

# FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

*Systematic Theology Series*

## HAMARTIOLOGY

*The Doctrine of Sin*

*The Catastrophe from Which the Gospel Rescues Us*

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### UNIT 7: THE EFFECTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF SIN WHAT SIN HAS COST THE HUMAN RACE, THE CREATION, AND ETERNITY

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#### Lesson 19

## Physical Death, Suffering, and the Curse

### The Visible Consequences of an Invisible Rebellion

*Every Thorn and Every Grave Is a Sermon Preached in the Language of Consequence*

*“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” — Romans 6:23*

*Key Texts: Romans 5:12; 6:23; 8:18–25; Genesis 3:14–19; 1 Corinthians 15:21–26; Hebrews 9:27*

*“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

**Romans 6:23, NASB 1995**

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## Introduction

Lesson 18 addressed the gravest consequence of the fall: spiritual death, the invisible rupture between the creature and the Creator that underlies every visible consequence of sin. This lesson turns to those visible consequences: the physical death, the suffering, and the cosmic curse that make the fallen world what every human being experiences it to be. If spiritual death is the root, physical death and suffering are the most immediate and most universal fruit, the daily, inescapable testimony that something has gone profoundly and catastrophically wrong with the world that God originally declared to be very good (Genesis 1:31).

The subtitle of this lesson, “The Visible Consequences of an Invisible Rebellion”, captures the essential theological relationship between the two. Adam’s rebellion in Genesis 3 was invisible in the sense that its most fundamental dimension, the spiritual death, the rupture of the creature-Creator relationship, the corruption of the image of God, was a catastrophe that no external observer could have seen. But the consequences of that invisible rebellion are visible in every dimension of the created order and every moment of human experience: in the sweat of every laborer, the pain of every childbirth, the thorn of every rose, and the grave of every human being who has ever lived. The visible consequences are the material testimony to the reality of the invisible rebellion, and every person who has ever felt the weight of suffering, the approach of death, or the frustration of toil in a resistant world has encountered, whether or not she recognized it, the specific physical evidence of the theological reality that Genesis 3:14–19 announces and Romans 5:12 explains.

This lesson examines the visible consequences in six major sections: the entry of physical death through Adam’s transgression and its spread to all humanity (Section I); the comprehensive curse on the ground and the created order (Section II); the specific curses on the woman and the man in Genesis 3:16–19, pain in childbearing and toil in work (Section III); the broader reality of suffering in a fallen world, including the crucial distinction between personal sin and participation in a fallen world as the source of specific suffering (Section IV); the universality and the eschatological significance of physical death (Section V); and the hope of the comprehensive reversal that Christ’s resurrection inaugurates and the new creation will complete (Section VI).

The pastoral significance of this lesson is perhaps more immediately felt than any other in the series, because the consequences it addresses are the consequences that every person in every congregation is experiencing at some level in every moment of their lives. The parishioner who has just buried a parent, the couple whose labor of childbearing has been marked by complication and grief, the farmer whose crop has failed, the professional whose work has produced more frustration than fruit, all are experiencing the specific, named, biblically interpreted consequences of Genesis 3. The pastor who knows this lesson knows not merely what has happened to these people but why, and in knowing why is equipped to offer not the generic comfort of “life is hard” or the reductionistic comfort of “This is God’s plan” but the theologically grounded comfort of a God who names the specific consequences of sin, who does not pretend they are not real, who promises their specific reversal, and who has begun that reversal in the resurrection of His own Son from the grave that sin’s wages had earned.

A note on the structure of this lesson in relation to the preceding and following: Lesson 18 (spiritual death) and Lesson 19 (physical death and suffering) together address the two primary temporal consequences of the fall, the spiritual and the physical. Lesson 20 will address the eternal consequence: the final judgment and the reality of hell as the ultimate expression of the wages of sin paid in full. The three lessons together form a comprehensive account of what sin has cost: the relationship with God (spiritual death), the created order and embodied human existence (physical death and suffering), and the eternal destiny of the impenitent (eternal death). Against each of these costs, the gospel offers its specific provision: the making-alive for spiritual death, the resurrection of the body for physical death, and the eternal life of John 5:24 for eternal death.

## I. Physical Death as the Consequence of Sin

*Romans 5:12 and 6:23, The Wages That Sin Earns*

### A. The Entry of Death Through One Man

Romans 5:12 is the New Testament's most theologically precise account of the entry of physical death into the human story: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (NASB 1995). The verse is famous for its grammatical incompleteness, it begins "just as" and does not complete the comparison until verse 18, but its theological content is perfectly clear. Three specific causal claims are packed into its compact structure: (1) sin entered the world through one man (Adam's transgression as the specific historical cause of sin's presence in the human story); (2) death entered the world through sin (physical death as the specific consequence of sin's entry, not as an independent natural feature of the original creation); and (3) death spread to all men because all sinned (the universal scope of physical death grounded in the universal participation in Adam's guilt through the covenant of works).

The causal sequence of Romans 5:12, sin enters, then death enters through sin, then death spreads to all, is the specific biblical refutation of every naturalistic account of human mortality that treats death as a built-in feature of the original design rather than as a judicial consequence of covenantal transgression. The biblical account is not that human beings are mortal because they are made of biological material that naturally deteriorates (though the biological reality of deterioration is part of the post-fall condition); it is that human beings are mortal because the covenantal head of the human race transgressed the law of the Creator, incurred the divinely announced penalty of death, and transmitted that penalty to all his posterity as the specific judgment of the covenant of works executed upon all who were in Adam. Physical death is not a natural feature of the human constitution; it is a judicial penalty imposed on the covenant representative and his race.

The implication for the understanding of physical death is significant: death is not a friend, not a natural stage in a life-cycle, not a dignified transition to another form of existence, and not a process that is theologically neutral. Physical death is the enemy, specifically named as "the last enemy" in 1 Corinthians 15:26, the specific expression of the wages of sin in the material dimension of human existence. Every human death is, in the fullest theological sense, the specific personal expression of the judgment that God pronounced on Adam in Genesis 3:19: "for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The gravity with which the Bible treats physical death, the weeping at graves, the anguish of loss, the groaning of Romans 8:23, is not theological sentimentality; it is the appropriate response to the actual gravity of a judicial sentence that sin has earned and the grave has executed on every human being who has ever lived.

### B. The Wages of Sin: Romans 6:23

Romans 6:23's formulation, "the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (NASB 1995), is the most compact and the most theologically comprehensive statement of the relationship between sin and death available in the entire New Testament. The Greek word *opsonia* (wages, soldier's stipend, earned pay) is chosen with precision: wages are what has been earned, what is legitimately owed, what the withholding of would be an injustice. Paul is saying that death is what sin has earned, the specific, proportional, justly deserved consequence of the specific, comprehensive, divinely prohibited act. Death is not an arbitrary penalty attached to sin by divine fiat; it is the natural and just expression of what sin is in its ultimate character: the separation of the creature from the Creator, the rejection of the source of all life.

The contrast with the "free gift" (*charisma*) in the second half of the verse is deliberate and theologically essential. Wages are earned; gifts are not. Death is what sin earns; eternal life is what grace gives. The contrast is not merely rhetorical; it is the specific theological claim that eternal life is not the wages of righteousness, as though the believer had earned immortality through consistent moral performance, but the unearned, undeserved, sovereign gift of the God whose grace exceeds all human earning and all human deserving. This contrast is the foundation of the entire Reformed soteriology: the gospel's provision for sin's wages (death) is not earned by the sinner but

given by the sovereign God, freely, on the basis of the atoning work of the One who bore the wages (death) that the sinner had earned.

*“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.”*

**Romans 5:12, NASB 1995**

## II. The Curse on Creation

*Genesis 3:14–19 and Romans 8:20–22*

### A. *The Comprehensive Scope of the Fall’s Curse*

One of the most theologically significant and most commonly underappreciated dimensions of Genesis 3’s account of the fall’s consequences is the comprehensive scope of the divine judgment: the curse does not merely affect Adam and Eve in their individual moral and spiritual lives but extends to the entire created order of which they are the covenantal heads. The serpent is cursed (Genesis 3:14–15), the ground is cursed (verse 17), and the entire relationship between the human creature and the creation it was designed to cultivate and tend is transformed from the joyful participation in God’s own creative work (Genesis 2:15: “then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it”) into the toil-laden, frustration-marked, futility-shadowed labor of Genesis 3:17–19.

The theological principle at work in this cosmic scope of the curse is the covenantal nature of Adam’s relationship to creation. Adam was not merely an individual human being; he was the covenantal head and king of the created order, charged with the royal responsibility of subduing and ruling the earth (Genesis 1:28) as the image-bearer of the Creator who made it. When Adam transgressed the covenant, he forfeited not merely his own standing before God but the covenantal relationship between the entire created order and the Creator it was designed to glorify. The ground that was subject to the king’s cultivation was cursed because of the king’s transgression; the creation that was organized under his vice-regency was subjected to futility because the vice-regent had abdicated his covenantal responsibility. The curse on the ground is not a separate, independently motivated divine action; it is the expression of the comprehensive covenantal judgment that follows from the comprehensive covenantal transgression of the one who held covenantal responsibility for the whole.

Paul’s treatment of the creation’s condition in Romans 8:20–22 provides the New Testament’s most theologically developed account of the curse’s ongoing reality: “the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now” (NASB 1995). Four elements of this passage carry crucial theological weight. First, the creation was subjected “not willingly”, the creation’s subjection to futility was not its own choice but the consequence of the human covenantal transgression that subjected it. Second, the subjection was done by “Him who subjected it”, the divine Judge whose sentence of Genesis 3 extended its scope to the entire creation. Third, the subjection was done “in hope”, the curse is not the final word; it is the penultimate condition of a creation that is moving toward liberation. Fourth, the whole creation groans, the entire created order participates in the consequence of the fall, and the groaning is the creation’s participation in the not-yet dimension of the eschatological tension that the believer also experiences in Romans 8:23.

### B. *Thorns and the Crown: The Symbolic Reversal*

The specific imagery of thorns and thistles in Genesis 3:18 carries a theological freight that extends far beyond its agricultural meaning. Thorns appear throughout Scripture as the emblematic marker of the cursed creation, the ground’s resistance to the human labor that was once joyful cultivation and has now become toilsome struggle. And the crown of thorns placed on Jesus at the crucifixion (Matthew 27:29; Mark 15:17; John 19:2) is one of the

most theologically charged images in the entire passion narrative: the One who became a curse for us (Galatians 3:13) bore on His own head the specific symbol of the creation's curse that Adam's sin had produced.

The crown of thorns is not merely a Roman soldier's mockery of a Jewish pretender-king; it is the enacted parable of atonement. The curse that God pronounced on the ground because of Adam, "thorns and thistles it shall grow for you", is borne by the Second Adam on His royal brow at the moment when He is accomplishing the redemption of the first Adam's race. The thorns become the crown of the Redeemer who absorbs the curse into Himself so that those who are His might be freed from it. And Isaiah 55:13's prophecy of the new creation, "Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up, and instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up", is the eschatological reversal that the crown-wearing Christ has made possible: the curse borne at Calvary is the specific provision for the creation's liberation that Romans 8:21 anticipates.

*"For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God."*

**Romans 8:20–21, NASB 1995**

### III. Pain and Toil

*The Specific Curses on Woman and Man in Genesis 3:16–19*

#### A. Pain in Childbearing: Genesis 3:16

Genesis 3:16's announcement to the woman, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you will bring forth children" (NASB 1995), is among the most theologically significant verses in the entire Genesis narrative of the fall's consequences, precisely because of its subject matter: the multiplication of sorrow in the very act by which human life continues. The judgment falls not on a peripheral or marginal dimension of human experience but on the most intimate, most fundamental, most life-giving dimension of specifically female embodied existence. The pain of childbearing is a constant reminder, written into the very act of bringing new human life into the world, that the world is not as it was designed to be.

The Hebrew of Genesis 3:16 is carefully constructed. The word translated "pain" (*itsabon*) is the same word used in verse 17 for the man's "toil", establishing a deliberate parallelism between the woman's specific experience in childbearing and the man's specific experience in work. Both share in the same fundamental suffering that sin has introduced; both experience it in the dimension of existence most specific to their embodied calling. The "multiplication" of pain, "I will greatly multiply" (*harbah arbah*), implies that some form of the experience existed before the fall (the process of giving birth has always involved physical engagement) but that the fall has intensified it to a degree that constitutes a qualitative transformation of the original experience. The transformation is a reminder inscribed in the most intimate dimension of physical existence that the original design has been disrupted.

The second half of Genesis 3:16, "Yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you", introduces the relational dimension of the curse: the distortion of the man-woman relationship from the mutual, co-equal, complementary partnership of Genesis 2 into the contested, power-shadowed, desire-distorted relationship that characterizes fallen human marriage. The "desire" (*teshuqah*) and the "will rule" together describe the relational consequence of the fall: the woman's desire (whether for the man's love, for control over him, or for a return to the original complementarity, the precise sense is debated) and the man's dominance both represent the distortion of a relationship that was originally characterized by the joyful, voluntary, non-contested complementarity that Genesis 2:23–25 describes. The curse on the woman's relational experience is the horizontal expression of the same vertical rupture that every other consequence of the fall expresses: when the vertical relationship with God is broken, the horizontal relationships that depend on it for their proper ordering are simultaneously distorted.

## **B. Toil and Frustration in Work: Genesis 3:17–19**

Genesis 3:17–19’s announcement to the man is the most comprehensive statement of the creation’s curse in the entire Genesis narrative: “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:17–19, NASB 1995). The passage is structured as a comprehensive account of the man’s post-fall existence: the ground is cursed (verse 17), it will grow thorns and thistles rather than the easy abundance of the garden (verse 18), and the labor will be sweat-producing toil rather than the joyful cultivation of the pre-fall condition (verse 19a), culminating in the return to the dust from which the man was taken (verse 19b).

The theological significance of the work-curse is that it falls on an activity, the cultivation of the ground, that was specifically commanded and blessed before the fall (Genesis 2:15). The cultural mandate is not revoked by the fall; Adam is still called to cultivate and keep the earth, still called to subdue and rule the creation in the name of the Creator. But the mandate that was once joyfully and easily discharged in the abundance of the garden is now discharged under the burden of resistance, frustration, and futility. The same essential calling remains; the conditions under which it must be fulfilled have been radically transformed. The thorns and thistles are not merely an agricultural inconvenience; they are the constant reminder that the creation which was designed to serve the human calling gladly and abundantly now serves it reluctantly and partially, because the covenantal relationship between the human king and the creation under his care has been fundamentally disordered by the covenantal transgression.

The sweat of verse 19a is the physical expression of the effort that the resisting creation now requires. Work was not absent before the fall (Genesis 2:15 establishes it); labor was not introduced as a punishment for sin. What sin introduced was the resistance of the creation to the labor, the frustration that accompanies the effort, and the futility that periodically makes the labor’s results disproportionate to its cost. Every worker who has experienced the frustration of effort that yields less than its labor deserves, the professional whose competent work has been undone by factors outside her control, the farmer whose crop has failed despite excellent cultivation, all are experiencing the specific, named consequence of Genesis 3:17–19. The frustration is real; its source is identifiable; and the hope of its removal is specific: the new creation in which “they will build houses and inhabit them; they will also plant vineyards and eat their fruit” (Isaiah 65:21, NASB 1995) and in which the futility of Genesis 3:17–19 will be permanently reversed.

## **IV. Suffering in a Fallen World**

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### *The Pastoral Distinction and the Theodicy Question*

### **A. Not All Suffering Is the Direct Result of Personal Sin**

One of the most pastorally important theological distinctions in the entire Hamartiology curriculum is the distinction between suffering as the direct consequence of specific personal sin and suffering as the consequence of living in a fallen world. Jesus addresses this distinction explicitly in John 9:1–3, when the disciples ask about the man born blind: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?” The question reflects the theological assumption of the disciples, shared by Job’s comforters and by many in every generation, that specific suffering must be the direct consequence of specific sin. Jesus’ answer is direct and corrective: “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

The theological principle Jesus establishes is not that personal sin never produces suffering, it often does, and the Bible is frank about this connection (Proverbs 5:3–11; Proverbs 20:17; 1 Corinthians 11:30; Galatians 6:7–8). The principle is that specific suffering in a specific person is not reliable evidence of specific sin in that specific person. The man born blind is not blind because he sinned or because his parents sinned; he is blind because he is living in a fallen world in which blindness occurs, and his specific blindness is the specific occasion for the specific display of the works of God. The pastoral implication is the one that Job’s comforters tragically failed to grasp: the

reflexive assignment of specific suffering to specific sin adds theological injury to experiential pain and is, in the vast majority of cases, both factually inaccurate and pastorally harmful.

The right pastoral framework for suffering maintains both sides of the truth simultaneously. All suffering is the consequence of living in a world ruined by sin, not necessarily of the sufferer's own sin, but of the comprehensive fall of Genesis 3 that subjected the entire created order to futility, decay, disease, accident, and death. Every specific instance of suffering occurs within this comprehensive framework of the fallen world's consequences. And every specific instance of suffering is simultaneously within the sovereign providential governance of the God who "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11, NASB 1995) and who is able, as Romans 8:28 declares, to work all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. The suffering is real; its ultimate source in the fallen world's condition is theologically identifiable; its specific purpose in the specific life of the specific sufferer is within the sovereign governance of a God who neither caused the fall nor stands helpless before its consequences.

## **B. *The Groaning of Creation and the Groaning of the Believer***

Romans 8:18–25 provides the most theologically comprehensive account of the relationship between suffering, the fallen creation, and the eschatological hope that sustains the believer through the present experience of suffering. Paul draws the explicit parallel between the groaning of the whole creation (verse 22) and the groaning of the believer herself (verse 23), establishing that both are expressions of the same fundamental eschatological tension: the present experience of the fall's consequences alongside the certain hope of the coming liberation.

The creation groans under the futility and corruption that the fall introduced, waiting for the liberation that the glory of God's children will trigger (verse 21). The believer groans with the first fruits of the Spirit already received, waiting for the redemption of the body that the resurrection will provide (verse 23). Both groanings are real; both are eschatologically oriented; and both are held within the framework of Paul's specific comparison in verse 18: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." The comparison is not a dismissal of the suffering, Paul does not minimize the reality of the present sufferings by saying they are trivial or easily borne. It is a contextualizing of the suffering within the eschatological framework that gives it its proper proportionality: not compared with a vague future improvement, but compared with the specific, certain, overwhelming glory of the new creation that the groaning creation and the groaning believer are both moving toward.

The pastoral implication of Romans 8:18–25 for the ministry of comfort to the suffering is one of the most practically significant in the entire New Testament. The pastor who has internalized the theology of this passage is the pastor who can sit with a genuinely suffering person and offer not the false comfort of easy explanation ("God allowed this for a specific reason that will soon be apparent") or the dismissive comfort of minimization ("This will pass") but the genuine, eschatologically grounded comfort of the gospel: the world you are suffering in is not the world it was designed to be; the body you are suffering in is not the body it will be; the creation that is groaning around you is groaning toward the same liberation that your groaning Spirit-indwelt self is groaning toward; and the God who subjected the creation to futility in hope has promised that the creation's groaning and your groaning are both moving toward the glory of verse 18, which is not worthy to be compared with the present suffering because it is so overwhelmingly greater.

*"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."*

**Romans 8:18, NASB 1995**

## V. The Universality of Physical Death

### *Hebrews 9:27 and the Inescapable Testimony*

Hebrews 9:27's declaration, "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (NASB 1995), is the New Testament's most direct statement of the universal appointment to die, and it contains in its brevity a remarkable concentration of theological content. Three specific affirmations emerge from the verse: the universality of death ("for men", without exception of any human characteristic), the singularity of death ("to die once", one life, one death, no repetitions or second chances), and the eschatological context of death ("after this comes judgment", death is not the end of personal existence but the passage into the divine judgment that follows it).

The universality of physical death is the most visible and the most democratic of all sin's consequences. Death does not discriminate by moral character: the righteous and the wicked, the generous and the miserly, the saint and the tyrant all die. Death does not discriminate by social status: the king and the slave, the wealthy and the poor, the powerful and the powerless all return to the dust from which the Creator formed the first man. Death does not discriminate by age: infants and centenarians, the young and the old all meet the same appointment. The universality of death is, in the precise biblical sense, the great equalizer, the one experience that no human achievement, no human connection, and no human wisdom can finally prevent or postpone indefinitely. And this specific universality is precisely the point that Paul makes in Romans 5:12's "death spread to all men, because all sinned": the universal spread of death testifies to the universal participation in the sin that earns death as its wages.

The singularity of death, "to die once", is Hebrews 9:27's specific contribution to the biblical doctrine of death's character. The single death is not a limitation or a deprivation; it is the theological affirmation that each human life is a unique, non-repeatable, genuinely consequential existence whose terminus is a genuine and final passage, not a temporary interruption in a cycle. The singularity of death is the precise counterpart to the singularity of life: each person lives once, and therefore each person's life has the irreversible significance of a once-for-all existence. The eschatological context, "after this comes judgment", gives the singular life and singular death their ultimate theological weight: the judgment that follows death is the divine assessment of the singular life that precedes it, and there is no second life in which to improve on the record of the first.

The pastoral significance of the universal appointment to die is precisely its inescapability. Every human being is moving toward an appointment she cannot cancel, postpone, or avoid. The medical advances, the healthy lifestyle, the safety precautions, the longevity-producing interventions that human ingenuity has devised can delay the appointment but cannot cancel it. And the theological significance of this inescapability is precisely its testimony: every human grave is a sermon preached in the language of consequence, proclaiming to every generation the specific theological reality that Genesis 3:19 announced and that Romans 5:12 explains: "for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The mortality that no human being escapes is the specific, visible, daily testimony to the invisible rebellion whose consequences this lesson traces, and every person who has ever stood at a graveside and felt the weight of the irreversible has encountered, whether or not she recognized it, the specific material evidence of the theological doctrine of the fall.

*"And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him."*

**Hebrews 9:27–28, NASB 1995**

## VI. The Hope of Reversal

*Christ's Resurrection, the Last Enemy, and the New Creation*

### A. The Last Enemy: 1 Corinthians 15:26

1 Corinthians 15:26's designation of physical death as "the last enemy that will be abolished" is one of the most theologically charged phrases in the entire Pauline corpus. Three elements of the designation deserve careful attention. First, death is named as an enemy, not a neutral natural phenomenon, not a transition to be embraced without grief or resistance, but the enemy of the human creature created in God's image for immortal fellowship with the Creator. The grief, the anguish, and the resistance to death that every human being feels in the face of her own mortality or the mortality of those she loves are not emotional overreactions to a benign natural process; they are the appropriate response to a genuine enemy that has invaded and conquered the human race through the specific mechanism of the fall.

Second, death is the last enemy, the final conquest in the sequence of Christ's eschatological subjugation of all powers hostile to God's kingdom. The "last" is significant: other enemies are being progressively overcome in the present age (verse 25: "for He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet"), but the final enemy, the enemy that Adam's transgression introduced and that has held dominion over the human race since, awaits the specific, decisive, eschatological act of the resurrection that will permanently abolish it. The present age is the age in which the work of conquest is underway; the final age will be the age in which the last enemy has been permanently defeated.

Third, death will be abolished (*katargeitai*), rendered inoperative, rendered powerless, made permanently ineffective as an enemy. The abolition is not the elimination of the concept but the destruction of its power: in the resurrection, death will no longer be able to do what it has been doing since Adam, claiming human bodies for the grave and separating souls from the embodied existence for which God created them. The resurrected body is the specific, material, permanent expression of the abolition of the last enemy: the body that death has claimed will be raised, transformed, glorified, and made permanently immune to death's further claim. The last enemy will have been rendered permanently inoperative in the lives of every person who is in Christ, and the creation that has been groaning under the futility and corruption of the fall will be liberated into the freedom of the glory of God's children (Romans 8:21).

### B. Christ's Resurrection as the Firstfruits

1 Corinthians 15:20–22 establishes Christ's resurrection as the specific, historical, eschatologically decisive event that begins the reversal of Adam's death-introducing transgression: "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive" (NASB 1995). The "first fruits" metaphor is the theological key: the first fruits of a harvest are the initial portion that represents and guarantees the full harvest to come. Christ's resurrection is not merely one more individual resurrection among many; it is the first fruits of the general resurrection of the dead, the initial portion that both represents the full harvest (all those who belong to Christ will be raised) and guarantees it (the risen Christ is the specific proof that the power of the resurrection is real, present, and operative in history).

The Adam-Christ parallelism of verses 21–22 establishes the precise Christological mechanism of the reversal: "since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead." The death that Adam introduced into the human story is addressed by the resurrection that the Second Adam introduces. The wages that the first Adam's sin had earned are paid, in full, by the Second Adam who bears them; and the first fruits of the resurrection that the Second Adam offers demonstrates that the wages have been fully paid and that the death whose wages sin had earned has been permanently conquered. The gospel's answer to physical death is therefore not merely the promise of a future immortality but the historical fact of a specific resurrection: Jesus Christ was raised from the dead on the third day, and His resurrection is the firstfruits guarantee that all who are in Him will also be raised.

The new creation that Christ's resurrection inaugurates is the comprehensive eschatological reversal of every dimension of Genesis 3's curse. Romans 8:21 anticipates the creation's liberation; Isaiah 65:17–25 describes the new heavens and new earth in which the thorns and thistles of the curse give way to the cypress and the myrtle; and Revelation 21:4's announcement, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away", is the comprehensive catalogue of the reversal: no more death (the last enemy abolished), no more mourning (the grief of loss permanently ended), no more crying (the anguish of suffering permanently past), no more pain (the specific, embodied, daily consequence of the fallen creation permanently removed). Every consequence of Genesis 3:14–19 that this lesson has traced, physical death, the groaning of creation, pain in childbearing, toil in work, suffering in a fallen world, is specifically named in the catalogue of "the first things" that have passed away when the new creation comes. The reversal is comprehensive because the fall was comprehensive, and the gospel's provision corresponds precisely to the fall's devastation.

*"But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive."*

**1 Corinthians 15:20–22, NASB 1995**

## Theological Terms and Definitions

| Term                                             | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
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| <b>Physical Death</b>                            | The separation of the soul from the body, resulting in the dissolution of the material aspect of human existence, that entered the world as a consequence of Adam's transgression and now characterizes the universal terminus of every human life. Romans 5:12 establishes the causal sequence: "through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned." Physical death is not a natural feature of the original creation (the tree of life in Genesis 2:9 suggests that immortality was available to unfallen humanity) but the judicial consequence of the fall, the divine sentence of Genesis 3:19 ("for you are dust, and to dust you shall return") executed upon the covenantal representative whose transgression brought death upon himself and all his posterity. Physical death is simultaneously a natural consequence of the spiritual death that severs the soul from the source of true life, a judicial sentence imposed by the divine Judge upon covenantal transgression, and an ongoing divine testimony in the fabric of human experience that sin has genuinely and catastrophically disrupted the created order. |
| <b>The Curse on Creation (Genesis 3:14–19)</b>   | The comprehensive divine judgment pronounced upon the creation in response to Adam's covenantal transgression, encompassing the serpent (Genesis 3:14–15), the woman (verse 16), the man (verses 17–19), and the ground itself (verse 17). The curse on the ground, "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you" (Genesis 3:17–18, NASB 1995), establishes that the fall did not merely affect the spiritual and moral dimensions of human existence but subjected the entire created order to the frustration, futility, and decay that Paul describes in Romans 8:20–22. The curse is not the permanent and final condition of the creation; it is the penultimate condition, the creation's present state between the fall and the final liberation that Romans 8:21 anticipates: "the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God."                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Thorns and Thistles</b>                       | The specific physical expression of the creation's curse on the man in Genesis 3:18, "Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you", representing the comprehensive frustration and resistance that the fallen creation now presents to human labor and cultural effort. Thorns and thistles appear throughout Scripture as the emblematic markers of the cursed creation: in Isaiah 34:13 as the sign of desolated judgment; in Isaiah 55:13 as the sign whose reversal marks the new creation ("Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up, and instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up"); in Hebrews 6:8 as the image of land bearing thorns and thistles that is close to being cursed. Most theologically significant, the crown of thorns placed on Jesus at the crucifixion (Matthew 27:29; Mark 15:17; John 19:2) is the precise and poignant image of the One who became a curse for us (Galatians 3:13) taking upon His own head the specific symbol of the creation's curse that Adam's sin had produced, so that the curse might be absorbed in His own person and the creation set free.                                                                                   |
| <b>The Groaning of Creation (Romans 8:20–22)</b> | Paul's description of the creation's present condition in Romans 8:20–22: the creation "was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." The creation's groaning is not merely a metaphor for the physical suffering observable in the natural world; it is the theological description of the creation's actual condition, the objective consequence of the fall that Paul is treating with the same doctrinal seriousness he gives to the human condition of suffering in the same passage. The creation did not choose its subjection to futility ("not willingly"); it was subjected by the God who judged Adam's transgression with cosmic scope. And the creation's liberation is inseparable from the liberation of God's children: the glorification of the sons of God (Romans 8:19) is the specific event that triggers the creation's own freedom.                                                             |

| Term                                                   | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
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| <b>The Universal Appointment to Die (Hebrews 9:27)</b> | The author of Hebrews' statement in Hebrews 9:27, "And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (NASB 1995), establishes three specific theological affirmations about physical death in the present age: (1) the universality of death ("for men", without exception of moral character, social status, religious devotion, or cultural achievement); (2) the singularity of death ("to die once", addressed against any doctrine of reincarnation or multiple lives, establishing that each person's earthly life is a single, non-repeatable existence); and (3) the eschatological context of death ("after this comes judgment", death is not the terminus of personal existence but the passage into the divine judgment that follows it). The parallel with Christ's once-for-all sacrifice in the surrounding context of Hebrews 9 establishes that Christ's dying once (verse 28) corresponds to and addresses the human appointment to die once (verse 27): the One who was appointed to offer the once-for-all sacrifice addresses the universal appointment to die by offering the atonement that deals with the sin whose wages is death. |
| <b>The Wages of Sin (Romans 6:23)</b>                  | Paul's formulation in Romans 6:23, "the wages of sin is death" (NASB 1995), uses the Greek word <i>opsonia</i> (wages, pay, soldier's stipend) to establish that death is not an accidental by-product of sin but its earned and deserved compensation. The metaphor of wages is legally and morally precise: wages are what a worker has earned by her labor; they are owed to her; their withholding would be an injustice. The wages of sin is death in the same sense: death is what sin earns, what sin has coming, what the divine law's penal justice requires as the specific, proportional, just consequence of the specific, comprehensive, law-violating character of sin. The contrast with the "free gift of God" ( <i>charisma</i> , the grace-gift) in the second half of the verse is deliberate and theologically exact: wages are earned; gifts are not. Death is what sin earns; eternal life is what grace gives. The contrast establishes that eternal life is not the wages of righteousness (as though the believer had earned it through consistent obedience) but the free, unmerited, sovereign gift of the God whose grace exceeds all human earning.             |
| <b>The Groaning of the Believer (Romans 8:23)</b>      | Paul's description of the regenerate believer's present experience in Romans 8:23: "And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body." The believer's groaning is distinguished from the creation's groaning (verses 22–23) by two features: the believer groans with the "first fruits of the Spirit" already possessed, and she groans specifically toward the redemption of the body that the resurrection will provide. The "first fruits" is the Spirit's present indwelling as the guarantee and earnest of the coming fullness; the groaning is the experience of the tension between the Spirit's first fruits already received and the full harvest not yet experienced. The groaning of Romans 8:23 is the groaning of Augustine's State 3 person who possesses genuine spiritual life but still inhabits a mortal body in a fallen world, who has the earnest of the coming redemption but not yet its fullness.                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Suffering and the Fallen World</b>                  | The biblical principle that not all suffering is the direct consequence of personal sin (John 9:1–3: "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him"), but all suffering is the consequence of living in a world ruined by sin and subject to the curse of Genesis 3:14–19 and the futility of Romans 8:20–22. This distinction is crucial for pastoral ministry: the pastor who reflexively traces every specific instance of suffering to the specific sin of the sufferer commits Job's comforters' error and adds theological injury to experiential pain. But the pastor who maintains the broader theological truth, that the world in which all suffering occurs is the fallen, cursed, groaning world of Genesis 3 and Romans 8, is the pastor who can provide genuine comfort: not the false comfort of explaining away the suffering but the genuine comfort of the hope of Romans 8:18–25, in which the present sufferings are placed within the eschatological framework of the creation's coming liberation and the believer's coming glorification.                                                      |

| Term                                        | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
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| <b>The Last Enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26)</b> | Paul's designation of physical death in 1 Corinthians 15:26 as "the last enemy that will be abolished." The designation is significant in several dimensions: (1) death is an enemy, not a neutral natural phenomenon, not a friend in disguise, not a benign stage in a cycle of existence, but the enemy of the human creature created in God's image for immortal fellowship with the Creator; (2) it is the last enemy, the final conquest in the sequence of Christ's subjugation of all enemies that Paul describes in verses 24–25; and (3) it will be abolished (katargeitai, rendered inoperative, rendered powerless), the future passive indicative of absolute certainty. The specific weapon by which the last enemy is defeated is the resurrection of Christ (verse 20–22) and the resurrection of all who belong to Christ (verse 23): death is abolished by the demonstration that the Creator's power to give life exceeds sin's power to take it, and that the final verdict on Adam's transgression is not the grave's permanent possession of those who fell in Adam but the resurrection's permanent liberation of those who are made alive in Christ.                                                                         |
| <b>The Hope of Reversal: New Creation</b>   | The eschatological reversal of all the consequences of the fall, physical death, suffering, and the curse on creation, through the new creation that Christ's resurrection inaugurates and that the consummation will complete. Isaiah 65:17–25 provides the Old Testament's most comprehensive vision of the reversal: "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things will not be remembered or come to mind" (verse 17). In the new creation, the curse on the ground is reversed: there will be no more thorns and thistles, no more toil under frustration, no more infant mortality or premature death. Romans 8:21 anticipates the creation's liberation from the slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of God's children. Revelation 21:4 provides the most pastoral statement of the reversal: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." The "first things" that have passed away are the consequences of the fall that the new creation abolishes; the "no longer" is the permanent eschatological elimination of what sin had introduced into the world. |

## Practical Application

### A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that physical death is not a neutral natural phenomenon but a judicial penalty, the specific, earned wages of sin, imposed by divine justice on the covenantal representative and his race, bearing ongoing testimony in every human grave that sin has genuinely and catastrophically disrupted the created order. This conviction changes the register in which death is heard and addressed: not the comfortable, therapeutic register of “death is a natural part of life” (which is technically true in the fallen world but is theologically insufficient), but the honest, gravitas-bearing register of “death is an enemy whose entry into the world was through sin and whose abolition required the resurrection of the Son of God.” The pastor who believes this will speak about death with the weight it deserves, comfort the bereaved with the gospel it requires, and hold the hope of resurrection with the theological seriousness that makes it genuinely good news rather than merely a pleasant sentiment.

We must also believe the crucial pastoral distinction that Jesus establishes in John 9:1–3: not all suffering is the direct result of personal sin. The pastor who reflexively assigns specific suffering to specific sin in the specific lives of the specific people under her care is making a theological error with enormous pastoral consequences, adding to the suffering of the afflicted the additional burden of misplaced guilt. The correct framework is the both-and of Romans 8:18–25: all suffering occurs within the comprehensive framework of the fallen creation’s groaning, and all suffering is simultaneously within the sovereign providential governance of the God who works all things together for good for those who love Him.

### B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

The doctrine of physical death, suffering, and the curse should produce in the believing heart a specific and sober grief at the reality of the world’s condition, not the despairing grief of those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13) but the honest, clear-eyed, eschatologically oriented grief of those who know exactly what is wrong with the world, exactly where the wrongness comes from, and exactly what the right response is. The groaning of Romans 8:23 is the appropriate emotional register for the person who understands the doctrine of this lesson: the groaning of one who already possesses the first fruits of the Spirit and who knows that the present embodied existence in a fallen world is not the existence it will be, and who therefore groans, honestly, specifically, eschatologically, toward the redemption of the body that the resurrection will provide.

Desire, above all, the hope of 1 Corinthians 15:20–22 as a live, motivating, daily reality: that Christ has been raised from the dead as the firstfruits, and that the harvest His resurrection guarantees includes the specific resurrection of your specific body from the specific grave to which the fall’s wages have appointed it. This hope is not wishful thinking but the eschatological confidence of those who have seen, in the empty tomb of the risen Christ, the specific, historical, materially confirmed evidence that the last enemy can be and has been defeated, and that the first fruits guarantee the harvest to come.

### C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read Genesis 3:14–19 as a systematic survey of the fall’s consequences, noting every specific element of the divine judgment and its specific target: the serpent (verses 14–15), the woman (verse 16), the man (verses 17–19), and the ground itself (verse 17). For each element of the curse, identify: (a) the specific dimension of the original creation that the curse has disrupted; (b) the specific experience of the fallen world that most directly corresponds to it in contemporary life; and (c) the specific element of the new creation’s reversal that addresses it. Then bring the whole survey to 1 Corinthians 15:20–22’s declaration of the firstfruits and ask: how does Christ’s resurrection specifically address each element of Genesis 3’s curse?
- Study Romans 8:18–25 as the New Testament’s most comprehensive theology of suffering in a fallen world. Identify: (a) the eschatological comparison of verse 18 (the present sufferings not worthy to be compared with the coming glory); (b) the creation’s condition in verses 20–22 (subjected to futility, not willingly, in hope; groaning and suffering together); (c) the believer’s condition in verse 23 (groaning with the first fruits, waiting for the redemption of the body); and (d) the eschatological confidence of verses 24–25 (hope for

what is not yet seen, waiting with perseverance). Then apply the framework to a specific current suffering in your own life or in the life of someone in your pastoral care. What is the specific form of the groaning? What is the specific first fruits already received? What is the specific coming redemption being awaited?

- Develop a pastoral theology of suffering based on the two-part framework of this lesson: (1) the general framework, all suffering occurs within the fallen creation of Genesis 3:14–19 and Romans 8:20–22; and (2) the specific pastoral distinction of John 9:1–3, not all suffering is the direct result of personal sin. Apply this framework to the three most common pastoral situations in which the theology of suffering is most urgently needed: (a) the person who is suffering and believes her suffering is the direct consequence of her specific sin; (b) the person who is suffering and has been told by well-meaning advisers that her suffering is the direct consequence of her specific sin; and (c) the person who is suffering and is angry at God because she cannot identify the specific sin that her suffering seems to be punishing. For each situation, articulate the specific pastoral correction or comfort that the framework suggests.
- Reflect on the crown of thorns (Matthew 27:29) as the symbolic concentration of this lesson’s entire doctrinal content. The thorns of Genesis 3:18 are the specific symbol of the creation’s curse; the crown of thorns on the head of the Second Adam is the specific symbol of the curse borne by the Redeemer; and Galatians 3:13’s declaration, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us”, is the specific theological interpretation of the symbol. Write a brief meditation (150–250 words) on the crown of thorns as the point where the curse of Genesis 3:18 and the redemption of Galatians 3:13 intersect. What does the crown of thorns reveal about the nature of the atonement as a bearing of the creation’s specific curse? And what does it reveal about the character of the Redeemer who willingly wore it?
- Meditate on Revelation 21:1–5 as the eschatological reversal of every consequence of the fall that this lesson has traced. Identify each specific element of the reversal: the new heavens and new earth (the reversal of the creation’s subjection to futility); no more sea (the traditional biblical symbol of chaos and separation); the new Jerusalem coming down from God (the restoration of the covenantal fellowship between Creator and creation); no more death, mourning, crying, or pain (the reversal of Genesis 3:14–19’s specific curses); the first things have passed away (the comprehensive eschatological language for the end of the fall’s consequences). Then ask: how does this vision of the new creation inform your own daily engagement with the consequences of the fall that you are currently experiencing? Does the specific, comprehensive, eschatologically certain reversal of Revelation 21 shape the way you experience the groaning of Romans 8:23, not as evidence that the fall has permanent dominion but as the appropriate groaning of one who knows the reversal is coming and who waits for it with perseverance?

**Key Texts:** *Romans 5:12; 6:23; 8:18–25; Genesis 3:14–19; 1 Corinthians 15:20–26; Hebrews 9:27–28; John 9:1–3; Galatians 3:13; Isaiah 55:13; 65:17–25; Revelation 21:1–5*

## Study and Discussion Questions

### Opening Question

1. Before studying this lesson, how would you have described the relationship between sin and physical death? Did you tend to think of physical death as a natural feature of the original creation that God warned Adam about, or as a judicial penalty introduced into a creation that would otherwise have known immortality? How does the causal sequence of Romans 5:12, sin enters, death enters through sin, death spreads to all, alter, confirm, or nuance your prior understanding? And what is the most practically significant pastoral implication of treating physical death as a judicial penalty rather than as a natural phenomenon?

### Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read Romans 5:12–21 carefully, attending to the Adam-Christ parallel that Paul develops across the passage. What is the specific structural parallel Paul draws between Adam's transgression and Christ's righteous act? In verse 12, what is the specific causal sequence Paul establishes (sin enters, death enters through sin, death spreads to all)? In verse 18, how does the second clause ("through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men") correspond to the first ("through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men")? And what does the comprehensiveness of the Adam-Christ parallel suggest about the scope of Christ's work of reversal, does it address merely the spiritual dimension of the fall's consequences or the full range of them?
3. Read Genesis 3:14–19 carefully and identify every specific element of the divine curse and its specific target. What is the specific structure of the curse on the ground in verse 17, is the ground cursed permanently or is there a specific condition attached ("because of you")? What does the specific parallel between the woman's "pain in childbirth" (verse 16) and the man's "toil" in work (verses 17–19), both using the same Hebrew word *itsabon*, reveal about the comprehensive, gender-specific, embodied character of the fall's consequences? And how does Genesis 3:19b ("for you are dust, and to dust you shall return") establish the judicial character of physical death, is it presented as a natural inevitability or as a judicial sentence?
4. Read Romans 8:18–25 and trace Paul's argument from the eschatological comparison of verse 18 through the creation's groaning of verses 20–22 to the believer's groaning of verse 23. What is the specific character of the "futility" (*mataiotes*) to which the creation was subjected in verse 20, what does the word suggest about the character of the creation's present condition? What does the phrase "not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it" (verse 20) establish about the relationship between the creation's subjection and the human covenantal transgression? And what does the parallel between the creation's groaning (verse 22) and the believer's groaning (verse 23) reveal about the solidarity between the human creature and the creation in both the experience of the fall's consequences and the expectation of the eschatological reversal?
5. Read 1 Corinthians 15:20–26 and identify the specific elements of Paul's argument for the resurrection as the reversal of death. What is the "first fruits" metaphor in verse 20 and what does it establish about the relationship between Christ's resurrection and the general resurrection of the dead? What is the specific Adam-Christ parallel in verses 21–22 ("since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead")? And what is the specific character of the "abolition" of death in verse 26, does the Greek *katargeitai* suggest the elimination of death or the rendering of it permanently inoperative?
6. Read John 9:1–3 and identify the specific theological question the disciples are asking and Jesus' specific answer. What theological assumption underlies the disciples' question ("who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind")? How does Jesus' answer ("It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him") both correct the assumption and provide a positive theological framework for understanding the blind man's suffering? Does Jesus' answer eliminate the connection between sin and suffering entirely, or does it establish a more nuanced account of the relationship between specific suffering and specific sin?

### **Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)**

7. The lesson argues that physical death is a judicial penalty rather than a natural feature of the original creation, grounding this claim in the causal sequence of Romans 5:12 and the divine warning of Genesis 2:17. Evaluate this claim. What is the relationship between the tree of life in Genesis 2:9 and the question of whether Adam would have been immortal apart from sin? Does the tree of life's presence in the garden imply that immortality was available to unfallen humanity, or merely that the tree was a provision for maintaining physical life that might have been necessary regardless of the fall? And what are the theological implications of treating physical death as a judicial penalty rather than as a natural phenomenon for the understanding of medical intervention, hospice care, and the appropriate Christian posture toward death?
8. The lesson presents the comprehensive scope of Genesis 3's curse, extending to the serpent, the woman, the man, and the ground, as the expression of the covenantal nature of Adam's representative relationship to the creation. Evaluate this claim. Is the covenantal framing of the curse's scope explicitly supported by the Genesis text, or is it a theological inference from the structure of the curse and from Paul's treatment of the creation's subjection in Romans 8:20–22? What specific textual evidence supports the reading that Adam's transgression subjected the entire created order rather than merely affecting Adam and Eve individually?
9. The lesson uses the crown of thorns as a symbolic concentration of the doctrine of Christ bearing the curse of Genesis 3:18. Evaluate the exegetical and theological warrant for this symbolic reading. Does the New Testament itself explicitly connect the crown of thorns with Genesis 3:18's thorns, or is the connection a theological inference from the typological pattern? How does Galatians 3:13 ("Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us") illuminate the connection? And is the symbolic reading of the crown of thorns a homiletically legitimate enrichment of the passion narrative or a case of reading more into the text than the authors intended?
10. The lesson presents Romans 8:18's comparison, "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us", as the specific eschatological framework that gives Paul's theology of suffering its pastoral force. Evaluate this framework. Does the eschatological comparison actually comfort those who are suffering, or does it risk trivializing their present suffering by making it seem insignificant by comparison with the coming glory? Is there a way to affirm both the genuine weight of present suffering (not minimizing it) and the incomparably greater weight of the coming glory (not trivializing the present by comparison) that maintains the pastoral integrity of both affirmations?
11. The lesson concludes with the claim that the gospel's provision for the fall's consequences is as comprehensive as the fall itself: spiritual death answered by regeneration, physical death answered by resurrection, the groaning of creation answered by the new creation of Revelation 21. Evaluate the claim that the reversal is genuinely comprehensive. Does the new creation of Revelation 21 explicitly reverse every element of Genesis 3's curse, or are there elements of the curse that Revelation 21 does not explicitly address? And is the comprehensiveness of the reversal a hermeneutically sound reading of the eschatological texts, or is it a theological systematization that imports more than the individual texts explicitly teach?

### **Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)**

12. The lesson argues that physical death must be understood as a judicial penalty rather than a neutral natural phenomenon, and that this understanding should change the register in which death is addressed in pastoral ministry. Apply this to a specific pastoral situation you are currently facing or anticipate facing: how would you address the death of a loved one with a grieving parishioner in a way that takes seriously both the genuine grief of the loss (death is the enemy, the genuine consequence of sin, not to be minimized or explained away) and the genuine hope of the resurrection (death is the last enemy, but it has been defeated by the One who rose from the dead as the firstfruits)? What specific texts would you bring? What specific theological framework would you offer? And what would you avoid saying that might trivialize the grief or the hope?

13. The lesson identifies the reflexive assignment of specific suffering to specific personal sin as one of the most harmful pastoral errors, pointing to Jesus' correction in John 9:1–3. Assess your own pastoral instincts in this area. Do you tend to look for the specific sin behind specific suffering in the lives of those you counsel? If a parishioner comes to you with a significant and unexpected illness, a financial disaster, or a painful relational breakdown, is your first interpretive instinct to look for the specific sin that might have produced it? If so, how would the distinction Jesus draws in John 9, and the broader framework of Romans 8:18–25, correct and redirect that instinct toward the more theologically honest and pastorally compassionate engagement that these texts require?
14. Romans 8:23's description of the believer's groaning, groaning with the first fruits of the Spirit already received, waiting eagerly for the redemption of the body, is one of the most honest accounts of the emotional texture of genuine Christian existence in all of Paul's letters. Does this description characterize your own experience of the Christian life? Do you groan for the redemption of the body with the specific, eschatologically oriented longing that Paul describes, or has the hope of physical resurrection become a theological proposition affirmed in the creed but not a live, motivating, groaning reality in your daily experience? What specific spiritual practices or theological disciplines would make the hope of bodily resurrection more live, more motivating, and more genuinely comforting in the face of the specific physical suffering and mortality that you and those in your care are currently experiencing?
15. The doctrine of the creation's groaning (Romans 8:20–22) establishes that the creation itself participates in the consequences of the fall and the hope of eschatological reversal. Apply this doctrine to the contemporary Christian engagement with environmental and ecological concerns. Does the doctrine of the creation's groaning and its promised liberation provide a theological basis for Christian care for the created order? Is the Christian's responsibility for the creation the same as, or different from, the responsibility that the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 established before the fall? And how does the specific eschatological framework of Romans 8:21, the creation's liberation tied to the glorification of God's children, shape the character and the limits of a distinctively Christian ecology?
16. The lesson concludes with Revelation 21:4's comprehensive catalogue of the reversal: no more death, no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain. How fully does this vision function as a live source of hope and comfort in your own spiritual life? Is the new creation of Revelation 21 a real, anticipated, longed-for destination that shapes your present experience of suffering and mortality, or has it become a distant theological horizon that has little motivating traction in the daily realities of your life? What would it mean, specifically and practically, to live with the daily awareness that the world you are currently inhabiting, with its graves and its thorns and its pain and its futility, is not the world that the God who is "making all things new" (Revelation 21:5) is bringing into being, and that the firstfruits of that new creation have already appeared in the empty tomb of the risen Christ?

## **Prayer Focus**

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Open this lesson's time of prayer by reading Genesis 3:17–19 slowly, not as a remote historical text but as the specific divine word that names the world you have been living in since the day you were born: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Allow each specific element of the curse to land with its full weight: the thorns and thistles of every frustration in work, every effort that has yielded less than it cost, every labor that the resisting creation has refused to reward proportionally. The sweat of the face that accompanies every significant human endeavor in a world that no longer yields its abundance easily. And the "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" that stands at the end of every human life, including yours, as the specific divine sentence that sin's wages have earned and that no human achievement or human wisdom can permanently forestall. This is the world. This is the consequence. This is what is wrong.

Then read Romans 8:18–25 as the New Testament's specific, gospel-grounded, eschatologically oriented word about the world that Genesis 3 has described. Read it as Paul's specific response to the specific reality of Genesis 3: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (verse 18). The sufferings are real; their reality is not denied or minimized; they are the specific suffering of the creation that Genesis 3 has cursed. But they are not the last word; they are the penultimate word of a groaning creation that is groaning toward the liberation of verse 21. Pray in the groaning register that Paul describes: not the groaning of despair (which has no hope) but the groaning of the person who already has the first fruits of the Spirit (verse 23) and who groans toward the full harvest that the first fruits guarantee. Name the specific thorns and thistles of your own present experience, the specific frustrations, the specific sufferings, the specific mortality that you carry, and bring them to God as the honest groanings of a person who knows exactly what is wrong and exactly where the wrongness comes from, and who waits with perseverance (verse 25) for the redemption that the risen Christ has guaranteed.

Pray together in three specific directions. First, for those in your congregation who are experiencing the most acute expressions of the fall's physical and material consequences: the seriously ill, the bereaved, the unemployed, the suffering. Pray for each one with the specific theology of Romans 8:18–25 in mind: that the Spirit who is already the first fruits of their coming glory would make that glory a live, motivating, comforting reality in the midst of the present groaning; that the God who subjected the creation to futility in hope would make that hope present and powerful in their specific experience; and that the eschatological certainty of the reversal would give them the perseverance that verse 25 describes: "if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it." Second, for those who are suffering and have been told that their suffering is the direct consequence of their specific sin, who are bearing the additional burden of Job's comforters' theological error alongside the burden of the suffering itself. Pray for their liberation from the false guilt and for the specific comfort of John 9:1–3's correction: that their suffering is not necessarily the punishment of their personal sin but the condition of living in the fallen world, within the sovereign governance of the God who is able to display His works in the midst of it. Third, for the entire creation groaning toward its liberation: a prayer that is as theologically unusual as it is biblically mandated. Pray for the world, not merely for human beings within it but for the creation itself, the groaning of which Romans 8:22 describes with the language of childbirth's anticipation. Pray that the One who is making all things new (Revelation 21:5) would hasten the day of the creation's liberation, and that the church, whose glorification is the specific trigger of the creation's freedom (Romans 8:19–21), would live with the eager, groaning, eschatologically oriented anticipation that the first fruits guarantee and the creation itself is displaying.

Close with 1 Corinthians 15:20–22 and Revelation 21:4–5 as the doxological frame for the entire theology of physical death, suffering, and the curse that this lesson has traced. "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep." The firstfruits are in: the harvest is guaranteed; the last enemy has been defeated in its decisive engagement; and the full abolition of verse 26 awaits only the consummation that the firstfruits' resurrection has made certain. "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer

be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” The first things that will have passed away are the specific things this lesson has named: physical death, the groaning of the cursed creation, the pain of childbearing, the toil under thorns and thistles, the universal appointment to die. They will have passed away, permanently and completely, because the God who is making all things new has borne their curse, defeated their power, and guaranteed their reversal in the specific resurrection of the One who wore their symbol on His royal brow at Calvary. To that God, who wipes the tears and abolishes the death and ends the pain, to Him be the glory, before all time and now and forever. Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

*“And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. And He who sits on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’”*

**Revelation 21:4–5, NASB 1995**

**Key Texts:** Romans 5:12–21; 6:23; 8:18–25; Genesis 3:14–19; 1 Corinthians 15:20–26; Hebrews 9:27–28; John 9:1–3; Galatians 3:13; Isaiah 55:13; 65:17–25; Revelation 21:1–5

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## ***Soli Deo Gloria***

*To God Alone Be the Glory*

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## **FAITHFUL TO THE WORD**

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