## Healing in a Broken World - Romans 8:17-25

In **Romans 8:17**, the phrase "suffering with Christ" (*sympaschō*) has a specific theological meaning. In mainstream biblical scholarship, *it does not mean that God inflicts sickness on people to make them like Jesus.*

The debate over whether illness counts as "suffering with Jesus" usually stems from different theological perspectives. The text can be understood across these two main viewpoints:

**1. The Contextual View: Persecution and the Battle with Sin**

In the immediate context of the New Testament, "suffering with Christ" primarily refers to the unique hardships a person faces *because* they choose to follow Jesus.

- **Persecution and Rejection:** Jesus was rejected, mocked, and persecuted by the world. When Christians face social exclusion, hostility, or persecution for their faith, they are actively sharing in the same kind of suffering Jesus did.
- **Spiritual Warfare and Self-Denial:** Just a few verses earlier (Romans 8:13), Paul talks about "putting to death the deeds of the body" by the Spirit. Forcing your flesh to submit to God, denying selfish desires, and fighting sin is an agonizing process—a form of suffering with Christ to live a holy life.

**2. The Broader View: Living in a Broken World**

While the primary focus is on gospel-related persecution, the verses immediately following (Romans 8:19-23) expand the scope to include the physical world. Paul writes about how the entire creation is "groaning" under the weight of decay, and how humans groan while waiting for the redemption of their physical bodies.

- **Physical Illness:** Under this view, things like cancer, chronic pain, and physical illness are not a special punishment from God, nor are they a "requirement" to earn glory. Instead, they are the reality of living in a fragile, fallen world.
- **How Illness Becomes "With Jesus":** If a believer experiences illness and chooses to rely on God, maintain their faith, and reflect Christ's character through the pain, that trial is transformed. The illness itself isn't a holy badge, but **the way a person endures it in fellowship with God** unites their experience with the "Man of Sorrows".

**A Note on the "Prosperity Theology" Debate**

- **Prosperity teachers** often argue that Jesus bore all physical sickness on the cross (citing Isaiah 53:5), meaning Christians should expect perfect physical health, and therefore Romans 8:17 *only* applies to spiritual warfare or persecution.
- **Mainstream theologians** counter that while salvation is secure, our physical bodies will continue to decay, get sick, and die until the final resurrection (Romans 8:23). Therefore, enduring physical sickness with faith is a legitimate part of the current earthly groaning.

Ultimately, Paul's point in Romans 8:17 isn't to glorify the pain itself, but to comfort believers: whatever trials, persecutions, or physical heartbreaks we face, they are a temporary path leading to an **eternal weight of glory**.

In **Romans 8:23-25** perfectly highlights the structural tension between our spiritual reality and our current physical brokenness:

*"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.*** *For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."* (ESV)

**The Breakdown: The "Now and Not Yet" of the Body**

This text introduces a crucial distinction in Christian theology known as the **"Now and Not Yet."** It directly addresses why Christians still experience physical pain, illness, and aging.

**1. "The Firstfruits of the Spirit"**

- **The Greek:** *Aparchē* (ἀπαρχή) refers to the very first part of a harvest. It was a guarantee that the rest of the massive harvest was on its way.
- **The Meaning:** When someone becomes a Christian, God puts the Holy Spirit inside them. This acts as a down payment. Your soul is redeemed, your sins are forgiven, and you have eternal life *right now*. But the full harvest hasn't arrived yet.

**2. "Groan Inwardly"**

- **The Greek:** *Stenazō* (στενάζω) means to sigh deeply, grumble, or groan from a heavy internal pressure.
- **The Meaning:** Paul explicitly states that having the Holy Spirit does *not* exempt you from the pain of the physical world. In fact, it makes you more aware of it. Christian's "groan" because they are trapped in a physical body that is still subject to the laws of a fallen planet—it gets cancer, it breaks down, it tires, and it dies. This inner groaning is a normal, healthy expression of faith living in a broken world; it is not a sign of "weak faith" or "spiritual failure".

**3. "The Redemption of Our Bodies"**

- **The Greek:** *Apolytrosis* (ἀπολύτρωσις) means a releasing effected by payment of a ransom—full deliverance.
- **The Meaning:** This is the climax of Paul's argument regarding physical suffering. Our souls are redeemed *now*, but our physical bodies will not be fully redeemed until the resurrection. Complete physical healing, immortality, and freedom from disease are a future certainty, not a guaranteed present entitlement.

**How This Settles the Sickness Debate**

When people claim that *"sickness is a lack of faith"* or that *"Jesus took all sickness away on the cross so Christians should never be ill,"* Romans 8:23 stands as a firm theological guardrail.

Paul frames the Christian life as a state of active, patient waiting (*hypomonē*). We are saved in this **hope of a future physical rescue**. If we were meant to have perfect, un-decaying, un-groaning bodies right now, it wouldn't be a hope, it would be a current sight.