

Making Peace with Romans 8:28



by BRAD HAMBRICK

You're about to read a difficult account of suffering. Imagine yourself hearing this unfolding story from a friend. For the moment, restrain from offering perspective, answers, or potential ways that God could possibly redeem this situation. Simply let yourself listen. Enter her world. Hurt with her. Cry with her. Question with her. Maybe even come to that place where a “good answer” that makes things “better” feels like it might dishonor her pain.

Natasha¹ and her husband longed for a child and finally conceive after five years of trying. They learn their child is a girl and decide to name her after Natasha's mother, who died when Natasha was an infant. Throughout the pregnancy they read every book on “what to expect” and prepared a dream nursery, complete with initials on the wall in large decorative letters. Everything was set.

But... their daughter is born dead, suffocated by the umbilical cord that got wrapped around her throat. The only visual memory they have is of her blue, still body. They are haunted that they didn't know she was in trouble and couldn't help her. Not knowing how to deal with the pain, their marriage quickly deteriorates. The questions that flood their minds either trigger conversations so upsetting that the volatility tears them apart, or conversations so “safe” that their aloofness only adds to the emotional drift.

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¹ This is not the story of a particular person, but a fictional case study meant to illustrate how suffering can quickly cascade in someone's life. The English name Natasha sounds like the Hebrew word נטש (naw-tash'), which means “forsaken.”

Their marriage silently suffocates, not unlike their child, with no one hearing the muted cries for help. The husband begins to have an affair at work. He finds “life” in conversations with a co-worker that have been so long absent from his marriage that he’s convinced himself they never existed. When Natasha finds some questionable emails, he lashes out, blames her, leaves, and promptly files for divorce.

Within a year he is remarried and has a child—a little girl. Natasha’s dream life is being lived by another woman. Then, as she drives home from her part-time job as a waitress that supplements her full-time job as a teacher’s aide, Natasha is in a car accident. Not only was the car totaled—something she could not afford—but she also crushed two vertebrae in her lower back. This requires surgery—more money she doesn’t have—to fuse the vertebrae together. For the rest of her life, she’ll experience limited mobility, chronic pain, and be labeled “disabled.”

Now the cry of an infant, the sight of a child the age her daughter would be, the sound of squealing tires, or the possibility of running into her ex-husband in a store are all triggers of intense anxiety and despair. She lives with a hyper-vigilant sense that something catastrophic is about to happen. She never feels safe.

Peace and hope—words that once had beautiful, biblical meanings for her—have become the equivalent of words like *unicorn* and *leprechaun*. She knows what they mean and she knows they don’t exist. People who believe in peace and hope seem blissfully naïve. She no longer has that privilege.

“What could I have done to deserve all this?” she asks herself. She feels a heavy load of shame. She longs to figure out how she has sinned so she can repent. Perhaps then God would forgive her and remove this burden. At times she is relieved when she sins, hoping the sincerity of her repentance will “work” this time and help her life get better.

Other times she is angry because she feels condemned by God. A few people have reassured her with Romans 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” But while they can refute the words with which she articulates her emotions, this truth doesn’t seem to touch the place where God feels so painfully absent. Is she abandoned by God? Rejected? Cursed? Does it matter? Does she care anymore?

But Romans 8:1 is more bearable than Romans 8:28—“we know that for those who love God all things work together for good”—or its slightly kinder sequels.² When friends try to comfort her with these passages, she knows that

² Passages such as 2 Corinthians 1:3–5, Romans 5:3–5, James 1:2–4, and 1 Peter 4:19.

they simply do not understand. Sometimes she gets angry. Other times she pities their simplicity. Other times she envies their innocence.

Isolation becomes her form of self-protection. It works for a while because people can't scrape her wounds with their truths. But the isolation from people becomes emotional insulation and keeps the feelings of being unknown, unloved, and confused painfully hot in her soul. Now that she has drifted from church, her only contact with Christian teaching is the material her friends retweet or post on Facebook. Periodically, she sees some version of "We should be more bothered about our sin than our suffering" or "God won't protect us from anything that will make us more like Jesus." These statements only solidify her view of God as uncaring, even cruel.

In the midst of her pain—physical, emotional, and spiritual—the emptiness drives her to talk to you. She says she doesn't expect you to fix anything. Honestly, she'd be happy if you just didn't make things worse. She shares her story, looks you in the eye for a brief moment, and sighs. Her gaze settles back to the floor.

What do you do next? What do you say? Which way is hope from here? Where does ministry start? What does sanctification look like? What needs to be healed? What facet of the gospel needs to be seen? How "practical" can you even be with struggles that appear to have no fixes? How do you serve as an ambassador of a God who isn't trusted?

These are questions we will wrestle with in this article. I say *wrestle with* because to say I will *answer* them feels too bold. Whether it's formal counseling or a friendship, ministering in a situation like this involves joining someone on a hard journey rather than simply giving directions. To equip you for that journey, I will first consider the issue of suffering by calling attention to five false beliefs that are commonly held by Christians. I will then explore Romans 8:28, highlighting how we can approach the verse in such a way that hurting people, like Natasha, will hear it as God intends—as truly comforting words.

Five False Beliefs about Suffering

I have observed that counseling conversations about suffering in evangelical circles quickly veer into a discussion of "the problem of evil."³ But to get preoccupied with these discussions is to do a disservice to those who are hurting. We get lost trying to untie a theological knot and become distracted from the counselee's tangled life. Or, if the sufferer becomes upset with God, which sufferers often do, we act as if we are God's defense attorney, rather than bearing witness to the pain and confusion

³ The "problem of evil" refers to the philosophical and theological issue of a good and powerful God allowing evil to exist.

that the person is giving voice to.

When we respond in ways like these, it is often because we feel uncomfortable sitting in the presence of unresolved pain. Counselors hurry the counseling process so they can feel soothed—even at the expense of the counselee experiencing true comfort. When we do this, we are like an impatient orthodontist who accelerates the treatment process so much that the journey to the perfect smile becomes painfully unbearable. This attitude doesn't work with teeth and it doesn't work with suffering people either.

We need to allow time and space for the sufferer to be “messy” or “theologically incorrect” on the journey toward coming to peace with God and what has happened.

In this article then, my emphasis will be on walking with people “at a human pace”—a pace that is patient with the person. We need to allow time and space for the sufferer to be “messy” or “theologically incorrect” on the journey toward coming to peace with God and what has happened. We walk at this pace because this is how God so kindly walks with us.⁴ We will leave as much room for confused error as God does in places such as Psalms 44 and 88, where many false statements are made as people lament their situation and wonder what God is up to.⁵ God includes these in his Word so that we will know that he is with us in every staggering step of confusion as we suffer. He does not abandon us even when we don't understand and dislike what

⁴ The concept of God graciously facilitating change at “a human pace” is borrowed from David Powlison.

⁵ The psalms are unique in Scripture because they are a place where God gives us words to speak back to him in the midst of the full breadth of human experience. God allows believers to put into words their honest doubts about whether he will be true to his promises when their experience seems to contradict who he says he is. For example:

- God is felt to be hiding from us in our troubles (Ps 10:1).
- God is felt to be forgetful or uninterested in our suffering (Ps 13:1; 44:24).
- God is felt to have forsaken those who cry out to him (Ps 22:1–2).
- God is felt to be asleep and therefore unaware (Ps 44:23).
- God is felt to have abandoned his people forever (Ps 74:1).
- God is felt to have aggressively “spiked” an innocent person in anger (Ps 102:10).

We do not have to choose between honesty and reverence because of psalms like these. God is not agreeing that our experience is objectively true, but he is demonstrating his willingness to sometimes put compassion before instruction. His compassion can strengthen his children enough to be able to eventually hear the truth. But we are not coming to God against his permission when we wrestle with thoughts like these. God wants to transform our suffering story, but he is willing to enter it where we are and transform it from within the story. By this, God continues to do incarnational ministry. Understanding and entering our world did not just last the thirty years of Jesus' earthly life.

is happening.

Before we begin to think about how to minister Romans 8 to sufferers, let's first consider five common misunderstandings about suffering. You might hear these false beliefs from Natasha as she tries to make sense of her experience, or you yourself might hold to some aspects of these beliefs. They are quite common among Christians. Debunking these false beliefs can help you confront your own misconceptions about suffering. This will not only make you a better counselor, but it will also help you be more alert if the person you are helping is believing a falsity.

God doesn't dismiss your suffering because his was greater. Instead, he says the purpose of the incarnation and Calvary was "so that" he can identify with you and help you in your suffering.

False belief #1: Suffering is a competitive sport. Often we hear stories of others' suffering and beat ourselves up for complaining because "Ours isn't that bad." Or we search for stories that are worse than our own, thinking it will shrink our pain. Natasha might say, "At least I'm not a quadriplegic or held hostage by a terrorist... I guess things could still be worse."

This misconstrues suffering as a competitive sport. Simply put, just because someone else got hit by a truck doesn't mean my knee surgery hurts any less. We are not competing with Auschwitz for God's compassion. In order to minister effectively to sufferers, we must strip away the competitive mindset. It accuses sufferers of being complaining whiners, and the shame of that discourages prayers for help.

False belief #2: The cross is God's way of silencing us about our suffering. We must be especially careful not to extend the first error into our application of Calvary. In this error Natasha would think, "If Jesus died on the cross, how can I complain about *anything*?" Suddenly, Jesus' greatest act of mercy robs us of our voice in our greatest hour of need. I invite you to read Hebrews 2:17–18.

Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, *so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest* in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For *because he himself has suffered* when tempted, *he is able* to help those who are being tempted.

God doesn't dismiss your suffering because his was greater. Instead, he says the purpose of the incarnation and Calvary was "so that" he can identify with you and help you in your suffering.

Similarly, consider Hebrews 4:15–16.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Christ does not minimize your suffering in light of his own. Rather, Christ wants his suffering to help make him more approachable during our times of need.

With these passages in mind, we know that God does not use Jesus' suffering to dwarf our own. Jesus' suffering is not the measuring stick our suffering must exceed in order to merit God's empathy. Instead, God speaks to us compassionately—"You are understood... Come to me and let me help you." So let us only use the suffering of Christ as God directs. Otherwise, we distort the character of God and silence ourselves when he is waiting to hear from us.

In reality, and as we will see in the verses that lead up to Romans 8:28, God invites sufferers into relationship where they can be fully known by him—better than they know themselves in the disorientation of suffering. And he invites them into relationship where they can be fully loved by him—in a way that cleanses suffering of its stigma and sense of banishment.

False belief #3: The experience of suffering always means that something needs to be forgiven. When Christians try to make sense of personal suffering, they often conclude that they must have somehow deserved it because of their sin and brokenness. That can become the default conclusion because we know we are sinners. Natasha was processing her suffering this way.

Not only do sufferers do this, but counselors and other ministers of the Word do it, too. We are most comfortable when ministry involves helping people with clear issues like identifying sin or unpacking theological truths, such as the implications of our identity in Christ. Likely, we are most comfortable because in the areas of sin and identity we have more influence over the outcome.

However, ministry to those who are suffering primarily involves being an ambassador of God's comfort. Natasha's suffering is not due to personal sin or lack of faith. By definition, she and other sufferers have no voice in or control over what happened. This is the ultimate insult of suffering. By implication then, when

we counsel and comfort sufferers it feels less action-oriented, teaching-driven, or dynamically-engaging than most evangelical ministry. But if we reflect on what has been most meaningful during our own times of suffering, we will likely find it was presence more than precept, and empathy more than exhortation.

If we grow insecure or uncertain about the efficacy of this type of ministry, then our doubt will become contagious. During times of intense suffering, people are already at a hope-deficit. We must believe in the power of “weeping with those who weep” (Rom 12:15) if we are going to have the quiet courage to counsel sufferers well.

Help people understand how their suffering resulted in the particular challenges that they now face.

False belief #4: Comforting sufferers encourages them to see themselves as victims. Sometimes we resist comforting and sitting with people in their pain because it feels like we are leaving people to wallow in their victimization. But that is not true. These things take time. We may struggle to be comfortable with it, but walking at a human pace is what is needed. Natasha, for example, has an entirely different future than the one she expected, which was to be a mom, a wife, and an able-bodied adult. All of these things have been compromised. Comforting her over the loss of these hopes will take time as each is discussed.

And by “comfort,” I don’t mean offering a hug and reassurances to the person. Rather, comforting is patiently helping people understand the impact of their suffering and then providing supportive guidance about how to counter and alleviate that impact. For example, we can think through questions such as these together.

- What does it mean to steward your life well with the physical limitations and cognitive distraction of chronic pain?
- How can you regulate your emotions in light of the trauma you experienced?
- How can you parent well in a blended family when the children struggle with both the divorce and remarriage?

We need to help people understand how their suffering resulted in the particular challenges that they now face, and also work together to identify how to construc-

tively move forward given the realities of those challenges. Often people feel “crazy,” lazy, or weak because they do not understand the impact of their suffering. Normalizing these experiences can be an important part of helping them trust enough to begin to engage in God’s process of restoration. This is not wallowing; this is creating a solid starting point for healing.

False belief #5: God allows suffering because the benefits outweigh the pain.

This is the complement to “suffering is a competitive sport.” If early in suffering we look for someone in worse circumstances to convince ourselves that things “aren’t that bad,” then, after God has begun to show himself faithful, we begin to weigh the redemption against the suffering. In both cases, we need to throw away the scale.

Inadvertently, we begin to believe we must have been as sinful or obstinate as our suffering was difficult. We start to do “guilt math” in order to make the lesson we learned justify the suffering we endured. Here is the equation:

$$\begin{aligned} &(\text{the lesson I learned}) + (\text{the opportunities it has produced}) > \\ &(\text{the pain I endured}) + (\text{the sin that caused my suffering}) \end{aligned}$$

We believe the good (i.e., lessons and opportunities) *must be* greater than the bad (i.e., suffering and triggering sin). We believe this must be true so that we can feel like God’s reason was justified. It is another way we try to get a satisfying answer to the nagging question “Why?!” It is an attempt at the elusive concept of “closure.” It is something we can share with people so that we feel less stigmatized by our suffering. “See, I learned my lesson and it was worth it, so now I can move on.”

Yet this faux-certainty comes at a great price. It would mean that every grace of God to us in our suffering is actually a reflection of our guilt. The grace of God becomes haunted by the question, “Was there really no other way for me to learn these things... for these benefits to have been produced? I guess I was so bad off that God had to do something drastic to get my attention.”

Occasionally, there are times when these types of correlations are clear, like when a car accident awakens an alcoholic to the severity of the addiction or a child running away alerts a parent to an abusive parenting style. But do not force it where it is not obvious. The correlation is certainly not obvious for Natasha. If God desires for you to see the cause and effect between your suffering and what he wanted to change in your life, he is perfectly capable of making it clear. He does not need our speculative assistance. The intersection of God’s goodness and his desire to be known allows us to rest in the fact that he would not be secretive about something so important if it were his intention to get a point across.

These five false beliefs are powerful and common in the church, and even outside the church. They are ways most people try to make sense of suffering. Before moving to the next section, ask yourself: which of these false beliefs are most prominent in how I think about suffering? And, what experiences in my own life would it be helpful for me to rethink in light of these reflections?

Words Fitly Spoken

As you listen well to a hurting person, there will be numerous opportunities to clarify things like those found in the five points above. Be patient. Allow questions, doubts, and skewed understandings to be spoken freely and openly. Be a safe person to bring hard questions and confused feelings to. It is only when people bring themselves honestly to us that we can minister words that are fitly spoken, words that are apt and right for the situation. Such words are “like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Prov 25:11).

If we aren't safe, then people won't bare themselves and our counsel will not be fitly spoken, because we won't know the areas where they most need God's Word and perspective. And if we aren't careful, then our words can be *unfitly* spoken even when they are truthful. This doesn't make them less nutritious, but it does make them less appealing.

So, again, patiently wait for Natasha to raise tough questions about suffering. By doing so, you will be able to speak to her heart when it is most receptive to truth. As you walk together, she will inevitably wrestle with the question of God's purpose or role in personal suffering. Take up this subject only when you have listened and cared for her well enough that she brings this question *to you*.

Now, I would like you to imagine that Natasha says to you, “Thank you for listening to me and being willing to hear my pain. I really appreciate how you helped me see some of the things I was believing about God and others in the midst of my pain. Those beliefs made God and Christians seem unsafe. Can I ask you though, what am I supposed to do with passages like Romans 8:28 in the midst of what I'm going through?”

The rest of this article will engage with her question.

The Journey to Romans 8:28

As with any passage, context is extremely important. If we allow Romans 8:28 to roam around by itself, it can be like a stray dog that looks friendly but snarls and bites when you get too close. But in its context, we find the compassionate, patient approach we would hope for from “the Father of mercies and God of all comfort” (2 Cor 1:3). Let's set the context for Romans 8:28 by starting a few verses earlier

in verse 25. Paul has been writing about suffering and how we groan inwardly as we wait for the redemption of our bodies. As we suffer, we place our hope in what we do not see.

“But if we hope for what we do not see...” (v.25)

Together, we hope. Paul is writing to hurting, longing, waiting Christians. They want something (every indication is that their desire is for a good thing), but they do not have it. God seems deaf to their prayers. Doubtless they are struggling to maintain an accurate view of God as gracious and good.

Notice that Paul says “we.” He can relate to their experience. He is one of them. Together there is some good thing they want that they cannot see. It is not just that they do not yet “have” it. They cannot even “see” it. What they are longing for is beyond the horizon of their vision. However far off it may be, it feels even farther away because it is out of sight.

They are left only with hope—and so they must wait.

Why is Romans 8:28 so often resisted? Because it sounds too neat, like the God who said these things could not possibly understand.

“...we wait for it with patience.” (v.25)

And we wait with patience. Like hope, patience is a pleasant word on paper. It sounds nice. We use it as a compliment. When we say, “You are so patient,” we speak with admiration. But patience is a virtue that is only necessary because of sin and suffering. Being patient can feel excruciating. We never say, “You are so patient” to the person who is at the beach sipping a drink from a coconut. That person may be patient, but the context does not allow that patience to be demonstrated.

Patience is only noticeable in an environment of stress, deprivation, or annoyance. We deduce from verse 25 that Paul’s readers must have been growing exhausted. Hoping and waiting are hard work. Faith-fatigue was setting in.

Pause for a moment and think back to Natasha. Would she find hope in knowing others struggle to maintain faith and stamina in long-suffering? Yes. Why? Because it’s starting to sound like God “gets it.” Why is Romans 8:28 so often resisted? Because it sounds too neat, like the God who said these things could not possibly understand. Let’s continue.

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness...” (v.26)

The Spirit helps us. We don't have to just deduce that they were exhausted; we read it in this verse. Paul says that the strain of waiting and hoping brought them to the place of profound *weakness*. They had done everything their waiting, hoping, praying, longing, and believing could do. And they were about done.

The Holy Spirit is tender and situationally appropriate.

In this place of human weakness, the Holy Spirit softly enters the text... and our lives. “Likewise” means “in the same way” or “with the same posture” and here reveals how much the Spirit experiences our sorrows as we groan and wait for glory. We will see more of this later, but for now realize the transition phrase is not “triumphantly the Spirit helps us” or “jubilantly the Spirit helps us.” Instead, we see that the Holy Spirit is tender and situationally appropriate.

But we have a hard time seeing God this way—and that can be a big part of our struggle during suffering. Our cynical, exhausted mind imagines God as “not getting it.” Instead of being our help, we see him like a disappointed father with crossed arms, tapping his foot as he recounts our mistakes. In our fatigue, God takes on the worst-case disposition. With this faulty view, God's posture toward us during this terrible time might seem like this:

- We see God demanding something more, bigger, or better at the very moment when we are exhausted.
- We see God judging us as bad, weak, stupid, or faithless when we already feel condemned.
- We see God rejecting us when we already feel alone.
- We see God disappointed in our best efforts when we already feel distraught.

These worst-case projections put distance between God and us at a time when we need him most.

Unless we allow God to take the journey of suffering with us, we will not trust the answers he has for us at the end. That is why this walk *into* Romans 8:28 is so vitally important. We don't just “arrive” there. What gets us there is painful suffering, and God is with us every step of the way. Any answers he has for us are bearable only because of the trust in him that has been forged on that journey. In

fact, placing our trust in him is the most essential thing we can do on a painful, wearying journey. Trust is the flipside responsibility of the beatitude in Matthew 5:4, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” *In order to* experience God’s comfort, we must trust him with our tears. As we do, we come to view his posture toward us differently—and accurately. Like this:

- God identifies with our exhaustion and is willing to sit with us. This allows us to not rush when we need rest.
- God identifies with our feelings of condemnation and takes them as his own. This allows us to trust his grace will not run out.
- God identifies with our sense of isolation by not minimizing his own experience of being forsaken by his companions. This allows us to sense that he will never leave us (Matt 26:40–41).
- God identifies with our distress. He himself sweated drops of blood. This allows us to believe he meets us where we are (Luke 22:44).

But this passage is not yet at a place of resolution. God goes with us deeper into the disorientation of suffering so that he can bring light to the darkest places of our experience.

“...for we do not know what to pray for as we ought...” (v.26)

We don’t know how to pray. When asked, “What’s wrong?” dear sufferers will often shake their head as if to say, “I don’t know where to begin... Reciting it again would only magnify the echo of sorrow... I’m not sure my words do my pain justice... I’ve talked to God and he was silent. What good would it do to tell my sorrows to you?”

They are at a loss for the content of prayer (i.e., “what to pray”) and the attitude of prayer (i.e., “as we ought”). There is a clear sense that the hope they had while waiting is fading. It is not as if they never had hope or faith. They did and they prayed earnestly. But the fact that they were once full of faith now seems to only highlight their souls’ hunger. To have once prayed naturally, fervently, and expectantly now only makes their loss for words and unmet desires sting more sharply. But notice the conversation with God has not stopped. Even their loss for words is an opened-mouth, blank stare *toward* God. And God responds to even this silent, bewildered faith.

“...but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” (v.26)

But the Spirit knows how to pray. Begin considering this phrase from Scripture with the question, “To whom is the Spirit speaking?” The Holy Spirit is not giving us a divine pep talk, saying, “Just do this” or “Here’s what I’ve been up to, if you just

understood.” The Spirit is speaking to God the Father on our behalf. The Spirit is taking our pain and despair to the ear of the Father. Even our hopelessness cannot be silent in the Father’s presence because of the Holy Spirit.

There are many places in Scripture where God reminds us he knows our suffering. For example, God gives assurances to Moses, and these assurances are true for every suffering believer. “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their suffering” (Ex 3:7).

God’s message of hope for suffering is more than truth-content articulating how to resolve the philosophical “problem of evil.” Philosophical answers do not get expressed in “groanings too deep for words.” At its core, God’s message for your suffering is:

I understand (Heb 4:15–16).

I am with you (Heb 13:5).

I will carry the load with you (Matt 11:28–30).

Look to me as often as you are weary (Heb 12:1–2).

We can walk together in this dark place, he says (Ps 23:4), so do not feel rushed to simply get over this pain.

To make sure God’s words to us do not seem to fall short of what we want or need when we are suffering, let me put it in a slightly different way. Imagine something has happened that has left a child feeling sorrowful. In his sorrow, the child fears that he will be rejected by his father if he comes to him for help. What would mean more: a few words spoken by the father that sought to counter the content of the child’s fears, or the father gently raising the chin of his crying child, locking eyes, and the child seeing that his father’s eyes are filled with compassion and understanding? The obvious answer is the second one and that is what God offers.

“But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head.” (Psalm 3:3)

See God gently lifting your head to catch his empathizing eyes. Encounter the Father who is with us in our sorrow and brings us comfort. C.S. Lewis captures this image when Digory is tempted to believe that Aslan does not care that his mother was dying of cancer.

“But please, please—won’t you—can’t you give me something that will cure Mother?”

Up till then he had been looking at the Lion’s great feet and the huge claws on them; now, in his despair, he looked up at its face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his

whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and (wonder of wonders) great shining tears stood in the Lion's eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory's own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself.

"My son, my son," said Aslan. "I know. Grief is great."⁶

Just as Aslan shared in Digory's grief, so the Spirit shares in ours—and groans to the Father on our behalf. The Spirit brings all the despair of our suffering before the Father, in its perfectly articulated utterlessness. The Father hears those groans—and he responds. He then ministers to us perfectly and tenderly.

"And he who searches hearts..." (v.27)

The Spirit knows our heart. The words of the Holy Spirit are not vague or general; they are the exact representation of our heart. The words that the Spirit brings to the Father are everything we would say if we had the wherewithal to articulate the pain of our hope-depleted souls. Our pain may scream, "I am alone!" But the prayers of the Spirit remind us we are known.

The Spirit brings all the despair of our suffering before the Father.

Here, the word *searches* carries more meaning than merely identifying the best way to say something. It carries the meaning of exploration. God actively explores the terrain of our heart. By the Spirit, God gets to know every contour of our suffering, even those parts we may not fully understand yet. This is the perfect fulfillment of Hebrews 4:15–16: we have a Savior who is fully aware of our broken experience because he subjected himself to the world's brokenness.

The God who counts our every sleepless tossing and captures our every tear (Ps 56:8) does not just document the outcome of our suffering, but also lives with us at the core of each experience. The Holy Spirit cries with us "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" in the midst of every moment we feel abandoned. His voice joins ours in every one of those prayers.

"...the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." (v.27)

And the Spirit intercedes, knowing God's will. The Spirit prays for us according to the will of God. But what does that mean for someone like Natasha? How does

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: Collier/MacMillan, 1970), 141-142.

she think about God's will for her given her heart-wrenching circumstances? How does anyone? The distance between our suffering and what could be considered God's will often feels so great that considering it is either overwhelming or offensive. How do you get from a child with cancer to God's will? How do you get from being raped to God's will? The distance is beyond human capacity.

This is the pressure we begin to feel from this passage. Initially we thought God didn't get it (i.e., understand our suffering). Now we fear that *we* won't be able to get it (i.e., reconcile God's compassionate understanding with our ongoing suffering). This is when it's important to notice again who is talking to whom. The Spirit is still talking to the Father. Our call at this stage of bewilderment is to trust, not understand.

This is when we notice something that is absent from this passage, something we all wish was included: a time line. How long is the journey from verse 25 to verse 28 and beyond? How long, O Lord? Is it hours, days, months, years, or decades? We don't know. We are promised a competent, compassionate companion. But we are not given a map for the journey. We can't determine how long it will take or how far we still have to go. Initially, we would give anything not to be alone. Once that need is met, we quickly begin to want to know more details. But what we have learned about God on this journey allows us to trust his character in the uncertainty.

Verse 28 picks up with what we *do* know—even in the absence of the desired time line.

“And we know...” (v.28)

And through trust in God we know. Hopefully these introductory words to verse 28 sound a bit different after our journey through the preceding verses. The phrase *we know* is less the triumphal decree that we normally read it as, and more of an empathic reassurance of what God has shared in the preceding verses.

In the words that follow, Paul summarizes the implication of the Spirit's ministry: God is intimately aware and personally involved, so there is solid reason for confidence. One implication of this is that we should minister this truth to others in the same pastoral way it is offered in Romans, after much listening and walking with compassion on their suffering journey.

We've walked our way to verse 28. We have found that God journeys with us. But because it is a journey, I will end here—at the beginning of verse 28. We will not journey farther today. The journey doesn't end here, of course. But that is the point. You may not get to the second half of verse 28 any time soon. So I will leave you with a sense of unresolved tension, though I will offer some additional warn-

ings about how *not* to use the verse when you do journey to verse 28 with a sufferer.

The Ghost Word and More Guilt Math

The positive message of verse 28 that Paul offers us with confidence can easily be misunderstood or resisted because of a “ghost word” we often inadvertently insert in this passage. By “ghost word,” I mean a word we add that makes sense to us, changes the meaning of the passage, but is not there. See if you can spot the ghost word that I’ve added to this rendition of Romans 8:28:

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together
for more good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

You probably caught the word *more* because it reads awkwardly. While the word doesn’t fit, I’m convinced it captures one thing we do with this passage that makes it painfully offensive instead of comforting. We try to super-size what the passage says, as if it were a late-night infomercial trying to get us to buy something that seems too good to be true.

This is rarely done overtly, but represents the kind of emotional math we engage in. After our pain, we try to identify the “good” that came from it that would make it “worth it.” How was our suffering “for our good”? We weigh our pain and we weigh our blessing. If we deem there is not “more” blessing than pain, then we...

- ... begin to *doubt* God’s Word and become angry,
- ... or, we try to *minimize* our suffering to get God off the hook.
- or, we begin to *inflate* how much we needed the “lesson” to balance the scales.

If the scales do not feel emotionally balanced, we move into uncharted spiritual territory. These seem like our only three options: doubt God, minimize suffering, or inflate the blessing (its impact or necessity).

Let me begin by saying, I believe it is okay for us to wonder about God’s goodness in the midst of suffering. If it were not, then God would not have given us so many psalms of remorse, lament, and grief. To whatever degree we can read God’s intent into biblical statistics, God thought we needed more psalms of confused sorrow than clear praise.⁷ But let’s not use God’s patience with our bewilderment as a reason to fuel the disillusionment we feel when life is hard. Instead, let’s reexamine what inserting the concept of “more” into this passage does.

First, it causes us to do the guilt math that we discussed earlier—the at-

⁷ There are more psalms in the “minor key” or unpleasant emotions than there are celebratory psalms.

tempt to make whatever good that comes from our pain add up to make the suffering “worth it.” We may do this in order to protect our view of God. Or we may do it to bolster our own sense that we are being godly “enough” in the face of tragedy because we can identify good. But there are consequences to this: we begin to live as if any sense of tension we feel is a lack of faith.

If we learn anything from the candor of Scripture, it’s that God doesn’t need us to protect him. We live like children who won’t admit we are scared of the dark because we don’t want to offend our parents who told us that there was nothing to fear. Yet God inspired a gritty honest Scripture so we would live in authentic relationship with him. Part of authenticity means that we quit doing guilt math. We can be confused and hurt by the seeming disproportionate weight of our suffering without fear of offending God or feeling like a deficient Christian.

Why do we feel like it’s a lack of faith to say, “At this point in my life I still feel that the sorrow of the traumatic event is greater than the good that has come from it”?

Second, the rushed-ness of guilt math causes us to declare the winner before all the votes have been cast. We don’t know *what* good is coming—or *when* good is coming. Why would we feel coerced to already say the balance has tipped? Some people may experience so much redemptive good early on that this kind of statement is natural, and that is wonderful. But why do we feel like it’s a lack of faith to say, “At this point in my life I still feel that the sorrow of the traumatic event is greater than the good that has come from it”?

Who watches a tragic movie with a redemptive ending and thinks it was “good” 60 minutes in? Who watches a great comeback and thinks it was epic before the final buzzer? What abandoned spouse can say it was “worth it” in 18 months? What grieved child can say there is estimable good in having lost a parent? The obvious answer is... no one. My point is simply that God is not the one rushing us to the right answer.

So what do we do with this reflection?

The answer: throw away the scale. Quit trying to measure the cumulative benefit (in your life or for others) against the cumulative sorrow. The math

does not honor your pain and is not needed to justify God. All it does is rush you through processing your pain and leaves you feeling defeated, rejected, or cynical.

So what do we do instead of guilt math? We revisit what God means when he says “all things work together for good.” What does he mean by *good*?

Good: A Different Destination

Much of the problem with this passage concerns the definition of the word *good*. We must begin to view “good” differently. We must see it as a destination instead of as a counter-balance for “bad,” and we must trust that God can get us there. A good destination can be reached on a hard journey.

Good-as-destination is very different from good-as-payback. In the payback-mentality, anything bad that happens has to be “paid back” by something equally good. This means that every new hardship makes good further away because it has to increase to equal the new debt incurred by the latest hardship. When every pain suffered has to be reimbursed with new good for the account to be settled, it delays the prospect of being fully paid back. This eats away hope.

In our pain we often wonder if life can ever be good again, if we will ever know peace, or whether hope will ever seem real. The answer to all of these is “yes.” God has made promises to us. In that sense we are all on a journey to the Promised Land. We are all walking with the shepherd of Psalm 23 through the valley of the shadow of death to the place where we will no longer need hope or faith or patience. We will fully see and know the goodness of the Lord.

Indeed, God is bringing us to a place that is good (ultimately heaven, but not only heaven) in spite of all that Satan intends for our harm. In this sense we live like Joseph (Gen 37–50). We do not know the length of the journey and the math may seldom seem to “add up.” But we trust that the hardships of life are no hindrance to God’s ability or faithfulness to bring us to a place that is good.

As we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we may cry out to God many times. That is part of the “good.” Not because God delights in our sorrow, but because our cries indicate that we are not trying to be more spiritual than God requires or more biblical than the Bible prescribes. Crying out to God means that our hearts are un-calloused toward him and open to his love along the journey. And our cries to our God actually bring him honor, because they testify that he is a God who hears and is inclined toward his people.

We are living out our covenant relationship with God “in good times and in bad.” We are experiencing God’s comfort and allowing our suffering to facilitate a more intimate relationship with him. As we are fully known and fully loved by

God, we come to know his character more clearly. As we know him truly, our affection for him grows. As our affection grows, it creates a natural desire to be like him, and he faithfully does the work of conforming our character to his.

Yet this process of being conformed to his image does not mean we need to force ourselves to move quickly along toward “good” when we are suffering. God is still working in us when we cry, mourn, weep, question, doubt, ask, wonder. We have the freedom to wander to these places if that is where we really are on the journey. God is a gentleman to us in our suffering. Again, he walks with us at an unrushed pace, at a pace we can handle. But as you experience his goodness and love for you, you will inevitably be drawn toward him.

God is a gentleman to us in our suffering.

Are We There Yet?

Are all of your questions answered? Not mine. Have you made peace with Romans 8:28? Maybe. Are you closer at least? God’s intent was never that we could ace the “problem of evil” column on a cosmic edition of Jeopardy. God’s intent is that we would come to know his character, even in the midst of our suffering, so that pain would be no more of a hindrance to our relationship with him than our sin.

We should remember that most people who do not believe in God, even Christians who doubt God, do not do so for intellectual reasons. They disbelieve for personal reasons. They’ve been hurt and they cannot reconcile how there could be a good God in light of their experience. As with everyone, it is their sin that severed their relationship with God, but it is their pain that often blinds their eyes to the hope available in the gospel. In light of their pain, they believe Jesus’ death on the cross (if it was anything) was just another cruel act by a cruel God.

But when people come to see that Jesus, the High Priest, experienced all of their suffering, and when they understand that the Holy Spirit explores, understands, and brings all of their suffering to the Father, then God can no longer be cruel. He is too involved to be cruel. The cross becomes God absorbing the full effect of the fall. Christ took on all of the groaning of creation (Rom 8:22), which included all the sorrow of each and every one of us. Because he did, we can trust him in the redemption of our most personal and intense suffering. This is the relationship that is described in the balance of chapter 8. The better we, as coun-

selors and friends, help people see the journey from verse 25 to 28, the more they will embrace the truth that we are part of God's family and cannot be separated from his love no matter what tribulation comes upon us.

Still, as you seek to minister the concepts in this article, please do not rush anyone to the "right" conclusions. The ability to embrace the things discussed might best be described as "end of the journey" truths—things that make more sense once we have some distance from the experience.

As Natasha is still emotionally close to the experience of suffering, you will likely spend more time embodying the truths in verses 25–27 than you will explaining the truths that come after. As you embody God's care, it may foreshadow the reason for your hope even while she builds the strength needed to receive that truth in propositional form. When she is ready, it will be a beautiful, personal, contextualized, fitly spoken truth. And there will be thankfulness that you walked with her at a human pace as God's ambassador until then.

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