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- 26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.
- 31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?  
32 He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave Him up for all of us, will He not with Him also give us everything else?
- 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
From Romans 8:26-39. (NRSV, *alt*)

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Cancer. Car accidents. Conflict in homes. Death of an infant. Death of a husband. Death of a wife. Death of a child. Heart disease. Effects of police ineffectiveness and corruption. Conflict at work. Dementia. Depression. Effects of war. Sexual assault. Conflict at sport. Conflict at church. Isolation from family. Theft. Unusual diseases. Earthquake. Fire. Flood. Religious conflict. Body image issues. Divorce. Overwork. Underemployment. Self-confidence issues. Unplanned pregnancies. Uncertainty of future. Financial pressures. Illnesses from age. Conflict in family. Uncertainty how to cope with home and family life. Apparent rejection of faith by family members. Certain life-style choices. Pressure from parents. Pressure from family. Loneliness. Feeling alone and no-one cares. And the list could go on.

This is not simply a list of issues people in our world have experienced at some point: these are issues that of people I know have experienced – either directly themselves, or seen in family and friends around them.

The question that flows from all this, as we consider the various challenges is ‘how shall we respond to all this?’ And the fact that you are here today says something about your response to the challenges and varied experiences that ‘life throws our way’. We look to Jesus.

But not everyone looks to Jesus. There are those who say (as you’ve heard me speak about this before) that ‘If God is a God of love, how can there be so much suffering in the world?’ and, thus, ‘use’ this as some ‘answer’ to say they do not ‘believe in’ God’. But in these situations I simply ask, if that’s your response (ie: there cannot be a ‘God of love’), then what’s your response, given that the suffering doesn’t ‘go away’ with apparent rejection of God?

The reality is that our world is full of suffering and pain. And in the context of ‘the whole of creation groaning’ the Apostle Paul directs us to Jesus. He says (8:28), “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose.” Of course, key questions here, are: What is this ‘good’? How (and what) is God ‘working’? What’s this really about?

If we are to take Paul's words in Romans 8:28 literally and seriously, we must face the fact that "all things" includes those things which we find painfully unpleasant. We may even think they are unbearable. "All things" includes the sin of others and even our own sins. "All things" means there is nothing which falls outside of God's control and which works contrary to our good. Not one thing falls outside of God's control. "All things" are caused to work together so that God's will—our good—is accomplished.

It is vital that we understand the term "good," or we will completely reverse the meaning of this verse. Romans 8:28 is often perceived in about the same way as if it is the spiritual version of "keep a good thought." A lot of people think this means that since I love God he will fix everything just fine like a football player, a little undersized and short on experience going up against a player who even has muscles in his ear lobes going into the game saying to himself, "I can do all things through Him who gives me strength." Or the person who has been asked to do a job they have no clue about doing, "I can do all things through him who gives me strength." There are problems with this particular interpretation.

What is the book of Romans about? The core aspects of Romans is about your salvation, the grace of God in your life, and whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, God has provided salvation to both because all people have sinned and need salvation.

We here on this earth, live in a world where sin has taken hold and brought about separation from God and even affected the existence we have here. Not only did sin introduce spiritual pain and death, it introduced problems to the physical universe; to our bodies, to our planet, and to the whole universe. And this reality befalls us all...

So, what is the real 'good' that God wants to do in the world? He wants to save the world, to bring them into the likeness of his Son, Jesus Christ. The purpose which God is steadfastly bringing about is conforming us to the image of His Son – that very Son who went down to death between two thieves for our sakes.

That is the journey on which our God is taking us. Here there is no note of evolutionary optimism, as though some increment of good is always being worked out in spite of appearances. In contradiction to the sin and death we experience in our world, the 'good' God gives us in Jesus is forgiveness and everlasting life. And this is so much more than anything this world can ever give: forgiveness for life, and the gift of everlasting life.

The question, then, is, "What then shall we say in response to this?" Note: this is the first of seven questions asked by the Apostle Paul. 31 What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 How will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? 33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? 34 Who is he that condemns? 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? And here Paul lists seven types of trauma that we think would normally separate us from the love of

God: Trouble. Hardships. Persecutions. Famine. Nakedness (ie: going without). Danger. Sword (ie: war).

Can these tragedies separate us from the love of God? It is a rhetorical question: of course not. The word, no, resounds. And why is this? It's because of Jesus! The broad context of the Book of Romans is the gospel of Jesus Christ; a major theme of the book is God's righteousness. God's righteousness requires the condemnation of sinners. God's righteousness is provided for those whom He justifies. In other words, in Jesus we are 'put right' with God (we have true forgiveness'), and in Jesus we have every 'right thing' that God wants for us (that is, perfect life with Him forever).

This does not mean, however, that we shall be exempted from 'troubles' of this world. One writer has put it like this: "The maxim of illusory religion runs: 'Fear not; trust in God and He will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you'; that of real religion, on the contrary, is: 'Fear not, the things that you are afraid of are quite likely to happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of."

There are times in our lives – even as God's people – where we become 'afraid' of 'things' in our lives. We hear the word. We know about Jesus. But fears keep bubbling away within us. In this regard St. Paul has said (8:26), "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

The temptation might be to think that in our suffering God isn't even there to hear our prayers. Have you ever wanted to turn to God in prayer and not known what to say? God is not only present, He is there helping us pray. God helps us pray the prayers we really need to pray (both through 'set prayers' of 'the church and the 'groans' of our heart).

There are many things people can experience in life, and at times they may seem to 'crush us'. But the promise of God is 'the Spirit helps us in our weakness'. The promise of God is "If God is for us, who is against us? He did not withhold His own Son, but gave Him up for all of us. How will He not with Him also give us everything else?" And the promise of God is "nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (And this promise is affirmed to us in our baptisms).

Has suffering and groaning found its way into your life? Are there deep inner agonies you cannot even verbalise? Your experience is not unique. It is that of all creation. It is what happens to every Christian at various times and with various levels of intensity. You should not feel guilt-ridden or unspiritual over your groanings. If you have come to recognise your own fallenness and that of the world in which you live, you have come to see life as it really is.

The question is not whether you are groaning, but what good this suffering and groaning is producing in you. Does it focus your hope on the things of God which are presently unseen?

Paul started out this chapter by telling us that therefore there is no condemnation for those who are "in Christ" Jesus. He ends by telling us that therefore there can be no separation from the love of God for those who are "in Christ" Jesus. God is working together in our lives to bring about this transformation.

Thank God for strengthening us. Yes – there are trials and troubles in this life. But through Christ our Saviour we also receive a Spirit of life and strength and healing and peace. And we may also live with a Spirit of thankfulness and praise. Amen.