

The Spirit in Suffering

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When we're in the throes of suffering, it can be difficult to make sense of things. We get disheartened, angry, even lose hope. How do we suffer well? Where is the Holy Spirit in suffering? How do we cope? We need: a meaning, a companion, and a hope.

Meaning

Victor Frankl was an Austrian neurologist who was arrested by Nazis and sent to Auschwitz. There he was forced to dig a tunnel for a water main unaided, day after day, often without food. While he was in Auschwitz, he watched many suffer brutally and die. *Some* took their own lives. How did Frankl survive? Why didn't *he* take his own life? He came to believe that suffering is a moral task. And if a person can discover *meaning*, they can embrace the task, survive just about anything. When working with his fellow patients, Frankl would coax prisoners out of suicide by asking them to consider what the future held for them. One prisoner expressed a longing to be reunited with a child—the meaning of *love*. Another aspired to finish a series of scientific books—the meaning of *vocation*. With meaning in hand, each one endured and survived. Do you have a meaning strong enough to embrace the task of suffering? Or does it consistently take you by surprise? St. Paul offers meaning for sufferers when he writes [For I consider the present sufferings are not worthy of comparing to the glory to be revealed in us \(8:18\)](#). Writing from prison, he compares his present sufferings to future glory. In a sense, this is what Frankl's patients did—comparing their hardships to the glory of reunion with a child, completion of a calling. What glory does Paul have in mind? It's a glory to be revealed *in us*. It includes two interrelated glories: 1) *adoption* into the family of God, [\(23\) we wait eagerly for adoption as sons; \(21\) the freedom of the glory of the children of God](#) 2) *the redemption of our bodies* [\(23\)](#). **Adoption:** Paul is saying there is a love so deep and so true it will one day lift you out of the miserable circumstances of sorrow and sin and place you under the waterfall of *undying affection and intimate belonging*. A couple in their 60's tried to adopt three times. Each time they were promised the child, saw the child, came to love the child, and each time the adoption fell through. After the final fail, the husband described their marriage to me as two zombies living together. Unfeeling, just moving through life. Then,

with tears in his eyes, he told me he had a dream of Jesus calling them to not give up, that they would have a child. They went on to adopt not one but three children. Each grown and thriving. Why? Their parents' adoptive love? Yes, and no. *Remember* their love wasn't enough, not even for one another. *They* needed more than they could give one another. They needed *intimate affection and undying belonging*, to make it through heartache, the adoptive love of God. But, that love didn't insulate them from sorrow, doubt, numbness. Why? To drive them to God's glorious love, into their adoption. Because sometimes we compare our sufferings, not with future glory, but with others. Why do *they* have a child? Why do they get a nice house? Why are they so much more successful? It's natural to observe the differences. What's unhelpful is sinful *comparison*, tallying up what others have and put it next to what we don't, and growing discontent, angry, bitter. We rarely compare ourselves to people *who have less*. That might lead to gratitude and contentment, but sinful comparison leads to complaining and despair. When we compare present sufferings to things less than future glory, that thing will eventually break under the weight. Imagine what that child, or vocation, had to bear once those Auschwitz survivors were released? We need more than a meaning; we need glory revealed *in us*.

Companion

So how do we get this glory, in us? In a season of sorrow, I received a phone call from a friend. As I blabbered through it, he offered to come by in the middle of the day. When he got there, we sat down on the couch. I don't remember anything he said or prayed. I only remember his presence. It gave me the permission to collapse, to ball my eyes out *with him by my side*. I needed a companion, a conduit of heavenly love. Do you need a companion? Maybe Frankl's patients endured, not merely because of meaning but because of *his presence*? Don't underestimate your need, or your opportunity, for the ministry of presence. Show up in the middle of a work day, a hand on the back, a hug. Presence can speak more than a thousand words. Now the trouble is, people leave. My friend could not stay all day, but *the Spirit* does stay: [but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons \(23\). 26: 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.](#) **When we're weak; he prays.** As we groan, the Spirit groans.

The Spirit sits down with us, rises with us, cries out within us—Abba, Father—as we wait for glory. The Holy Spirit is a *continual* companion. When everyone else is gone, asleep, doesn't understand—the Spirit is present, alert, and empathizes with groans too deep for words, as we wait for glory. **When we lack words; he intercedes.** Sometimes it hurts so bad we just sit in his presence. One commentator describes this as a “necessary incompleteness” (Moo) to life this side of glory. Our adoption is incomplete, so we cry out. Our redemption is incomplete, so we cry out. It's already but *not yet*. So, the Spirit stirs us to wait eagerly for the completion of our adoption. The word *eagerly* means to strain forward, to lean toward the front seats and say, “Mom, Dad, are we there yet?” The Spirit is straining us forward to that second glory, the **redemption** of our bodies. Like the new creation, our redeemed bodies will no longer be corrupt. They will not break down, be diseased, or sin: “**But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is**” (1 Jn 3:2). We will enter the glorious freedom of the sons and daughters of God. We will run and not grow weary, we will walk and not grow faint; we will sing and not suffer; we will create and not oppress, and the glory of God will be revealed *in us*. Redemption *and* Adoption. How do you know? The Companion groans *and* the Companion *yearns*. The Spirit is a firstfruit, a taste of what's to come, the nudge, the pledge that all painful things will be undone. All things will be new!

Hope

Paul says, **In this hope we are saved** (24). In *this hope*—the hope of glory, of all the painful things coming undone, of everything being shot through with radiant, healing, liberating of light of Jesus Christ; the King of New Creation. In this hope *we are saved*—we are saved by faith in Christ Jesus not just *from* sin but *to* a stunning future. We are saved into it. By *hope*. You can hope in meaning—a child, a job, a clear medical report—or you can hope in this, the very promises of God. A few weeks ago, one of our members unexpectedly lost his father, who died at the ripe retiring age of 65. Was a respected judge and Christian. When I called our member to pray with him, he said amidst groans of sorrow, “I'm clinging to Rom 6:23.” It caught me off guard. Really? Yep. “*The wages of sin is death BUT the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus.*” Eternal life *in Jesus*. He hoped in the promises of God, the hope of glory. Now, his father is dancing in glory of his Father's adoptive love *with a redeemed body!* The



promises of God: Already *and the Not yet*. Necessarily Complete. When you suffer, hope in the promises of God. Know them now, so they are at hand then. Friends, the glory is coming but only for those who hope in Christ Jesus. Where will you hope? In the meaning of man or the glory of God? The glory revealed *in us*. Present sufferings don't compare to future glory. *That's* the comparison we're meant to make. When we run a race lactic acid builds up, muscles begin to fatigue, feet throb, throat gets dry, and we want to quit. But then we think about the glory of crossing the finish line, the cheers, the friends, the rest, and the medal. The reward eclipses our pain, and we press on. Keep your eye on the reward: the undying affection, intimate belonging, and bodily glory will be necessarily complete soon enough, in the presence of the Father, Son, and *Holy Spirit*. Hope in the glory to be revealed.