

Date: 15.2.09
Text: Romans 8:18-39
Title: Hope when it all seems hopeless
Place: Kingscliff /Tweed Heads am/pm
File: Bushfires - Romans 8

Introduction

When Alexander the Great set out on his military campaigns, he always divided his possessions among his friends. One time someone said to Alexander, "But you are keeping nothing for yourself ." "O yes, I am." He said "I have kept my hopes." As one man has commented "A person can endure anything so long as he has hope, for then he is walking not to the night but to the dawn."

Hope. Its such an important commodity isn't it? But we can't go down to the supermarket and buy a kilo of hope. We can't surf the internet to purchase a packet of hope. We can't go to the swap meet and trade in something for a measure of hope.

And yet this week this is what our nation desperately needs, hope. For we have seen bushfires ravage a huge chunk of our nation, floods take over another a huge area, while drought is still gripping most of the rest. We have seen people who have lost their family members, friends, neighbours, property, houses, belongings. These natural disasters are so powerful, so destructive, so scary that they have shaken us to the core. And so we need to find something to hold onto. And that is where hope comes in. Hope that God is in control, hope that God can pick up the pieces. Hope so that we can find a way to move forward in the midst of such devastation.

And the Bible recognizes this. In fact in Romans 8, the Apostle Paul will even sum up our world in one word, hopeless.

1. The Present State: Hopeless

Malcolm Fraser famously said, "Life wasn't meant to be easy." And it isn't easy, is it? And for many people waking up this morning, it is about as tough as it gets. And as they survey the devastation, as they feel their pain and loss it can cloud their thinking and remove their hope.

In fact our passage says it is not just people that are groaning but our world itself is groaning. It's frustrated that it is subject to decay. It doesn't like the fact that the ozone layer is being depleted, that we are hotting up, that there are tsunamis, earthquakes, fires and floods. For the world was created by God to be perfect. But since man has set foot in its dirt, since man has rejected their Creator, the earth has copped it right left & centre. And it groans for the days that God has promised are just around the corner, where it will be liberated and set free, made perfect once again.

But not only is the earth groaning, is our society groaning but we as Christians groan also. We are not immune from the sufferings of this world. We get caught up in all the trouble and strife as well. And what's more we are still part of the problem. We can't seem to be the people that we want to be and the people that God wants us to be. We wish we could knock sin on the head but it keeps coming back to haunt us.

And so we groan as we want to see this perfect world, we want to look face to face into the eyes of our perfect God, we want to be transformed into a perfect people but that won't happen until we get to heaven. So in the meantime we groan, we sigh, we wait expectantly for that time to come. We have the deposit but the loan is not yet paid off. We have the down payment, but the full amount hasn't yet come our way. Paul says we are in the midst of the labour pains, we know the baby is coming, but that doesn't take away the pain. Not yet any way.

But the present state is not all hopeless, it just depends upon where you let your gaze rest. For if you look at our nation, or even at ourselves, it might seem that the issues are too big to make any difference. But if you look at God, you see He is big enough to handle anything that is thrown at the present. And so Paul just briefly mentions two seeds of hope for the present.

Firstly in verses 26 and 27 he talks about another person who groans. But this time he is not talking about the world personified, or people or even Christians, he is talking about God's Holy Spirit. He groans. You see sometimes in the midst of all the devastation, life is all too hard for us to cope with it. Sometimes we don't know what to do, or what to say to God, or even where to go to start. And so the Spirit in our weakness, takes our hearts desires, takes our prayers, takes our silence even and interprets that to God. He interceded for us, He acts as a go between, so to speak.

He makes sure that God understands our plight. He translates feelings that words can never express. He searches our hearts. So we know that we are not alone, for God's Holy Spirit is within us and so God the Father always understands our situation.

And that leads Paul to his second point, for if we can just lift our eyes up to our heavenly Father, then we would begin to understand that he is in control of this world, even in control of the chaos. In fact he promises that *in all things*, note that, in *all things*, both good and bad, even in flood and fire, *he works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*.

God can allow the Joseph's of this world to be sold into slavery as happened in the book of Genesis, but it was his way of getting a Saviour into Egypt to save his people from the famine. God can use the stubborn heart of a Pharaoh as he does in Exodus in order to produce something so fantastic, the crossing of the Red Sea, that both Jews and Christians still talk about it some 3000 years later. God can bring good out of anything, because somehow evil does not tie his hands, but instead he can use it, over time, to produce good.

There's a story of a museum guide who would take his tour group to a darkened room, and shine a light on a mass of string, colour and apparent chaos and ask the group, what do you think is going on here? And the inevitable reply was, "I don't know." He would then say, "Stand over there and watch"

And as the group moved over to the other side of the room, he would turn on a spotlight. It was instantly apparent that the mass of jumbled coloured string, seen just a moment earlier was in fact an enormous tapestry. But seen from the wrong side. The

real work had to be seen from a different perspective to understand what the artist was creating.

So it is with God and his ways. From a human point of view it does seem hopeless at times and for many it would seem hopeless today. But we have to learn to lift our eyes up. For God has a purpose in what happens in this world. And even evil can't stop God from bringing out good. Not for everyone, no, but for those who love him.

But how do we know that this is true? How do we know we are not just dreamin' as in the words of Darryl Kerrigen from the Castle? How do we know that this isn't just some Christian version of Bobby McLaren's pop hit, "Don't worry, be happy"?

2. Hope: Grounded in the past.

Well that's where we have to leave the present for a moment and go back to the past and see where our hope is grounded upon. And it is grounded in history, because history is His Story. Everything that happens, happens according to His purposes.

Think about your salvation for a moment, says Paul. In the beginning God foreknew you. He knew about you even before you were born, even before the world was born. And if you are a Christian then he predestined you to be more like Jesus. Your destiny was to come into a relationship with Him through Jesus. And then those he predestined, he called, he made sure we heard the gospel calling us to himself. Those he called, he justified, he made us right with God by taking away our sins. And those he justified, he glorified, he set us on the path to glory.

Something that gives me hope in the midst of our present hopelessness, is to know that God knew me, chose me, called me, forgave me, and changed me. That God used my shyness, my hurts, my feelings of rejection that I had as a teenager, to gently pull me to himself. For he has used all things for the good of those who love him. That *God uses the things that he hates, in order to bring about what he loves.*

God uses the things that he hates, in order to bring about what he loves. Now do you know who first said that? A young lady called Joni Erikson. Who one day goes swimming in a lake, she dives in, she hits her head on the bottom and immediately knows that she is in trouble, big trouble. As a result of that dive she becomes a quadriplegic, so she has no use for her arms and legs. A lady who suffers greatly but being a Christian she sees in this tragedy God's plan. So she can definitely say that God has used this evil for good, to bring about his good purpose.

So look back at the past - there you see how God's purposes are always completed. God isn't like me with a long list of things to do around the house, some of which I have started but never finished. No, what God starts he finishes. His purposes are fulfilled, despite the pain and difficulties in our world.

But look back again this time to Jesus. Didn't God give up his own Son? Didn't he send him to earth as a man? Didn't he experience what we have experienced? Wasn't he hungry, rejected, lonely, assaulted, betrayed and finally crucified? You see if God gave us the good gift of His Son in the past won't he continue to give us good things

today? If God didn't abandon us before, he won't abandon us in the future.

But look back one more time, Jesus died. He was crucified, killed, buried. What could be worse than that? How more hopeless can a situation be than that? And yet God used his Son's death to show us the power of his resurrection. God used his Son's death to pay the penalty for my sins and for yours. God transformed a splintery Roman cross into an object of love and faith and hope. For if God can raise the dead, he can bring hope out of the hopeless.

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* there's a desperate scene. The new prisoner in the prison dining room, tin plate with his mashed potato and peas. And the old prisoner beside him says to the new guy, "In here, **hope** is a **dangerous thing**. It can drive a man mad. Cause in here, **there's nothing to hope for.**"

What he is saying is that hoping when there's nothing to hope for is called futility. Hoping when there's nothing to hope for is avoiding reality. It's called kidding yourself. *But we are not kidding ourselves*, look at God's purposes, look at God's son, look at his death and resurrection. Look to the past, that's what the Christian hope is grounded in.

3. Hope : Looking to the Future

So please don't stay in the present. Look to the past and also look to the future, for the best is yet to come. God is preparing you for glory. God is doing something in your life that will last for eternity. God is conforming you to the likeness of His Son Jesus, for one day you are going to see this Jesus face to face. We're going to live with God and enjoy all the good things he has prepared for his sons and daughters.

Friends the present sufferings that we go through are nothing, nothing compared to the glory that will be revealed in us. The troubles we experience now cannot derail the plans that God has for you and me. But how do we know this for sure?

Well there is no one strong enough to stop God. So if God is for us, who can be against us. For anyone that is against us will not be stronger than God. And there is no one clever enough to land an accusation, because if God has allowed Jesus to die for our sins, there is no accusation that can stick. And there is no one authoritative enough to boss God around, because not only is God for us, but we have Jesus on the right hand side of God constantly interceding, constantly defending, constantly representing us before God.

And there is no catastrophe that can separate us from God's love. Not trouble or hardship, not persecution or lack of food, not lack of clothes, not physical danger, not war, not even fire or flood. No, God's love holds better than Super Glue! It can endure anything. For with God on our side, or more correctly when we are on God's side, we are more than conquerors, for the victory is assured.

But note what Paul's not saying. He's not saying when there's an earthquake, the Christians' houses will miraculously still be standing. He's not saying when there's an epidemic of **bird flu**, that Christians don't get sick and die like anyone else. He's not

saying that if flood or fire come near your house that you will miraculously escape all its dangers. No what he **is** saying is nothing's going to surprise God & nothing will **separate you from the love of Christ.**

And remember Paul knows what he's talking about. Because he's faced trouble. And persecution. And danger. And the sword. I don't know if you know Paul's life story. You can read it sometime in the book of Acts. But he was a top ranking Jew, who decided to persecute the Christian faith and then he gave it all up. To become one. He was left for dead after he was stoned. He was smuggled out of town in a basket. He was whipped. He was thrown into prison. But he says, "*who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness or danger or the sword?*" And his answer is nothing, for God was always there for him.

So look to the future, the best is yet to come. Which reminds me of the story of an unmarried woman, finding that she had terminal cancer and not long to live, who set up an appointment with her pastor & funeral director to go over plans for her service. She selected a modest coffin, favourite Scripture verses and hymns. And then, she mentioned a most peculiar thing. She asked to be buried with her Bible in her left hand and her fork in her right. The pastor, a bit confused asked her the significance of the fork. To which she replied, "Being a single girl, I was frequently invited out to dinner after church on Sundays. After the meal, the hostess would clear the plates and would often say, 'keep your fork.' I always knew then that the best was yet to come.

God's best is yet to come for the Christian. And that gives us hope in this world. For God has done stuff for us in the past and he gives us a vision of our future and he promises that nothing, nothing will separate us from the love of God. Which brings us back to the present. Hope helps us to live life in the present.

4. Hope: Lived out in the Present.

Because doesn't that give us a thankfulness? That's why we can thank God in all circumstances, because everything that is happening is happening to help fulfil God's purposes. God has not lost control, God is still using evil to bring about good. Which means we may not like what is happening, but we can always thank God for it happening.

And that gives us contentment as well. Everything that has happened has already passed through the sieve of God's perfect will. The frustrations, the tears, the grief is helping me become more like Jesus. If I allow it, it will deepen my trust, my faith, my joy, my peace, my patience, my walk with God. That takes away my worries, and gives me a sense of contentment.

It helps me as I pray. If God is only in control of the good things, then hadn't I better pray to Adolf Hitler or the god of fire or even Satan to get them to stop the evil. But if God is in control of good and evil, then it is not a waste of time to pray for he has the whole world in his hands and he cares about what I do and what I say.

And lastly it gives us confidence. God is in control of what is happening in Victoria.

God is in control of what is happening in Queensland. I may not like, no of course I don't like it, but least I know that I am not alone and the one that is with me has the whole world in His hands. I now have confidence as I step out and live the rest of my life of faith.

Let me end with a story. Corrie Ten Boom was at the Nazi death camp Ravensbruck where roll call came at 4:30am every morning. Most mornings were cold and sometimes the women would be forced to stand without moving for hours in the bone-chilling pre-dawn darkness. Nearby, were the punishment barracks where all day and far into the night would come the sounds of cruelty. Blows landing in regular rhythm and screams keeping pace.

But Corrie and her sister Betsie had a Bible, and at every opportunity they would gather the women together and read Romans 8: *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us”*

Corrie later said “I would look about us as Betsie read, watching the light leap from face to face. More than conquerors. It was not a wish. It was a fact. We knew it. We experienced it minute by minute in an ever-widening circle of help and hope. Life at Ravensbruck took place on two separate levels. One, the observable, external life, grew every day more horrible. The other, the life we lived with God, grew daily better, truth upon truth, glory upon glory.”

That's the experience of the Christian. Not an easy life, not a life where everyone lives happily ever after, but a life that is filled with groans. But that is not all. God is also doing something beautiful within us and for us. His purpose is to prepare you for glory. So don't let the present take away your hope. Look back at the past and onto the future and then live with hope in the present.

