

“When Triumph Is in a Minor Key”
Ecclesiastes 8:14-17, Genesis 50:20, Romans 8:28-30
August 30, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

It’s good to be back with you this morning.

In my last sermon we concluded our series in Philippians. Next week, in September, we’ll return to our series in Deuteronomy. This leaves us with a Sunday without a series this morning.

In the first half of my time away, in the back of my mind I was thinking of various topics and themes that might be a good fit for a one-off sermon this morning. And then, Melissa McMillan died.

It’s always difficult to know how much to choose a sermon text or topic in light of immediate events. And it’s certainly not my intention to duplicate the funeral service for Melissa that we’ll have tonight at First Pres. That service will focus on where Melissa is now, and the hope of eternal life.

But beyond the focus of any funeral, when something like this happens, there are also questions we may have that are related more to this life.

Questions like: Why does God allow the suffering of his faithful children in this life? Why did Melissa have to go through so much? And why was she taken from us, when most of us who knew her would argue that our church, and our school, and our families would seem to be much better off with her here than with her gone from us?

And it seemed good to me to try to address some of those questions together, as a church family, this morning.

These are questions that apply to those of us grieving the recent loss of Melissa. But they’re also questions that those who were not particularly close to Melissa will struggle with as well. Because the truth is that we all have to deal with losses or suffering in this life – whether in the present, in the past, or in the future.

Some of you are dealing with other losses, or with illness, or difficulties finding work, or other trials, or struggles, or disappointments.

Whatever struggles or losses you may be dealing with, I want to take some time this morning to consider how we are to face such things when we can’t see the purpose in them ... when the bad seems to outweigh the good ... when God’s ways seem confounding.

We’ll hear from several texts this morning, from Ecclesiastes, Genesis, and Romans.

With all that said, let's turn now to our texts.

And please do listen carefully. This is God's Word for us this morning.

First, from Ecclesiastes 8:

¹⁴ There is a vapor that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vapor.

[and jumping down to verse 17:]

¹⁷ then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

Next, from Genesis 50. Joseph said to his brothers:

“You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”

Finally, from Romans 8, starting in verse 28, the Apostle Paul writes:

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord,
Teach us good judgment and knowledge,
for we believe in your Word to us – your commandments and your testimonies.
You are good and you do good.
Teach us your ways.
Grant this, we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:65, 66, 68, 72]

Introduction

When we come to the topic of suffering and loss, and how we are to consider it as Christians, there is so much we could say – and so many different truths that the Bible brings to bear.

Of course, in one sermon we cannot cover it all. We'll consider a few aspects of how the Bible addresses this topic, but if you want to dig in deeper, I encourage you to consider additional resources, like Tim Keller's book *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*.

This morning, what I specifically want to consider, is that: When suffering and loss strike, we are often confounded. But God assures us that he is bringing profound beauty and glory from the struggles of his people, if we remain faithful to him. And he has proven this in the gospel itself.

Let me say that again: When suffering and loss strike, we are often confused and confounded. But God assures us that he is bringing profound beauty and glory from the struggles of his people, if we remain faithful to him. And he's proven this in the gospel itself.

Let's consider that one piece at a time now.

When Suffering and Loss Strike, We Have Questions and Confusion

First, when suffering and loss strike, we are often confounded – we have questions and confusion.

And I don't mean that for unbelievers. I mean that specifically for Christians. And I mean it specifically for Christians who believe God's promises in the Bible.

In Genesis 50:20 Joseph reminds us that even trials that other people or that evil spiritual forces mean for evil in our lives and in the lives of God's people – even those things, Joseph reminds us, God will work for good.

And Paul makes it clear that that pattern is not unique in the life of Joseph. In Romans 8:28 Paul makes it clear that God works all things together for the good of his people – for the good of those who love God, whom he has called as his own.

The Bible tells us that God is in control. And he works all things for the good of his people. And as Christians, we are called to believe that.

And often, I think, it's not in spite of our faith in that truth, but it's because of our faith in that truth, that when suffering and loss strike, we are left confused – we are left with questions.

Because we cannot see how what has happened could possibly be for good.

And the Bible itself tells us that this is not a foolish way to feel, but it is a wise way to view things. That's what we're told in Ecclesiastes 8.

There's much debate about who wrote Ecclesiastes. And while we cannot be certain, I suspect it's probably Solomon. And Solomon (or whoever wrote it) in the Book of Ecclesiastes, uses the term "vapor" (or *hebel* in Hebrew) to describe those things we cannot lay hold of – things we cannot grasp at, or wrap our fingers around, or fully understand or leverage.

And using that concept of vapor – of that which is beyond our grasp – Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 8:14: "There is a vapor that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to

whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vapor.”

Solomon, the wise king, is saying that when he looks at the world, and he sees suffering in the life of the faithful, it is vapor to him – he cannot wrap his mind around it, he cannot understand it, it’s elusive to him.

Solomon knew Genesis 50:20 – he knew the Bible’s teaching that God works all things for the good of his people. But how some losses and suffering could actually be for the good of God’s people – how God was bringing about good from such things ... to Solomon, that was vapor. It was beyond his grasp. It was incomprehensible to him. Which meant he was left with questions and confusion.

And Solomon goes on to stress that this is not a problem that was unique to him – it’s universal. Because just a little later, in verse 17, as he sums all this up, Solomon writes: “Then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.”

Solomon says that when he saw the faithful suffer, it was vapor to him – he could not understand it. And now he says that that’s true of all of us – we cannot grasp or understand, exactly what God is doing in such things. However much we may toil in trying to understand it all, we cannot find it out. Even though some purported wise man claims to know all that God is doing in such situations, he cannot really know.

Our three texts taken together present us with two truths. The first is that God really is working all things – even things like suffering, and death, and evil – God really is working all things for the good of his people. That’s one important truth for us here, from Joseph and Paul.

But a second important truth for us, from Solomon, is that most of what God is doing in such situations – not all, as we’ll discuss in a few minutes – but most of what God is doing in such situations, is beyond our grasp or understanding. We cannot see it. It doesn’t make sense to us.

Most of us have experienced this in certain losses or suffering in our own lives. And it’s true in the situations we face together as well.

Think again of Melissa. Sure – as Paul says in Philippians 1:23, we can understand that it’s far better for her, for her to be with Christ. But as Paul goes on to discuss in the very next verse, that doesn’t mean we understand why it’s better for us for her to be taken. And that’s true not just for Melissa, but for many Christians who are taken from us through death.

And putting death aside, it’s even more unclear to us what good comes from the suffering that often precedes death among God’s people. Like Solomon, we too want to say: “This is vapor.” However much we toil, we cannot find out all its purposes. “Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.”

Which leaves us with a question: Can we really trust that God is working such things for good? Can we trust God with that, even when we cannot see all that he is doing?

The Bible's answer to that question is "Yes." And it explains that answer in many different ways. But for the rest of our time this morning, I want to consider three things – I want us to hear the Bible's call: to reconsider what we can see, to realize that there's so much that we can't see, and to remember who the God of the Bible is and what he's already done in relation to our suffering.

So: reconsider what we can see, realize that there's so much we can't see, and then remember who God is and what he has already done.

And as we do those things, the truth that emerges is that God is bringing profound beauty and glory from the struggles of his people, if we remain faithful to him.

Reconsider the Beauty We Can See

So first, even in our questions and confusion, there is beauty we can see if we place our trust in Christ.

But as Paul points out ... it may not be the kind of beauty we're looking for. But it is the kind of beauty that God especially values.

Paul, after writing in verse 28 that "for those who love God all things work together for good," in the very next verse he writes: "For those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son."

We are reminded there that what God finds especially glorious among his children – what God finds especially beautiful among us ... is when we look more and more like Jesus.

We have this tendency – I know that I do – to think that an especially beautiful life is a life of ease, or comfort, or worldly success – an idyllic life without struggle and with extra enjoyment. And to be sure, joy and peace are good things.

But even so, what God finds even more beautiful in the lives of his saints is not their ease ... but their looking more and more like Jesus. And sometimes the means by which his saints are made more like Jesus involve trial and tribulation and suffering.

Sometimes that's how God works among those who are especially in need of growth – those who are more distant from the Lord.

But in other cases it's actually those who are especially faithful whom God chooses to glorify and beautify through trials and suffering. In fact, this is so true that some theologians speak about the "reward of suffering" – the biblical pattern that God will reward the faithfulness of his children with trials and tribulations, so that they will become even more holy, and also so that their faithfulness will be displayed before the world and even before the heavenly hosts, as a testimony to God, and as a spiritual glory for them.

This is what we see in the life of Job. In the Book of Job, it's because Job was so faithful that the Lord brings suffering into his life, so that the heavenly hosts would see his faithfulness on display,

and so that Satan would be perplexed and defeated. Job's faithfulness was beautiful in the sight of God, and God wanted to display it before others as well – both in heaven and on earth.

And we need to have eyes to see such beauty as well. Now, to be clear, the Bible does not deny that the ugliness of sickness and suffering and death in this world are intrusions that do not belong in God's good creation. But the Bible is also clear that God, in his sovereign care, can use those intruders in his world like tools, and through them he can even bring about and display the holiness and faithfulness of his people – both increasing their resemblance to Jesus, and displaying it to others.

In such situations, the calling of God's people is simple: We are to accept the story God has placed us in, and we are to remain faithful to him. Even as we may lament our losses and our suffering, we are to accept the story and the life God has given to us, and we are to commit ourselves to being faithful to him, even in the midst of struggle and loss. And when we do, we will become more like Jesus, and the beauty of Jesus's heart will be more fully displayed in our lives.

Many of us saw just that in how Melissa lived the last season of her life. And many of you have seen the same thing in the faithfulness of other believers who have walked difficult roads.

Such faithfulness is beautiful to God. It is marveled at by the heavenly hosts. And we need to have eyes to see it as well.

And so, in the midst of the suffering of God's people, the Bible calls us first to reconsider what we can see of the beauty that God is bringing from such struggles.

Realize There Is So Much We Cannot See

Second, though, the Bible also calls us to realize that there is so much that God is doing that we can't see. But it's still real.

Paul alludes to this in verse 30 of Romans 8. There he stresses how the final completion of this work God is doing is found in our glorification ... which we do not see in this world ... but in the next. It's a reminder that much of what God is at work doing now, cannot be seen on earth, but only from the vantage point of heaven.

Think again of Job. In the story of Job, God notes Job's faithfulness. Satan then challenges God that Job would not remain faithful to God if he faced suffering. God allows suffering then to enter Job's life, and Job's faithfulness and perseverance becomes a beautiful and glorious display in the heavenly places, that vindicates God and that defeats Satan – it's an amazing thing that results from it all ... but Job can't see any of it. All Job could see was the trials. Maybe a hint of growth in himself. Maybe a bit of his faithfulness displayed before others. But most of the impact – most of the beauty and glory God was bringing from it all – most of that Job could not see.

This tells us that God is making something beautiful and glorious from the story of his people – both their story as a whole and the story of each individual who trusts in him. And that means, among other things, that he is bringing beauty and glory out of situations where their faithfulness endures suffering and trial. He's bringing glory in the midst of sorrow. He's bringing beauty and

triumph even when their lives take on a minor key. He is creating a heavenly beauty that transforms what at first seems like discordant struggles in this world.

J.R.R. Tolkien imagined this idea by describing God’s work in the world and in the lives of his people as being like God writing a beautiful song in the heavens – a song that would be all the more beautiful for the ways it incorporated and enfolded the sorrowful themes of suffering and the discordant notes of tribulation.

In his writing, Tolkien wrote a creation story for the fantasy world he created. And being a faithful Christian, Tolkien sought to write a creation story that also captured theological truths about our world and the God of the Bible.

In Tolkien’s creation story, both the world itself, and the history of the world, are sung into existence. It all begins as a song, and then that song is manifest in the history of the world that follows, so that in some sense the song of God and the story of the world are one and the same thing.

And the song begins with God’s faithful angels following his lead, and singing according to his direction. And the song is pure and beautiful.

But then, as they are singing the story of the world into existence, just as in the Bible, there is an angel who rebels. Melkor, a Satan figure, begins to weave themes into God’s song that are contrary to God’s directions – he tries to rival God’s song with a song of his own, just as Satan did in the history of our world.

And so, as the story of the world was sung, discord is brought into the tune, through Melkor’s rebellion. “Then,” Tolkien writes, “the discord of Melkor spread ever wider, and the melodies [from God] which had been heard before foundered in a sea of turbulent sound.”

But then God rises. And he meets the discord that Melkor has introduced, with a new musical theme.¹ Tolkien writes: “It seemed at first soft and sweet, a mere rippling of gentle sounds in delicate melodies; but it could not be quenched, and it took to itself power and profundity. And it seemed at last that there were two musics progressing at one time before the seat of [God], and they were utterly at variance. The one [from God] was deep and wide and beautiful, but slow and blended with an immeasurable sorrow, from which its beauty chiefly came. The other [from Melkor] [...] was loud, and vain, [...] [like] many trumpets braying upon a few notes. And it [attempted] to drown the other music by the violence of its voice, but it seemed that its most triumphant notes were taken over by [God’s music] and woven into its own solemn pattern.”

In other words, God’s music takes in Melkor’s tune of brokenness and rebellion, and weaves it into God’s own tune in surprising ways – in ways that increase the beauty of God’s song, even as that song finds its beauty at times in a minor key.

¹ Yes, to those who are Tolkien lovers: I am simplifying the story significantly. I’m sorry. But I wanted to bring out a key element of Tolkien’s story here without folk less familiar with Tolkien’s world getting lost in the details of the mythology.

The song comes to an end. And God speaks, and he says to Melkor: “Thou, Melkor, [shall now] see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove by mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.” And God then shows to the angels how the song has been manifested as the story of the world. [Tolkien, 15-17]

In all of this, Tolkien was trying to express a deep theological truth: That even as forces of sin, or destruction, or death, tried to overcome the beautiful song of God, God in his power, was able to take those broken and rebellious notes, and weave them into his song in a way that increased the beauty of his song – even if that beauty now came at times as a sorrowful theme. The history of the world, Tolkien was saying, is like that song – it’s a song that plays out as the story of our world and the story of our lives ... but it can only be heard clearly, in its beauty and glory, in heaven.

There it is clear, in ways we cannot now see here on earth, how God is taking all the discordant notes of suffering, and brokenness, and incorporating them into his own song in ways that make it even more beautiful ... even as it at times takes on a more sorrowful key.

We can catch a glimpse of this interplay of sorrow and triumph even now in our worship.

For much of the last seven years, I met with Melissa weekly, to discuss the hymns for the coming Sunday. As the pastor, I choose the hymns. But it was good to do that in conversation with Melissa, drawing from her musical insight.

And it happened more than once that we were discussing a final hymn for the service ... and the theme of the sermon lent itself to a hymn that gave a sense of God’s power and triumph in the lives of his people. And when I thought of that kind of song, I tended to think of hymns in a major key – songs in a key that had a bright and celebratory sense to them. But sometimes, as we talked, Melissa would suggest a hymn in a minor key – a key that may incorporate a sense of sorrow or emotional tension. And I said something like: “Well, that’s a good hymn. But I don’t want to end on a sad note.” And Melissa looked at me, and said: “It’s in a minor key ... but it’s not sad. It’s victorious. It’s triumphant.” And, of course, she was right.

And what Melissa knew about so many hymns ... Melissa also knew about the last season of her life: That something can be in a minor key ... and still be triumphant. A song, or a story, or the events of our lives can be mournful, and sorrowful, and have deep emotional tension ... and at the same time, it can result in even greater beauty, and glory, and ultimately in triumph.

We see some of that. We saw it in Melissa’s life – in her faithfulness and Christ-likeness. We’ve seen it in the holiness and faithfulness and love of many of God’s saints as they walked difficult roads.

But Tolkien and Paul remind us that for all we can see here and now ... there is so much more that is only visible ... or only audible ... from heaven. But it’s still real. And the day will come when we will see it, and hear it, ourselves.

Remember Who God Is in the Gospel

Now ... that may be a very nice idea.

But how can we know that it's true?

The answer is given to us in the gospel itself. Because in the gospel, God has shown us his heart towards our suffering, as well as his power.

First, we see God's heart towards our suffering in the gospel.

And that's important, because as we talk about this, it can be easy for us to imagine God as cold and aloof in this process – maybe making something beautiful, yes, but also detached and even uncaring when it comes to the suffering his children go through along the way.

But the gospel reminds us that God is not detached or indifferent to the suffering of his children. Rather, he enters into their suffering, and he joins them in it.

Because in the gospel, when we had brought sin and brokenness into this world, when it became clear that the path to redemption, and healing, and renewing the beauty and glory of God's world would require struggle and suffering ... God did not remain aloof and lay that burden on us ... but instead, he came himself, into this broken world, in human form, in the person of Jesus Christ ... and he received the greatest suffering of all. He who least deserved to suffer, received the greatest measure of it, so that he might save us and glorify us – so that we might be made beautiful again before him. For us he endured the suffering of the cross. For us he took on death and the grave.

And so now, when God calls his children to paths of sorrow or suffering he's really calling us to walk a road that he has already trod – to travel on a path that he has already forged for us ... a trail he's familiar with, and where he will always be by our side ... a road where he has already born the brunt of whatever loss or sorrow comes along the way.

And as we do, we can trust him – and trust in his love for us – as he assures us that the path he has laid out for us, though it contains suffering, really is worth it and really does lead to him. He can be trusted. Because he walked that path long before he ever asked us to.

God's heart for us is on display in the gospel. And so he can be trusted, even when he calls us to paths of sorrow and loss.

But also, in the gospel, God's power over trials and losses is revealed. Because Jesus did not remain on the cross. Jesus did not remain in the grave. On the third day, he rose – triumphing over sin and death. He brought to bear his power over all brokenness and evil. And in his resurrection, he promised the same thing to all who follow him in faith – we too will one day be raised from the grave, to dwell with Christ forever.

The story in this temporal life may end in a minor key ... but it is not ultimately sad ... it is, in the end, victorious ... it is, eternally, triumphant.

That is the promise of the gospel. Even when we can't see it just yet.

Conclusion

And so, brothers and sisters ... let us be confident that even in moments of great suffering and loss ... even when there is dissonance and turmoil, even in those moments, the song that God is making in the lives of his faithful people is not, ultimately a sad one. It is triumphant. Because he is triumphant. He has conquered sin and death in his own resurrection. And he will do the same for all who place their trust in him.

We can be confident in the beauty and the triumph our Lord is bringing from the lives of his people ... even when that triumph comes, for now, in a minor key.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Keller, Timothy. *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2013.
 Meyers, Jeffrey. *A Table in the Mist: Ecclesiastes Through New Eyes*. Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2006.
 Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*. Second Edition. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1977. (2001 Edition)

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.