

Because of the January 19, 2020 winter storm, Bob didn't preach Sunday. We post this timely sermon from 2014.

Romans 8:24-39 "When you need to pray but don't know how"

Of the many translations available, the Living Bible probably expresses this text in the clearest and simplest way.

Following are verses 24-28 of Romans 8 in the Living Bible:

24 We are saved by trusting (Christ). And trusting means looking forward to getting something we don't have now; (for a man who already has something doesn't need to hope and trust that he will get it.) 25 But if we must keep trusting God for something that hasn't happened yet, it teaches us to wait patiently and confidently.

26 And in the same way-by faith-the Holy Spirit helps us with our daily problems and in our praying. For we don't even know what we should pray for, nor how to pray as we should; but the Holy Spirit prays for us with such feeling that it cannot be expressed in words.

27 And the Father Who knows all hearts knows of course what the Spirit is saying as He pleads for us in harmony with God's own will.

28 And we know that all that happens to us is working for our good if we love God, and if we are fitting into His plans.

Since we human beings have been on earth, we've tried to define, describe, understand, and control life.

Yet every generation is frustrated to learn what you all know:
life is continual mystery; an unsolvable riddle.

In London, England, a few years ago, some anonymous person scribbled this underground graffiti,

"Life is a sexually transmitted disease."

A.J. Ayer was a British philosopher, born in 1910. He lived to the age of 79. Late in life, Ayer wrote:

"It seems I have spent my entire time trying to make life more rational and that it was all wasted effort."

Both the philosopher and the subway graffiti artist were saying that making sense of life can't be done—it's a pointless exercise.

Imagine someone dusting a bookshelf, lifting a bookend, and finding an ant.

Norma's thinking, "How can you possibly imagine such a thing, Bob? You haven't dusted your office in 20 years. Not even an ant could find its way in there!"

Let's get back to that person discovering an ant near a bookend.

The ant and the duster are equally surprised.
The ant scurries for cover toward the other bookend only to have the housekeeper lift the bookend and crush the helpless insect.

Some see life as that hopeless and futile.

It's been that way for every culture and era.

The Roman poet Horace died about four years before Jesus was born. He said:

"Life's brief span prevents us from making far-reaching hopes."

Does life have any meaning, hope, or purpose?

Many buy into the idea that life's all accidental, so just be happy while you're here.

Make the best of it.

To many people, that seems like the only option.

But a stickler stands in the way of our being happy.

Pebbles get in our boots, so to speak.

Sand into your sandals.

Stuff happens that interferes with our contentment.

We try to be cheery, but pain, stress, and accidents keep impeding us.

We folks hoping for happiness instead sigh, groan, and moan.

The July-August Smithsonian featured a story entitled, “Piece of Mind.”

The spelling of “piece” is meant to be a play on words.

The “Piece of Mind” article by Clive Thompson makes interesting comparisons of today’s on-line posting with the scrapbooking that some of us might have done.

The younger ones among us might not know that “cut and paste” features on computer programs have their background in the cutting and pasting that folks did in their scrapbook collections for decades.

The Smithsonian article included a reference to a schoolteacher Frances A. Smith who “hoped to marry a farmer and move west, so to prepare a pile of knowledge, around 1870 she began clipping and pasting everything a farm wife might want—ranging from remedies for children’s scaly rashes to details about cows and lightning rods.”

Here’s what first drew my attention to the article:

“In the next 24 hours, for example, the New York Times will write more than 700 stories, the Huffington Post will post 1,200, Forbes and BuzzFeed will generate 300 to 400 and Slate another 60. Of course, this is just the smallest sip from the fire hose,” wrote author Thompson, “Throw in say YouTube, and you’ve got 144,000 hours of new video to watch every day.”

It’s true that YouTube often features cute videos of precocious kids and loveable animals that make you smile.

But 90% of the 144, 000 daily videos cause grimaces, not grins:

- News of Israeli-Hamas war;
- a Malaysian airliner with 298 innocent persons on board being blown out of the sky;
- Thousands of Central American kids showing up at the Mexican border and no one knowing what to do with them.

Countless other incidents, far and close, make us sigh, groan, and moan.

So what can give meaning and purpose to us ordinary people?

“While visiting a West Virginia (coal) mine during the 1960 Democratic campaign, John F. Kennedy was asked by a miner, ‘Is it true you’re the son of one of our wealthiest men?’ Kennedy concurred.

‘Is it true that you’ve never wanted for anything, and had everything you wanted?’

Kennedy admitted so.

“Is it true you’ve never done a day’s work with your hands all your life?” Kennedy nodded.

‘Well, I’ll tell this,’ said the miner. ‘You haven’t missed a thing.’”¹

That miner undoubtedly thought John F. Kennedy lived an ideal life.

He’d have traded lives with J.F.K. at the blink of an eye.

He likely didn’t know Kennedy’s groans, sighs, and challenges:

- Back pain that constantly plagued him;
- A far from perfect marriage;
- An uncertain political future.
- And his life would have abruptly ended on November 22, 1963.

We know so little about life and what to do with it.

Our Romans 8 text doesn’t give us all of the answers. It gives vital insights, however, not many people find but all need.

The writer and doctor, Oliver Wendell Holmes was the father of Oliver Wendell Holmes, the Supreme Court Justice.

In his work called *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, the elder Holmes described a certain minister as:

“A country clergyman with a one-story intellect and a one-horse vocabulary.”

I’ve had enemies who’d have thought that description of me far too generous.

Critics described Jesus’ Apostles in a similar way: “Ordinary men of no education,”² in other words, “hillbillies.”

¹ *The Ultimate Reference Book*, Lance Davidson, Avon Books, New York, 1994, p. 245. John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1917-1963), U.S. president

The critics spoke truth.

Most of Jesus’ Apostles were ordinary men with limited education.

But something happened to them.

Something changed them and altered their attitude toward life—made them bold, confident, fearless, and yet loving.

What changed them?

The same thing later transformed the Apostle Paul.

Before we discuss what caused those changes, let’s look at two widespread popular assumptions.

The Roman poet Horace knew about them.

So did many of his Greek predecessors.

People on university campuses make these assumptions.

Folks in many corporate offices take them for granted.

Many doctors subscribe to them and write prescriptions based on them.

They’re the daily conversations on talk shows around the planet.

Rural preachers of superb intellect and vast vocabularies fall for them and so do many country ones.

Politicians constantly propound those two themes.

To what am I referring?

1. First: pain and stress are always bad.

2. Individuals can be happy only in good circumstances.

We keep hearing that drumbeat, don’t we?

- Stress is always bad for you.
- People can be happy only if their surroundings are favorable.

Are these valid assumptions?

Romans 8 tells of the sighing, groaning, and moaning constantly taking place.

The whole creation suffers and rots.

144,000 news reports a day “prove” it.

“The world is fast going to hell.”

In Voltaire’s *Candide*, Candide asks,

“To what end was this world formed?

Replied Martin, “To infuriate us.”

One short interlude interrupted the long-standing dismal outlook about the world’s future.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the emergence of science and education gave many people great but brief expectations.

As late as 1952, successful writers like William Faulkner thought positively and hopefully of human effort.

In a speech at Wellesley, Massachusetts, June 8 of that year, Faulkner said:

“What’s wrong with the world is it’s not finished yet. It is not completed to that point where man can put his final signature to the job and say, ‘It is finished. We made it and it works.’”

Faulkner stated what many earlier thinkers, scientists, and social planners promised.

In fact Victor Hugo, the fellow who wrote that musical play so many of us love—“Les Miserable” said: “In the twentieth century, war will be dead . . . hatred will be dead, dogmas will be dead; man will live . . .”

Would any sober person say that human beings today are building a pleasant world?

That finishing touches are just around the corner?

Paul accurately described the world’s condition: “**the whole creation has been groaning.**”

Victor Hugo is dead; that’s for sure.

So is William Faulkner

War, hatred, and dogmas thrive.

Life today resembles life in Paul’s day:

People groaned and sighed at injustice, suffering, death, and thoughtless acts.

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”

Recall that first prominent assumption?

“Pain and stress are bad.”

Lots of people use meds hoping to find tranquility in their stress.
A slight minority of people might need those meds. **Most don’t.**

Many folks are so accustomed to using meds for stress they think they cannot function without them.

You understand the irony in all of this.

Many of those same people say that they don’t need God and they don’t need religion because they don’t need a crutch to live.

“**They can make their way on their own, thank you.**”
But if they need to take meds or use booze to cope with stress, isn’t that using a crutch?

They’re not making it on their own as they claim they are.
They take legal and illegal chemicals to “handle” their stress.
New “crutch” stores keep opening all over the country.
What perspective on this does our Romans text give us?

Consider this great insight.

The Apostle Paul acknowledged the pain and suffering that he, his fellow believers, and we now endure:

“**the whole creation has been groaning.**”

But for believers, the world will not end in decay, stench, and rot.
It groans ‘**as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.**’

All of you women who gave birth endured considerable pain.

In her early stages of labor with our four children, I was with Norma. Back in those days they ushered fathers out of the room, so I missed much of her intense pain.

I’m not sure how much pain she endured when Janice, our last one, was born.

They barely got her out of our car onto the gurney.

The doctor wasn’t even there, but he still charged us.

That caused us to groan some.

If you believe in Christ, the pains the world undergoes are not death pangs.

For you the planet isn’t closing out with a hopeless moan.

These sighs and groans are birth pains.

What happened to Jesus illustrates my point.

For the Apostles on what’s been called “Good Friday,” everything was bleak.

Roman soldiers were expert executioners.

Prisoners didn’t survive crucifixions.

The Apostles groaned thinking they’d wasted their time
Jesus, their leader died.

Everything seemed lost.

All that night, the next day, and the next night, they suffered darkness in their souls—a lot of moaning and sighing.

So, too, with the other men and women who’d trusted Jesus and invested in him.

But by Sunday evening, it wasn’t just two angels and a few women claiming that Jesus was alive.

**The Apostles saw him, felt his wounds,
talked with him, and ate with him.**

**Evidence fully convinced them of Jesus’ resurrection
Jesus sent those believers on a mission:**

“Tell people I’m alive; discuss the proofs you’ve seen; and tell them what I’m saying to you:

‘Believe in me, trust me, forgive and love as I have, and allow God’s Spirit to control you. Do as I have done and I’ll bring you back from your grave, too.’

“People will scoff at you and even persecute you as they did me.

Though most in the world think they can be happy only if their circumstances are good, you know differently.

“Things won’t always be pleasant, I already told you that. But my Spirit will always be with you to encourage you.”

The Book of Acts (chapters 3& 4) tells us how the Apostles believed Jesus and how Jesus kept his promise.

The Apostles met experiences that severely tested their belief.

Government authorities ordered them not to say anything more about Jesus’ resurrection.

They’d already beaten, threatened, and jailed Peter and John.

They and the other Apostles faced great uncertainty.

They didn’t know what was going to happen.

They didn’t know how to pray or exactly what to say.

We’ve all faced similar uncertainties; we’ve been in jams.

We’d like God’s help.

But we don’t know how or what to ask.

The problem isn’t whether God has the power to help.

In my case, the difficulty is always my own fear and frailty.

In Acts four, Peter and John faced the same issue—their weakness.

They didn’t know what would happen and they didn’t know what to pray.

They went to the church, explained the situation, and acknowledged that God created heaven, earth, and everything in between.

They referenced the authorities’ threats and then prayed:

- Not that God would help them find a good attorney (folks hired high-powered lawyers then, too).
- They didn’t ask God to remove the threat.
- They didn’t ask God to reduce their stress or to make them comfortable.

They evidently felt the same weaknesses that you and I feel on occasion.

Those times when we don’t know what to pray or how to pray.

“Now Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak the word with great boldness...

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were “all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly,” Acts 4:29 and 31.

Romans 8: 26 - “And in the same way-by faith-the Holy Spirit helps us with our daily problems and in our praying. For we don’t even know what we should pray for, nor how to pray as we should; but the Holy Spirit prays for us with such feeling that it cannot be expressed in words. 27 And the Father Who knows all hearts knows of course what the Spirit is saying as He pleads for us in harmony with God’s own will.

28 And we know that all that happens to us is working for our good if we love God, and if we are fitting into His plans. “

God is preparing a new world just as Jesus promised us; creation suffers its birth pains. We don’t know how to deal with our daily challenges, but when we ask, God’s Holy Spirit stands ready to help us find the strength and encouragement **Are you readying yourself to be a citizen of God’s new world and kingdom?**

Romans 7 and 8 contain great news about God’s help through his Spirit.

I’ve made copies of those verses in the Living Bible (see below).

Read them once a day for the next 7 days and pray after you read them.

**You’ll probably sigh, moan, and groan a lot less.
You’ll have a much better week.**

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Romans 7: 14 through 8: 1-39. The Living Bible

"14 The law is good. The trouble is not there, but with *me*, because I am too sinful to obey it. 15 I don't understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I can't. I do what I don't want to--what I hate. 16 I know perfectly well that what I am doing is wrong and that the laws I am breaking are good ones. 17 But I can't help myself because I'm not doing it. It is sin inside me that is stronger than I am that makes me do these evil things.

"18 I know I am rotten through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn I can't make myself do right. I want to but I can't. 19 When I want to do good, I don't; and when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. 20 Now if I am doing what I don't want to, it is plain where the trouble is: sin still has me in its evil grasp.

"21 It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. 22 I love to do God's will so far as my new nature is concerned; 23 But there is something else deep within me, in my lower nature, that is at war with my mind and wins the fight and makes me a slave to the sin and death that are still within me. In my mind I want to be God's willing servant but instead I find myself still enslaved to sin.

"24, 25 So you see how it is: my new life tells me to do right, but the old nature that is still inside me loves to sin. Oh, what a terrible thing this is! Who will free me from my slavery to this deadly lower nature? Thank God! It has been done through Jesus Christ our Lord. He has set me free."

CHAPTER 8

"So there is no condemnation awaiting those who belong to Christ Jesus. 2 For the power of the life-giving Spirit-and this power is

mine through Christ Jesus-has freed me from the vicious circle of sin and death.

"3 We aren't saved from sin's grasp by knowing the commandments of God, because we can't and don't keep them, but God put into effect a different plan to save us. He sent His own Son, in a human body like ours-except that ours are sinful-and destroyed sin's control over us by giving Himself as a sacrifice for our sins.

"4 So now we can obey God's laws if we follow after the Holy Spirit and no longer obey the old evil nature within us. 5 Those who let themselves be controlled by their lower natures live only to please themselves; but those who follow after the Holy Spirit find themselves doing those things that please God.

"6 Following after the Holy Spirit leads to life and peace, but following after the old nature leads to death, 17 And since we are His children, then we will share His treasures-for all God gives His Son Jesus is ours now too. But we must also share His suffering if we are to share His glory.

18 Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory He will give us later. 19 For all creation is waiting patiently and hopefully for that future day when God will glorify His children.

"20, 21 For on that day thorns and thistles, sin, death, and decay that overcame the world against its will at God's command will all disappear, and the world around us will share in the glorious freedom from sin which God's children enjoy.

"22 For we know that even the things of nature, like animals and plants, groan in sickness and death as they await this great event. 23 And even we Christians, although we have the witness of the Holy Spirit within us, aren't free from trouble; we too wait anxiously for that day when God will give us our full rights as His children, including the new bodies He has promised us-bodies that will not be sick again and that will never die."

"24 We are saved by trusting. And trusting means looking forward to getting something we don't have now; (for a man who already has something doesn't need to hope and trust that he will get it.) 25 But if we must keep trusting God for something that hasn't happened yet, it teaches us to wait patiently and confidently.

"26 And in the same way-by faith-the Holy Spirit helps us with our daily problems and in our praying. For we don't **even know what we should pray for**, nor how to pray as we should; but the Holy Spirit prays for us with such feeling that it cannot be expressed in words. 27 And the Father Who knows all hearts knows of course what the Spirit is saying as He pleads for us in harmony with God's own will. 28 And we know that all that happens to us is working for our good if we love God, and if we are fitting into His plans.

"29 For from the very beginning God decided that those who came to Him-and all along He knew who would-should become like His Son, so that His Son would be the first, with many brothers. 30 And having chosen us, He called us to come to Him; and when we came, He declared us "not guilty," filled us with Christ's goodness, gave us right standing with Himself, and promised us His glory.

"31 What can we ever say to such wonderful things as these? If God is on our side, who can ever be against us? 32 Since He did not even spare His own Son for us but gave Him up for us all, won't He also surely give us everything else?

"33 Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for His own? Will God? No! He is the One Who has forgiven us and given us right standing with Himself. 34 Who then will condemn us? Will Christ? NO! For He is the One Who died for us and came back to life again for us and is sitting at the place of highest honor next to God, pleading for us there in heaven.

"35 Who then can ever keep away Christ's love from us? When we have trouble or calamity, when we are hunted down or destroyed, is it because He doesn't love us anymore? And if we are hungry, or penniless, or in danger, or threatened with death, has God deserted us?

"36 No, for the Scriptures tell us that for His sake we must be ready to face death at every moment of the day-we are like sheep awaiting slaughter; 37 But despite all this, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ Who loves us.

"38 For I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from His love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels won't, and all the powers of hell itself cannot keep God's love away. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow. 39 Or where we are-high above the sky, or in the deepest ocean-nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

For best results:

Read the above once a day for the next seven days.

Pray that God will give you boldness and trust in Him.

