**ENDURING COVID-19**

**Romans 8:18-25**

**INTRODUCTION**

According to statistics compiled by John Hopkins University, Canada has the fifteenth most cases in the world right now. It has less cases than countries like US, China, Italy, Spain, and Germany, and Iran, but it has more cases than countries like Australia, Brazil, Japan, Russia, and India.

Last Sunday, there were about 1400 COVID-19 cases in Canada. The latest statistics say that the number has quadrupled to 5,600 cases. If this rate of spread continues, then next week, we’ll have 22,000 cases. The week after, we’ll have 89,600. The week after, we’ll have 358,000. That’s just in three weeks.

And that’s only the impact on health. What about the impact on our economy? Every day I hear about people losing their jobs. Some of you have lost your jobs, or have had to close your businesses. Many of you have lost huge chunks of your retirement savings and investments. The situation is bad right now, and it seems like it’s going to get worse before it starts getting better.

In times like these, we need to ask, “What does God have to say about all this?” You’re not going to find the answer by reading the news. If you’re like me, you’ve probably spent far too much time reading the news and not enough time reading your Bible, and the result is that we’re being led to respond to the coronavirus in the same way as the world: with anxiety, with fear, and with a view of the world that makes God seem absent.

That’s why meeting together is so important. We need to fix our eyes on God’s Word together and be reminded that God is not silent. He has spoken into this crisis and given us exactly what we need to know so that we would respond with faith rather than fear.

Some of you here may not know what you believe about God. I want to welcome you and invite you to come on this journey with us. And I want you to consider that perhaps God is using these world events to get your attention. Normally, we’re all so distracted by work and entertainment and our social lives, but now that so much of that has been stripped away, perhaps now is the time to ask the deeper questions in life. Who is God, and what does he want from me? What does the Bible say about pandemics, and how does it equip me and empower me to get through this time of uncertainty and fear?

Those are important questions, and you’re probably not going to find the answers in one service. But if you take some time to seek the answers within the Christian faith, I believe that you will not only find answers, but find God himself in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Today we’ll be looking at Romans 8:18-25.

The title of this sermon is **Enduring COVID-19.** I need to say at the outset that this isn’t a practical sermon. It’s a theological sermon. It’s not a sermon about what we must and must not do. You can get all that online. But what you can’t get online are the truths that will help you understand this pandemic from a biblical perspective, and endure it with faith and hope. Only the Bible can give us that, so to the Bible we turn now.

We’re going to have three points today:

1. True Hope
2. True God
3. True Restoration

(1) **TRUE HOPE**

One of the things I love about the Bible is how it speaks to our suffering. It’s not a book that sugarcoats life by telling us that everything’s fine, that life’s not hard, or that everything we could ever want in life will come to us in this world. The Bible is real about suffering, which is why we see that at the center of its plotline is a crucified Saviour. The heart of our faith isn’t the empty tomb of the resurrection. The heart of our faith is the cross, and it’s at the cross that Jesus demonstrated that came to suffer for us, and he came to suffer with us.

The cross reminds us that we don’t have a God who looks dispassionately upon our suffering. We have a God who has tasted our suffering himself. Every loss, every pain, every sorrow that we experience, he has experienced as well. And as one who has tasted suffering personally, he has given us countless resources in the Scriptures to both understand and endure suffering.

Our text today is one of those passages. It’s a passage that helps us to understand and endure suffering, and the heart of its message is summarized in verse 18: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

The Apostle Paul’s talking about the power of hope. Hope won’t take away our suffering, but it will take away the fears and anxieties that our suffering produces, because it puts our suffering into perspective.

You could say that hope is a bridge between our future hope and our present reality. It brings some of the future glory that awaits us into our present experience of suffering so that we would receive grace to endure it.

Hope is crucial to the Christian faith. Verse 24 says that “in this hope we were saved”. Hope is one of the benefits of our salvation. We are meant to live in daily hope, waiting for the unseen future that will certainly come.

The Bible calls hope one of the three greatest virtues for a Christian to pursue. 1 Corinthians 13:13 says:

“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

We know 1 Corinthians 13 as the love chapter, and rightly so, because love is the greatest, but that’s not at all meant to diminish the value of hope. Hope is a crucial pillar of the Christian life, and if we are to thrive as Christians, we must cultivate hope.

My fear is that my generation has largely forgotten about hope. Love we know, faith we know, but true Christian hope has been largely abandoned. Yes, we talk about “hope”, but the hopes we talk about are usually worldly hopes. We talk about our “hopes and dreams” when it comes to family life, or careers, or vacations, but we rarely talk about the hope of eternal life with God.

But true Christian hope isn’t bound up in this world. It extends into the world to come. True Christian hope is the hope of resurrection. It’s the hope of the return of Christ. It’s the hope of spending an eternity in the new heavens and the new earth in perfect fellowship with God.

It’s meant to be a daily source of encouragement and comfort, but that’s not how we see it. Instead, we see it more like the “get out of jail free” card in Monopoly that we only use when we need it, rather than see it as the daily comfort that it’s meant to be.

Why is that the case? I believe there are at least two reasons. The first is because of the criticism of the world. You may have heard the saying that “some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good”. They’re thinking so much about the life to come, that they’re not thinking about the life that currently is. That’s certainly a possibility. People may use “hope” as an excuse to be passive or indifferent to this world’s suffering. They say, “God’s going to fix everything in the end, so why should I care about what happens to it?”

That’s not true Christian hope, because true Christian hope works itself out in love. It’s just like faith. Faith without works is dead, and hope without works is dead. The three theological virtues – faith, hope, and love – are meant to work together to result in good works and gospel opportunities.

We see this in 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3:

“We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

It was steadfastness of hope that enabled the early Christians to do their works of faith and labours of love, because hope gave them freedom from the fear of death. Hope enabled them to lay down their lives in sacrificial love for others, because they knew that death wasn’t the end. It was only the beginning of true, everlasting life.

C.S. Lewis wrote,

[Hope] does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.” – CS Lewis

If we want to engage the world, the remedy isn’t less hope. It’s more. We can’t let the world tell us what’s important. Only God can tell us, and he has told us through his Word to devote ourselves to works of faith, labours of love, and steadfastness of hope.

Here’s the second reason why hope has diminished in our day: our material prosperity. Who longs for heaven when it feels like heaven is already here? We live in one of the most prosperous countries in the world, which is something that we should be thankful for, but we need to realize that one of the effects of our prosperity is that it has given us very little reason to meditate on hope.

As prosperity grows, Christian hope diminishes. Our hope for heaven thins out and disappears because it feels like we’re already pretty close to paradise. We live longer, we make more money, we have the freedom to do what we want, and there’s very little in our lives that makes us cry out to the Lord to bring us to our true home.

COVID-19 is changing that. It’s stripping away our worldly sources of comfort and hope and forcing us to see just how fragile they are. If our hopes are bound up in this world, then we’re not going to do very well in the coming days, because hope is what keeps us going. It’s the fuel that keeps us burning. So if we put our hope in the wrong thing, we’re not going to persevere. But if our hope is in the Lord, in his triumphant return, in our future resurrection, and our glorious, eternal relationship with him, then we will endure these days with boldness and faith.

That’s one of the ways that the Lord is using this pandemic. He’s using it to shake up our false hopes that are wrapped up in the things of this world so that we would replace them with a true hope in the things of God. It could be that you’ve been hoping in your retirement; or in a long, pain-free life; or in the growth of your business; or in your career ambitions. If it’s been any of those things, then the Lord is using this pandemic to remind you that none of those hopes are sufficient. All of them will disappoint you, because if COVID-19 has taught us anything, it’s that God can strip away our hopes in an instant.

Don’t put your hope in the world. Put your hope in God, because true hope in God is the only thing that will give us peace about the future

(2) **TRUE GOD**

What Paul does next is he makes an argument that is of cosmic proportions to show us just how great our hope truly is. And as he does, he reaches into the very nature of God himself. This leads to our second point: True God.

In verses 19-22, Paul is showing us how great our hope is by saying that even creation shares the same hope. We need to realize that this is a poetic argument, because creation doesn’t actually have hopes. Rocks aren’t waiting for anything, let alone waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. But what we see throughout Scripture is that creation is often personified. The Psalms speak about the trees clapping their hands. Jesus speaks about the rocks shouting out with praise. And here, Paul talks about creation groaning and longing for humanity to be restored.

But in the midst of this poetic argument, Paul makes an important theological point about creation. In verse 20, he says that creation was “subjected to futility”. “Futility” is the word the Bible uses when it describes something that is fleeting and transient, like the grass that withers or the flowers that fade. He’s reminding us that creation doesn’t last. It fades, it withers, and it dies.

Verse 21 says the same thing. It says that creation is in “bondage to corruption”. Creation doesn’t last. It’s prone to corruption. Living things die. Animals eat each other or die of old age. Mighty trees rot and topple over. Sturdy rocks weather away with time. Creation is futile and vain because it’s full of death and corruption.

We know this, and the world knows this. We know that creation is full of death. We just try not to think about it. But Paul’s main insight here isn’t about *what* creation is. It’s about *why* it is the way it is.

In verse 20, he says that “creation was *subjected* to futility, not willingly, but because of *him who subjected it*.” He’s saying that creation didn’t do this to itself. Death isn’t its natural state. It was put in a state of death and subjected to futility by *him* who subjected it. Who is he talking about? He’s talking about God. He’s saying that God is the one who put creation in bondage to corruption and made it subject to death.

If you know your Bible, you’ll know that this is nothing new. It was back in Genesis 3:17 that God cursed the ground after our first parents sinned. And when God cursed the ground, he wasn’t just making it hard to grow crops. He didn’t have a bias against farmers. He was cursing creation itself, so that none of it would function the way that it was meant to. The wind in the sky, the waves in the sea, and the bugs in the ground, all of it was subjected to futility and corruption.

Paul’s making a massive statement about God’s nature. He’s telling us that, as COVID-19 continues to spread around the world, God isn’t just watching what’s going on. He’s *ruling* over what’s going on. His sovereign, omnipotent rule extends over all of creation so that nothing happens except through him and by his will.

That includes this pandemic. That includes any pandemics that hit our world in the future. God never does evil, but he ordains evil in such a way that it still accomplishes his purposes. This is what Christian over the centuries have called the Doctrine of God’s Providence.

We need the Doctrine of God’s Providence more than ever, because we need to know that God is always in control, even when we’re not. He always knows what he’s doing, even when we don’t. We need to know that evil doesn’t threaten God’s plans, it fulfills God’s plans.

Nothing captures this better than the Heidelberg Catechism. Question 27 says:

**Q. What do you understand by the providence of God?**

A. God’s providence is his almighty and ever present power,

whereby, as with his hand, he still upholds

heaven and earth and all creatures,

and so governs them that

leaf and blade,

rain and drought,

fruitful and barren years,

food and drink,

health and sickness,

riches and poverty,

indeed, all things,

come to us not by chance

but by his fatherly hand.

All things come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand. Whether we are in fruitful or barren years, whether we are in health or sickness. All of it comes to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand. We may be in a season of sickness, but the doctrine of God’s providence reminds us that we can be confident that even this comes to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand. The Catechism continues:

Q. **What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by his providence?**

A. We can be patient in adversity,

thankful in prosperity,

and with a view to the future

we can have a firm confidence

in our faithful God and Father

that no creature shall separate us

from his love;

for all creatures are so completely in his hand

that without his will

they cannot so much as move.

We don’t know why God has ordained this pandemic, but God’s providence tells us that we don’t need to know why. We only need to know that nothing can move – not nations, not armies, and not viruses – apart from his will, and his will is to work all things for the good of those who love him. For the Christian, God’s hand of providence is a hand of fatherly love. So let us be patient in this adversity. He will use this pandemic for our good, and he will remove it when that good is accomplished.

(3) **TRUE RESTORATION**

True hope. True God. Lastly, True Restoration.

Creation is waiting for its full and final restoration. Verse 20 says that creation was subjected *in hope,* the hope of being set free from its bondage to corruption. The earth is longing for the day when it no longer produces pandemics, the day when viruses no longer spread and kill and destroy. It’s waiting with eager anticipation and hope for the day when God lifts it from its futility and leads it into true and full restoration.

But that day won’t come until something else happens first. Verse 19 says that creation is waiting not just for its own revealing, but “for the revealing of the sons of God.” Verse 21 says that it’s hoping for the day when it obtains not just its own freedom, but “the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

Creation will be restored only when humanity is restored, because among all the things that God has made, we alone were made in God’s image. Not animals, not trees, not even angels. We alone were made in the image of God and given the responsibility to steward creation. That meant that our prosperity would lead to creation’s prosperity, and our failing would lead to creation’s failing. We failed, and creation has suffered for it.

So when we look around the world and see how it’s falling apart, we’re meant to remember that it was our sin that did this. We are responsible. Creation has fallen because humanity has fallen. God’s judgment on us has extended to the world that we were intended to care for, and the result is what we see around us now.

But there is hope, not because of who we are or what we’ve done, but because of who God is and what he has done in Christ. God has sent his Son Jesus Christ to suffer our judgment on our behalf by dying on the cross for our sins, so that everyone who believes in him would not only be forgiven, but restored.

And on that day when we are finally and truly restored, God promises that all of creation will be wrapped up in our restoration and enter into the same glory of the sons and daughters of God.

The Christian hope isn’t just that we’ll go to heaven when we die. That’s a wonderful hope, but it’s insufficient to capture all that God has promised. God hasn’t just promised eternal life for those who trust in Christ. He’s promised the restoration of all things. He’ll restore our bodies. He’ll restore our fallen, sinful nature. He’ll restore our broken relationships. And he’ll restore creation itself so that everything in creation will be healed and restored and brought back into glorious existence.

This is what we hope for. We’re not just hoping to flatten the curve, or mitigate the spread of this disease, or see the economy rebound. Those are good things to hope for, but they’re not the best things to hope for. The best thing to hope for is the day when God will rid the world of everything that’s broken and corrupt once and for all. There will be no more pandemics, no more tsunamis, no more earthquakes, no more cancer, no more dementia, no more murder, no more death. There will be no more sin. Christ himself will usher in the new heavens and the new earth and restore everything that he has made.

Until that day comes, we are meant to hope for it, especially in times of suffering, because God takes our suffering and uses it to deepen our hope, so that when we finally receive it, we would respond to him with deeper joy, deeper gratitude, and deeper jubilation when he comes to restore all things.

This is why verse 22 compares the groaning of creation with “the pains of childbirth”. They’re not the pains of death. The groans of death and the groans of new life may sound the same, but their outcomes are completely different. One leads to sorrow, the other leads to joy.

Creation groans, and we groan as well. Verse 23 says “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” We’re groaning along with creation, because we’re subjected to futility too. We’re in bondage to corruption as well. Our bodies get sick and die. Our loved ones perish. Our businesses go bankrupt and shut down.

But all of it, all of our pain, all of our suffering, all of our groaning, is merely preparing the way for everlasting joy, because we are in the pains of childbirth, not the pains of death.

Jesus said this in John 16:20-22:

“You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

**CONCLUSION**

And so, to my non-Christian friends, the question for you is do you know Jesus? Do you know the one who will turn our sorrow into joy that no one can take from you? A world without Christ is a world without hope, because its only hope is here in a world that could fall apart in an instant.

If you’re a skeptic, then you must admit that your pain is without purpose. There’s no meaning behind COVID-19. It’s just a random event. You might even say it’s natural, an organic process of survival of the fittest where the fit survive and the weak do not. You may be able to live with that burden, but I can’t. I can’t accept that the world is what it was meant to be. I believe with the generations of Christians before me that it was meant for something better, a reality that is free from pain and suffering and sorrow. And one day, it will enter that reality when Christ restores all things.

And so, I invite you to come to Christ. Put your faith in him, put your hope in all that he has promised. Trust in him for the forgiveness of your sins, and join us as we wait with eager longing and anticipation for the restoration of all creation.

And to my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, God is calling us today to abound in hope. Don’t let this pandemic lead you to despair. Don’t let it discourage you about the future. Let it give rise in your heart to a greater and purer hope for the day when Christ makes all things new. On that day, he will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and there will be no more mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for all the former things, all the pandemics, all the wars, all the sorrow will pass away, and death shall be no more.

Let us abound in hope, and let our hope work itself out in acts of love: love for one another, love for our neighbours, and love for all whom we come across. Let us share what we have. Let us give to those who are in need. Let us reach out to the lonely. And let us wait for that glorious day when Christ restores all things.