

Old Testament Lesson—Isaiah 44:6-8

Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be. Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one.

New Testament Lesson—Romans 8:12-25

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Does experience matter?

In other words, are you more likely to listen to someone with some hours under their belt—someone with years of practice—or would you, instead, listen to a total novice? A veteran or a newbie? Pro or greenie?

In almost every case (I would assume), the words of someone with more experience will carry more weight.

I mean...Would you take gardening advice from me? Want some cooking tips from Pastor Johnny? Lord, I hope not...I've no business giving out any such advice!

I mean...if my goal is to succeed in something, then I'm probably going to seek some pro tips from those who've been successful before. I do so because I value their experience. Right? They've been where I want to go.

If you have a lot of practice and experience in a certain area, then you've almost certainly gained a lot of knowledge in that area. And so those of us with little to no experience can benefit from the knowledge you've built up.

Well...The author of Romans was someone with a ton of knowledge—knowledge built up over a lifetime of community building and travelling the world. Paul was a Pharisee, an Apostle of Christ Jesus, a Roman citizen, a tentmaker for hire, expert theologian, church planter, and that's just the top of the list.

Of course, he was also a brilliant writer. It's no coincidence that he wrote half the New Testament. The letter to the Romans is itself a masterpiece of literature and rhetoric (in my humble opinion). In Romans, Paul crafts what many consider to be his magnum opus.

It is Paul's longest, most comprehensive summary of what he believes about God and Christ and the world to come. It is his most sophisticated—most developed theological statement. It's a journey through his perspective on sin and salvation.

But more importantly, perhaps, these are the words of a pastor trying to comfort a congregation that's going through a really, really, hard time. You see: Christians in Rome were under attack in those days. They were being persecuted—couldn't worship out in the open.

If they wanted to worship together, they had to do it in secret—had to meet in secret—pray in secret—preach in secret. After all, refusing to worship the Emperor was illegal. That could get you killed. And, in fact, it did—over and over. This was a time that produced countless Christian martyrs—people who would rather die than deny their faith in Jesus—people who'd rather be publicly executed than proclaim Caesar as their Lord.

With Romans, Paul wants to give this frightened, hurting church community something concrete to hold onto—some real comfort to soothe their troubled spirits.

To be honest, it's really the height of irony that it's Paul (formerly called Saul) who's the one offering these words to persecuted Christians—Paul, a former persecutor of Christians—Paul, with more than a little blood on his hands—Paul, with a body count.

I wouldn't be surprised if he, at least in part, considered these pastoral efforts a kind of penance for the lives he tore apart in a previous life—his ministry to Rome and other places a way of repenting from his sins.

After all, he was a knowledgeable persecutor. He'd gained a lot of experience rounding up those who believed in Jesus and putting them in prison. He was a pro. And I'm sure there was a time when he would've been delighted to share some pro tips and best practices.

If you wanted advice on the basics of terrorizing, Paul could've been your guy—like an ancient how-to manual: "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Persecution" or "Christian Oppression for Dummies."

Even after Paul came to know and believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior, he would've been an excellent resource on many things. And yes: People came to him—trusted him because of his wealth of knowledge and experience.

Of course, even Paul, the great Apostle to the Gentiles, didn't know everything. No one can. No one can encounter all there is to know. No one can experience all there is to do.

For example, scholars are pretty darn confident that Paul never got married—never became a husband. Along the same lines, we can be fairly certain he didn't have children—never became a father.

No one can prove it, of course. However, it would've been incredibly unlikely for Paul to have a family and not mention them once in any of his letters.

We can be relatively sure that Paul had about zero experience with spousal relations or being in the family way.

So...here's the big question, then: Would Paul be someone you come to for marriage advice? How about parenting advice? Perhaps you and your partner have hit a rocky patch—maybe due to financial difficulties or the stress brought on by the birth of a child...

Is Paul your guy? Is he a trusted resource? What do you think?

Well, if you're somewhat familiar with the letters of Paul, then you know he's got a lot to say about marriage and relationships. God knows he didn't let a total lack of personal experience stop him from sharing his thoughts on ancient family systems and intimacy and how to honor God through it all.

I mean...he speaks like he's been there before. But we know he hasn't. And I'd wager being the "father" of many churches is a far cry being a father to flesh and blood human beings. I'm sure being "married" to his calling isn't the same as becoming a husband.

But, you know, I'm inclined to forgive Paul for all that. He was a pastor, after all. And I know firsthand how often pastors are approached and asked to opine on things we've no experience with. People want to know where and how God is active in the world. I get that. And we do our best to help discern how the Spirit is moving in every aspect of their lives—including, yes, in their relationships, marriages, and parental roles.

And yet...as much as I love Paul and want to let him off the hook, it's hard to do that in this case with Romans 8. You see: Paul writes as if he knows what it's like to deliver a child—speaking like it's part of his lived experience—like he knows that pain...Curiouser and curiouser...

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

That's what he says. So, this isn't even a singular delivery we're talking about—not just one person giving birth. This is giving birth on a cosmic scale. This is God's "deliverance" seen in a whole new light! This is the pain and struggle of childbirth reverberating all across the created order—throughout the heavens and the earth.

Though he, of course, has no firsthand knowledge of this kind of labor, Paul views that struggle as a journey toward the miraculous—toward the undisputable evidence of God's grace and mercy and love.

There will be blood, sweat, and tears. And, when God's glory is revealed, that blood will be Jesus' blood poured out for humanity and no longer the blood of martyrs.

When Christ returns as promised, that sweat will no longer be the result of worshipping in secret and struggling against every injustice; but it will be from standing in the presence of our Redeemer.

And after that final push is over, those tears will no longer be tears of mourning, but the tears that flow joyfully and like a firehose when we first behold God's new and perfect creation—a world built upon compassion and illuminated by the light of Christ.

Friends: We can trust in the promises of God because we have so much experience with them. We've so much experience—witnessing those promises being fulfilled—being kept over and over again.

We've experienced God's promises fulfilled in Creation, through the words of prophets, through Christmas and Easter and Pentecost, in our baptism, and every time we come to the Lord's Table—to name just a few. This is the good news of the gospel.

Yes, the world today (as in Paul's day) groans in labor pains. As I witness the persecution of the most vulnerable and the blaming of the oppressed for their own oppression...as I behold

the terror so many face and the devaluing of truth and empathy, we cry out loud for God to answer the prayers of God's children.

And you see: that's what we don't realize sometimes. God already has answered those desperate prayers. We are the hands and feet of Christ, after all. As Paul says here, we already have the first fruits of the Spirit.

We need not and must not accept the injustices of our day. We've uprooted the tyrannical before. We've pushed back on empire before. We have the experience. We know how to do this.

In fact, we have so much more experience than Paul did—two millennia of human history—two millennia of God-with-us. We know what works.

We can ease the suffering.

And so as we work to make Christ's return a joyful homecoming, I pray that we'll trust our own experience—that God's promises are set in stone—that the Kingdom is coming...

...that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Amen.