Romans 8:18-29 *Grace is Greater: Greater than our Brokenness*

***David Flood***In his book, *Grace is Greater*, Kyle Idleman relates the following story that he found at Eternal Perspectives Ministries.

In 1921 a missionary couple from Sweden named David and Svea Flood went with their two-year-old son to the heart of Africa, to what was then called the Belgian Congo. They met up with another missionary couple and the four of them decided to take the gospel to a remote area where people had never heard about Jesus.

Unfortunately, when they arrived, the chief of the tribe wouldn’t let them live in the village. They were forced to live about a mile away, and their only contact with anyone from the village was a young boy whom the chief allowed to come sell them food. Svea ended up leading that young boy to faith in Jesus, but that was their only progress. They never had contact with anyone else from the village. Eventually the other couple contracted malaria and left. The Floods were on their own. And Svea, who was pregnant, also contracted malaria. She died several days after giving birth.

Her husband dug a crude grave, buried his twenty-seven-year-old wife, and went back to the main mission station. He gave his newborn baby girl to the missionaries there and said, “I’m going back to Sweden. I’ve lost my wife. I obviously can’t take care of this baby. God has ruined my life.” And he took his son and left. Missionaries adopted his baby daughter and brought her back to the United States to raise her.

It’s a sad story. A devastating story. This couple was so passionately in love with God that they were willing to move from their home to one of the remotest areas on earth. They sacrificed so much to share God’s love, and in the end it resulted in such heartbreak. It is not at all how David Flood imagined his life going. He had a plan for his life, and it took a dramatically different turn.

***Unexpected Detours***Some of you have stories similar to David Flood. Not that any of you were widowed on the mission field, I’m not aware of anybody here with a story like that; but many of you had a plan for your life, and then circumstances drastically changed...

* Your health took a turn.
* Your spouse walked out.
* Your job got eliminated.
* Your child rebelled.
* Your church fractured.

Things did not go the way you imagined them going.

How do we explain that? What accounts for such unexpected tragedy?

I don’t know if I can fully explain it. I certainly don’t claim to understand. But the Bible does give us some hint of what is happening. And it also gives us some hope.

Our text this morning is **Romans 8:18-29**:

**18**I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. **19**For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. **20**For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope **21**that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

**22**We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. **23**Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. **24**For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? **25**But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

**26**In the same way, 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. **27**And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

**28**And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. **29**For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Just like last week, our passage is from Romans. And just like last week, there is a fairly complex argument being presented here. As I said last week, the Apostle Paul’s writings do not make for light reading.

But I can summarize this passage fairly simply: **The world is broken. God’s grace is greater.** We live in a world where tragedies occur. Things do not always go as planned. Unexpected twists can leave us hurting and overwhelmed. But the hope and promise of this passage is that God’s grace can overcome that brokenness. That in all things, even the really bad things, God’s grace is still at work for our good.

***Not the Way things “Ought” to Be***Let’s take this big idea in two parts. First, **the world is broken.** Things are not the way they “ought” to be.

The Bible teaches that when God created the world, it was good.In fact, it was perfect. God created a wonderful world in which humans and animals and plants and weather and the land all worked in perfect harmony.

But then sin entered the world. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and things were thrown out of whack. And sin affected not just Adam and Eve—and not just the rest of us, who are born enslaved to sin—but creation as well. This is what Paul means in **verse 20** when he says “the creation was subjected to frustration…”

Because of sin, the world is messed up. **Verse 22** says that “the whole creation has been groaning.” This is why fault-lines crack and produce 9.2 magnitude earthquakes and walls of water that hit the shoreline at 500 miles an hour. This is why cold fronts run into warm fronts over North America and spawn killer tornadoes.

Creation is not what it should be. It “ought” to be peaceful and serene and abounding with life. But instead, **verse 21** says it is a world in “bondage to decay”. A world filled with death and brokenness and storm clouds. A world where mosquitos bite and carry killer diseases. A world where a bump to the head can result in a brain bleed and traumatic brain injury.

So now, think about us. When we come to Jesus we receive grace greater than all our sin. He covers our guilt and replaces it with His righteousness. In Christ there is no condemnation, we are free from the shackles of sin, we are adopted children of our Heavenly “Abba.” All those are gifts we receive when we put our hope and trust in Jesus.

But here’s somethingthat does NOT happen. Upon believing in Jesus, we do NOT immediately get taken out of this broken world and brought to heaven. We do NOT receive a promise that nothing bad will ever happen to us. We do NOT get a guarantee of a charmed life.

Instead, and in fact, Paul tells us that we too groan inwardly. We remain in this broken world—our bodies remain a part of this broken creation—and so we are subject to the same frustration as the rest of the planet. Listen to the way Paul writes it in **verses 22 and 23**:

 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly.

Not just creation, but we ourselves—even those of us who already belong to Jesus and have the Holy Spirit—are groaning because things are not the way they ought to be.

So this is why our plans don’t always work out the way we want. This is why gravity is sometimes our friend, and sometimes our enemy. This is why the cells in our body sometimes scramble their DNA and become mutant cancers that break us down from within. And this is why we sometimes experience the horrific pain of losing someone we love at a far too young age.

Listen, this is so important! This is the Bible’s explanation for why there is suffering in the world. It’s not because the devil is out there and he’s stronger than God. It’s not because we haven’t prayed hard enough and our faith is inadequate. It’s not some sort of punishment for some specific sin we have committed.

It’s because we live in a world that is broken—broken because of sin. We live in a world that is not as it ought to be. A world that is messed up. A world that is in bondage to decay.

***What we Know***Take a look, again, at the beginning of verse 22. Paul says “we know” that creation is groaning in pain.

The word that gets translated as “we know” is a word in the original language that has to do with certainty. It’s an absolute, unshakeable confidence. Paul is saying that it is patently obvious to everyone that the world is not as it ought to be. It is as plain as the nose on your face. We don’t have to convince people that the world is broken.

Paul uses that word one other time in Romans 8. It’s in **Romans 8:28** where he says:

**28**And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

It’s the same idea of confidence and certainty. As patently obvious as it is to Paul that the world is broken; so too is it absolutely true that “God works for the good of those who love him.” Paul is sure of it. He doesn’t say that he thinks this is true. He doesn’t say that he hopes it is true. He says: “We KNOW that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”

So, here’s the second part of our big idea: as true as it is to say that our world is broken, it is also true to say that **God’s grace is greater.** “Paul tells us that the author of our stories, the one directing our lives, is trustworthy and is going to bring a good ending no matter how bad the chapter we’re currently reading might seem. That’s the promise of grace.” (Idleman, p. 171)

Let me finish telling you the story of David Flood, the Swedish missionary who lost his wife in Africa. Here’s how Kyle Idleman relates the story:

[The daughter that he gave up] was given the name Aggie and grew up in the United States with Christian parents. One day she checked her mailbox and for some unknown reason found a Swedish magazine. She was flipping through it when a photo stopped her cold. It was a picture of a crude grave with a white cross. On the cross was the name “Svea Flood.” She recognized her mother’s name. she took the magazine to someone who could translate the story that accompanied the photo. Aggie sat and listened to the story about the work her mother had done as a missionary.

Sometime later she traveled to Sweden to find her father. Turns out he had remarried, fathered four more children, and basically ruined his life with alcohol.

After an emotional meeting with her half siblings, Aggie brought up the subject of seeing her father. They hesitated and then explained, “You can talk to him, but he’s very ill. And you need to know that whenever he hears the name of God, he flies into a rage.”

Aggie wasn’t deterred. She walked into his tiny apartment, saw empty liquor bottles everywhere, and approached the seventy-three-year-old man who had deserted her years before.

As soon as she said “Papa?” he began to cry and apologized profusely. She smiled, “It’s all right, Papa. God took care of me.” Instantly he stiffened and his tears stopped. “God forgot all of us,” he said, turning his face to the wall. “Our lives have been like this because of him.”

“Papa,” Aggie said, “I’ve got a story to tell you, and it’s a true one. The little boy you and Mama led to the Lord grew up to lead his entire village to faith in Jesus. The one seed you planted just kept growing and growing. Today more than six hundred African people are serving the Lord because you were faithful to the call of God in your life. You didn’t go to Africa in vain. Mama didn’t die in vain. Papa, Jesus loves you. He has never hated you.”

David was stunned. His muscles relaxed, and their conversation continue. By the end of the day he had come back to the God he had resented for so many decades, and within weeks he walked through the doorway of death and into his eternal home with God in heaven. (*Grace is Greater*, p. 175-176)

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” Even when David Flood was unaware of it, God was still working quietly behind the scenes to restore his brokenness.

I can’t help but wonder, though, how much differently David Flood’s life would have gone if he had not lost faith in what God could do. How much bitterness could he have avoided if, instead of letting his circumstances determine his view of God, he had let his view of God determine the way he viewed his circumstances?

I also wish I could tell you that we’ll all get a day like David Flood had: a day when we will be able to look back and see with clarity everything God has been doing to work for the good. To be quite honest, resolutions like that are quite rare in this lifetime.

And yet, the Bible assures us that God is at work in all things for our good. It is faith in His grace to make something beautiful out of our brokenness that allows us to keep following Him, even in the darkest of times.

***God’s Definition of Good***One of the reasons we have a hard time believing that God is working in all things for our good is because of how we define the word good. We have our own ideas of how things should work, what our lives should look like, and the things we will experience in this life. For the most part, we tend to think that if God is working things for our good then we should never encounter opposition; our plans should always come to fruition as well or even better than we expected; and we should never experience loss, hurt, disappointment, or pain. In other words, we have a very self-centered understanding of good, and we tend to define it in relation to what happens to us.

But God’s definition of good is different than that. **The good that God wants for us** doesn’t always have to do with making our lives easier. In fact, as I look at our passage in Romans 8, I see at least three things that hint at the kind of good God’s grace is working in the midst of our brokenness:

First, **God is working to draw us closer to Jesus**. God intends for us to look to Him in the midst of our suffering.

Look with me at **Romans 8:26**:

**26**In the same way, 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.

I think it is interesting that verse 22 says creation is groaning, verse 23 says we are groaning, and then verse 26 says the Spirit is groaning.

The idea here is that when we find ourselves at the end of our resources—when our situation is so broken that we don’t even know what to pray—the Spirit is praying for us. Sometimes God is working through our suffering to get us to stop relying on our own strength, and to get us to lean into His.

This week I read a book called *When God Doesn’t Fix It* by Laura Story. I basically inhaled it. I knew it touched on the topic of grace in the midst of brokenness, and once I picked it up I couldn’t put it down. Laura Story is the singer who recorded the song “Blessings.” The chorus of that song goes like this:

What if your blessings come through rain drops
What if Your healing comes through tears
What if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You're near
What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise

The book is the story behind that song. When Laura and her husband Martin were newlyweds, he was afflicted with a brain tumor. The doctors were able to remove it, but there were complications. He survived, but suffered a traumatic brain injury. It took him a long while to get his balance and his motor skills back. But his short-term memory never returned. Basically, he now goes through life with no idea what he’s been doing for the last 10 to 20 minutes.

Laura has a lot to teach about suffering, and where faith fits in when life takes an unexpected turn. But early in the book **she makes this statement**:

Our desire is for God to fix broken things.
But God’s desire for us is to fix our relationship with him. (p. 39)

Our idea of good involves health and prosperity and friction free relationships. We imagine lives where everything works the way we want it to. But we forget that the greatest good, the good God most wants, is to have us in a right relationship with Him. And if broken circumstances lead us to rely more heavily on Him, then He will work in those things to do just that. “What if a thousand sleepless night are what it takes to know [He’s] near?”

Or, again, **God is working to make us more like Jesus.** God intends for us to look more like Him as we go through suffering.

**Romans 8:29** says:

**29**For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

God’s end goal for us is that we will look like Jesus. That we will be “conformed to the image of his Son.” That is to say, God wants us to love others like Jesus. He wants us to give freely like Jesus. He wants us to scorn sin and embrace truth like Jesus. He wants us to be selfless and sacrificial and serve like Jesus.

And one of the ways that He is shaping us to look more like His beloved Son is through suffering. It is in the midst of our trials and struggles that we are being transformed into His image.

Harold Wilke was born with no arms. As he grew up, many tasks that came easily to other kids were, of course, extremely hard for him. He tells of a time, as a young child, when he was on the floor struggling to put a shirt on. His mom and her neighbor friend stood there watching him writhe around on the floor. After a while, the neighbor said to his mom, “Why don’t you help that poor child?” His mom stood there with her arms held stiffly at her side and her jaw clamped tight as she resisted every motherly instinct and finally, through gritted teeth, she responded: “I am helping him.”

Kyle Idleman writes:

I know when you’re going through suffering or you’re living with pain it may seem that God, who is all-powerful, should do something to help. Consider the possibility that God in his grace is helping. Sometimes grace hurts so that it can help. It’s hard to find grace in cancer, but maybe God allows the cancer to help us take stock of our lives and help us and those around us think about eternity. It’s hard to find God’s grace when you can’t stand your boss, but maybe God allows a difficult boss to help us learn to be self-controlled and not find our identity in a job. It’s hard to find grace in unemployment, but maybe he allows unemployment to help us understand that we are dependent on him. Maybe he allows the pain of a broken heart to expose our idolatry and help us learn to put our hope in him. The list could go on and on. How has this been true in your life? God’s grace to you is that he will work through your pain to accomplish his good purpose in your life. (p. 182)

And then, third, **God is working to prepare us for an eternity with Jesus.** In the end, remember, it is all worth it.

Look at **Romans 8:18:**

18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

This is what Paul wants us to believe with all of our hearts. He wants us to believe that if there were some cosmic scale upon which you could pile all of your trials and tribulations and sorrows and heartaches on one side; and the weight of glory that will be ours when all is said and done and we are living in redeemed bodies on a redeemed creation on the other side—then there would be no comparison! The arms of that scale would tip entirely in the direction of the glory.

In fact, Paul was a man who knew his fair share of suffering. You can read a partial list of his trials in 2 Corinthians 11. And yet, he calls them “light and momentary troubles” compared to the “eternal glory that outweighs them all.” (2 Cor. 4:17)

The point is that it is worth it.

He’s not trying to diminish your suffering, and neither am I.

But whatever you go through, it will be worth it in the end if you just cling to your savior and hold on until the day of redemption. As heavy as your brokenness and sorrow and suffering are, God’s grace is always going to be greater.

* There’s more of God’s grace than there is of your pain.
* There’s more of God’s grace than there is of your disappointment.
* There’s more of God’s grace than there is of your trials.
* There’s more of God’s grace than there is of your despair.

Pile all of your brokenness and sorrow on one side, and put the incredible grace of God’s eternal glory on the other; and grace is greater every time.

We might not all get a moment like David Flood had, when someone walks into our life and shows us how God was using it all. But never lose faith that God is still at work, and someday, from the perspective of heaven, you’ll see even more clearly than you can imagine that it has all worked for the good.

***Something Beautiful***Finally, I want to tell you about the garbage dumps of Jardim Gramacho. Jardim Gramacho is where the junk of Rio de Janeiro goes. It’s the largest landfill in the world. As Max Lucado says, it’s the Godzilla of garbage dumps.

**And Gramacho is where the *catadores* work**. The *catodores* are scavengers. Three thousand of them scape out a living by salvaging and recycling about two hundred tons of junk every day. They trail after the train of garbage trucks, trudging up the mountains of garbage and sliding down the other side, snagging scraps along the way. **Bit by bit, bottle by bottle**, copper wire by iron hinge and piles and piles of paper, they sort the salvageable and sell it to wholesalers on the edge of the dump for pennies on the pound.

Across the bay the Christ the Redeemer statue extends his arms towards Rio’s South Zone and its million-dollar beachfront homes and apartments. Tourists flock there. But no one comes to Gramacho. Nobody, that is, except Vik Muniz.

Vik Muniz is a Brazilian-born artist who convinced five garbage workers to pose for individual portraits. Suelem, an eighteen-year-old mother of two, has worked the garbage since the age of seven. Isis is a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. Zumbi reads every book he finds in the trash. Irma cooks discarded produce in a large pot over an open fire and then sells it. Tiao has organized the workers into an association.

Muniz took photos of these five, and then enlarged the images **to the size of basketball courts.** Then he and the five *catadores* outlined the facial features with trash. Bottle tops became eyebrows. Cardboard boxes became chin lines. Rubber tires overlaid shadows. Images gradually emerged from the trash. Muniz climbed onto a thirty-foot-tall platform and took new photos.

The **results were stunning**. It became the second-most-popular art exhibit in the history of Brazil, exceeded only by the works of Picasso. Muniz **turned junk into art.** He took something **broken, and made it beautiful**.

You might say that Vik Muniz treated Gramacho with grace.

Grace does this. God does this. Max Lucado says: “Grace is God walking into your world with a sparkle in his eye and an offer that is hard to resist. ‘Sit still for a bit. I can do wonders with this mess of yours.’” (*Grace*, pg. 74)

The world is broken. Your world may be broken. But God’s grace is greater.