and confidence that God would bless the people with bounty throughout the harvest season. Like the firstfruits of a harvest, the indwelling of *the Spirit* within believers is a kind of down payment, guaranteeing what is still to come (Ephesians 1:13b–14).

Adoption in the Roman world differed from our laws and customs. One common scenario would involve a wealthy Roman man who had no sons. He would adopt a promising young man from a poor family, paying the natural father for rights to bring the son into the new, adoptive household. This adopted son would be groomed to take over the family business, continue the good name of the adoptive father, and become the adoptive father's heir. Such adoption is seen in the history of the Caesars, who frequently adopted a nephew or other male to inherit their title. Examples include Julius Caesar's adoption of Gaius Octavius, who was later called Caesar Augustus, and Augustus's own adoption of Tiberius. Adoptions such as these were familiar to everyone in the Roman world, but especially to residents of Rome itself.

Although believers are already children of God, we still await *the redemption of our bodies*, victory over physical death (Romans 6:8; see lesson 9).

24–25. 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.

Christian *hope* is not wishful thinking or anticipating a probable outcome; rather, it is assured because hope is based not on our own faithfulness but on God's faithfulness to his promises (Titus 1:2–3). Still, we *do not yet have what we hope for*, because in that case we would no longer require hope. When Paul declares that "faith, hope, and love" remain and the last is the greatest (1 Corinthians 13:13), it is not because faith and hope are of dubious value. Instead, it indicates that when faith and hope are realized in Heaven, we will not need them as we do now, to anticipate our promised future. But love will still be required, even in Heaven. God has given us every reason for confidence, which gives us the patience to *wait for* our hopes to be realized (see Romans 5:3–5).

II. Present God

(ROMANS 8:26–30)

A. The Spirit's Help (vv. 26–27)

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.

The state of the world can leave us so completely horrified that we are left speechless. *Our weakness* includes every piece of evidence that we live in a sin-sick and dying world. But when *we do not know what we ought to pray for*, the Spirit steps in on our behalf. This comes as no surprise since Jesus promised the Spirit would be his disciples' "advocate" (John 14:16, 26; 15:26). Paul built on this, giving believers confidence that *the Spirit himself intercedes for us*. When words fail us, the Spirit does not.

Groans is the noun form of the verb "groan" in Romans 8:23 (above). This context suggests that the Spirit's intercession also happens within ourselves. This is supported by the fact that creation does not speak in language but does groan in brokenness (see 8:22, above).

27. 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.

He who searches our hearts refers to God (1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Psalms 7:9; 139:23; etc.). Note that, like Jesus, *the Spirit* only speaks *in accordance with the will of God* (John 14:10; 16:13). Though we may not always pray according to God's will—especially since we do not know *the mind of Father, Son, or Spirit*—nevertheless the Spirit will only intercede in keeping with God's plans.

B. The Supreme Plan (vv. 28–30)

28. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Even the darkest night of the soul does not mean we are cut off from God. Paul had an unshakable faith that all things are under the control of God, that *all things God works for the good of those who love him*. Faith in the sovereign God means believing that he is in control of all things. Even the evil in our world that causes the suffering of righteous people is not beyond his control.

Our problem is that of limited perspective. Only God can see how all things work together for good. The question about suffering, then, is not *why* (compare Judges 6:13), but *how long*. The *why* is because of human decision to turn away from God (Genesis 2:16, 17; 3:19; 6:3; Romans 1:21, 28). The question can only be *how long*—how long will the suffering continue until my soul is flooded again by God's love and comfort (compare Psalms 6:3; 94:3; Revelation 6:10)?

29. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

While doctrines of foreknowledge and predestination are important to consider, Paul's letter precedes by centuries debates about these terms and does not address the arguments that future Christians would engage in. Rather, Paul's point is that God is working within a plan, not haphazardly throwing people or events together in some sort of cosmic or salvific experiment (compare Ephesians 1:11–14). Though chaos or chance may seem to rule the day, we take comfort that the Lord knew us long before we accepted the call to join him in his ultimate purpose for people: *to be conformed to the image of his Son* (Psalm 139:13). This is both a new creation and a re-creation, for to be made in the image of Christ is to be restored to our unsullied state of having been created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27).

As the first to rise from the dead into glory, Jesus' bodily resurrection made him *the firstborn* from the dead (Colossians 1:18). Because of his resurrection, we expect to be *among many brothers and sisters* who will also return to life (contrast 1 Corinthians 15:12–19). The promise of our own resurrection is the ultimate hope we have in the midst of our sufferings (compare Acts 23:6; 1 Corinthians 15).

30. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Although elaborate and confusing doctrines have been offered to explain the concept of predestination, it is a rather straightforward idea as presented by Paul. In this context it means

that God has made an earlier decision about our future (see commentary on Romans 8:29, above).

This predetermined plan has three stages. First, God has *called* us, giving us the opportunity to respond to the gospel by faith. Second, a positive response leads to being *justified*, declared righteous through our faith in Christ because of his sacrifice on our behalf (Romans 3:24–26). The final stage is our being *glorified* when our own resurrections take place and we join Christ in Heaven for all eternity (compare 1 Corinthians 15:42–58).

Conclusion

A. Hope for the Future

Christians have a hope that persists through the ordeals of life. Outside of faith in Christ, this hope is not possible. Still, we observe and experience suffering. Focusing on these things makes a person nearsighted. Only with an eye on our future glory can a Christian not only endure hardship but also thrive in the hope of God’s promises.

While we hope for the glorious future in Christ, we still have work to do. Though our minds turn to evangelism—and rightly so—these verses remind us that we also have a responsibility to *all* creation. God has made us stewards of his good earth. While people suffer, all creation suffers. Likewise, believers’ peace is the peace of the world; our glory will be the glory of creation.

We wait in hope for the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises. May we, as people who have died with Christ and live again in the Spirit, be beacons of God’s wonderful intentions for all creatures, great and small.

B. Prayer

Father, help us view suffering through the perspective of faith. Teach us to depend on your Holy Spirit. Thank you for your Son, who has purchased our freedom. In his name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God is working all things together to accomplish his perfect will.¹