Advent 2026: Hope

Leader's Guide - Romans 8:18–25

THE AIM AND THE OPENING CONVERSATION

Main truth: Christian hope rests on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Although believers and creation still groan, God has promised bodily resurrection and the renewal of his creation.

Aim for the golfers: Help them understand that Christian hope does not deny suffering. It rests on what God has already done in Jesus and expresses itself through patient endurance and practical love.

A Word of Encouragement

You do not need to be a theological expert to lead this discussion. Your task is to help the group notice what Paul says, understand why it matters, and consider how to respond.

Some participants may be exploring Christianity. Others may have followed Jesus for decades. Some may be carrying grief they have never mentioned. Make room for honest questions without putting anyone on the spot.

Avoid rushing from someone's pain to an explanation. Paul gives us permission to acknowledge suffering before he helps us see beyond it. Sometimes the most faithful response is simply, "That sounds very hard. Thank you for telling us."

Keep returning to this distinction: Christian hope is not confidence that our circumstances will improve soon. It is confidence that the risen Jesus will complete what he has begun.

Opening Golf Question

"Have you ever returned to a familiar course after a hurricane, flood, drought, or major renovation? What was hardest to see, and what gave you confidence that the course could recover?"

Allow several people to respond. If no one has experienced that situation, ask:

"Have you ever thought a course—or your own golf game—was beyond repair? What changed your mind?"

Listen for the difference between wishing for a good outcome and having a reason to expect one.

Connect the Conversation to the Devotional

The damaged course represents a world we recognize; something good has been broken. The golfer remembers what belonged there and longs to see it restored.

The superintendent's work provides a limited picture of hope. Visible progress suggests that the devastation is not the end of the story.

But make the distinction clear: a superintendent can promise only what skill, resources, and circumstances allow. God's promise rests on his power and on the resurrection of his Son.

Transition: "Romans 8 does not ask us to pretend the damage is minor. It tells us why the damage will not have the final word."

READ THE PASSAGE AND FIND THE STORY

Scripture Reading

Read Romans 8:18–25. Encourage everyone to follow along in a Bible.

Consider asking: "What words or phrases stand out to you? What does Paul say about our present experience, and what does he say about our future?" Wait for some responses.

The Context (Context always matters)

Earlier in Romans 8, Paul explains that those who belong to Jesus are no longer under condemnation. They have received the Holy Spirit and have been welcomed into God's family.

Yet belonging to God does ***not*** remove suffering from their present lives. In verse 17, Paul connects sharing in Christ's sufferings with sharing in his glory. The passage we are discussing explains how present suffering fits within that promised future.

Paul is not writing as someone unfamiliar with hardship. Nor is he telling suffering people that their pain does not matter. He is placing real suffering beside the glory God has promised.

Three Movements to Notice

Creation is groaning. The world is not functioning as it should. Decay, disaster, disease, and death mark a creation that was made good.

Believers are groaning. Having the Holy Spirit does not make Christians immune to grief, bodily weakness, disappointment, or death.

God's people are waiting in hope. Their future includes the redemption of their bodies and freedom from the corruption that now touches creation.

Explain These Terms Simply

“Futility” describes a creation frustrated in its purpose. Things do not flourish as they were made to flourish.

“Bondage to corruption” refers to creation’s slavery to decay. Living things weaken and die; what is beautiful deteriorates.

“Firstfruits” means the first portion of a harvest. The Spirit’s presence is the beginning of what God has promised, not the fullness of everything believers will receive.

“Redemption of our bodies” means that salvation includes our physical existence. Christian hope is not merely that our souls survive death. It includes resurrection.

An Important Clarification About Adoption

Paul says believers have already received the Spirit of adoption in Romans 8:15, yet they still await adoption in verse 23. He is not contradicting himself.

They already belong to God’s family. They await the full, public enjoyment of that belonging, including resurrected bodies.

Ask: “What difference does it make that God promises to redeem our bodies rather than simply help us escape them?”

Transition: “Before Paul tells us how to wait, he helps us understand why the world—and our own hearts—groan.”

THE DAMAGE IS REAL

Main Discussion Question

“Why is it important that Paul says both creation and Christians groan?”

Christianity does not require us to describe a broken world as though it were already whole. We can grieve disease, death, injustice, loneliness, and loss without denying God’s goodness.

A believer may trust God deeply and still feel sorrow deeply.

Connect to the Golf Illustration

The golfer does not walk past the uprooted trees and announce that everything is fine. The damage is unmistakable.

Likewise, hope does not begin by minimizing what someone has lost. It begins by telling the truth about the damage while looking toward God’s promise.

Ask: “What are some ways we pressure people to act as though everything is fine?”

“If a friend admitted that they were struggling, what response would make it easier for them to keep talking?”

“What response might cause them to shut down?”

The Biblical Background

Genesis 3 connects human rebellion with death, painful labor, and a cursed ground. Romans 8 describes creation as sharing in the consequences of humanity’s fall.

The world’s brokenness is not evidence that God originally made a defective creation. It is evidence that the world is no longer as it should be.

However, do not move from that broad truth to the claim that a particular illness, storm, or loss is punishment for a particular person’s sin. Jesus challenges simplistic connections between personal suffering and personal guilt in John 9:1–3.

If Someone Asks, “Does Suffering Mean My Faith Is Weak?”

You might say: “Paul specifically says that people who have the Holy Spirit still groan. Faith does not mean you stop hurting. It means you have someone to trust while you hurt.”

Trust and grief can exist together. Jesus himself wept at the tomb of Lazarus.

If Someone Begins Sharing a Painful Experience

Do not turn that person into an illustration or ask the group to solve the problem.

Leader’s caution: Avoid statements such as “Everything happens for a reason” when they function to end the conversation. God’s sovereignty is a foundation for patient care, not a shortcut around compassion.

Transition: “Paul does not leave us with an honest diagnosis alone. He gives us a reason to believe that suffering is not the end.”

THE FUTURE HAS ALREADY BEGUN

Main Discussion Question

“What makes Christian hope different from simply wanting things to get better?”

The central answer is the resurrection of Jesus.

Christian hope is not based on the strength of our feelings or our ability to imagine a better future. It rests on an event Christians confess already happened— God raised Jesus from the dead.

For supporting texts: Read 1 Peter 1:3–5 and 1 Corinthians 15:20–23.

Explain “The Future Has Already Begun”

This does not mean that the world has already been renewed or that Christians should already be free from suffering.

It means that Jesus has already entered the resurrection life his people will one day share. His resurrection is not an isolated exception with no connection to anyone else. He is the firstfruits of those who belong to him.

In Romans 8, the Spirit is described as the firstfruits. In 1 Corinthians 15, Christ is called the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. These are related pictures: Christ’s resurrection begins the promised harvest, and the Spirit gives believers a present share in the life God will bring to completion.

Follow-Up Questions

“Why does it matter that Jesus rose bodily rather than merely living on in his followers’ memories?”

“What changes when our hope rests on God’s action rather than our own optimism?”

“Where do you feel the tension between already belonging to Christ and not yet experiencing everything he has promised?”

Already—and Not Yet

A Christian is already forgiven, but still struggles with sin.

A Christian already belongs to God’s family, but still awaits bodily resurrection.

A Christian already has the Holy Spirit, but still groans.

The unfinished character of our experience does not mean God has abandoned his work. It means we are living between Christ’s resurrection and his return.

If Someone Asks, “Why Doesn’t God Finish Everything Now?”

You might say: “Scripture tells us that Christ will return, but it does not give us a date or explain every aspect of God’s timing. It calls us to trust his promise and recognizes that waiting is difficult.”

Do not claim to know why God has allowed a particular person’s suffering to continue.

Keep the Gospel Clear

This hope is received through faith in Jesus, not by optimism, moral improvement, or religious effort. The Savior who rose is the Savior who died for sinners.

Transition: "Because this hope is grounded in Christ, we can acknowledge what hurts without surrendering to despair."

GOD WILL REDEEM, NOT DISCARD

Main Discussion Question

"What does this passage teach us about how God views the physical world and our bodies?"

Paul speaks of creation being set free and our bodies being redeemed. God does not treat his creation as a failed project to be abandoned.

Our bodies matter. The world matters. What God made good will not remain enslaved to decay forever.

Connect to Everyday Life

Golf reminds us how physical our lives are: walking a fairway, feeling the wind, swinging a club, and enjoying the company of friends.

We also discover our limitations through our bodies. Distance disappears. Joints hurt. Recovery takes longer. Eventually, losses reach much deeper than a golf score.

The promise of bodily resurrection tells us that physical weakness and death do not define the final future of those who belong to Christ.

Follow-Up Questions

"How might bodily resurrection speak to someone living with illness, disability, or the limitations of aging?"

"How does the promise of creation's renewal affect the way we treat the world now?"

"What is the difference between looking forward to renewal and expecting God to recreate our favorite chapter of the past?"

Avoid Promising More Than the Passage Promises

Do not promise that the new creation will reproduce every familiar circumstance exactly as we remember it. Scripture does not tell us whether we will play our favorite course again or recover every earthly role and possession.

It promises something greater: life with Christ, freedom from corruption, and bodies redeemed from death.

*******Likewise, do not offer an unconditional assurance that everyone will share this future regardless of their relationship to Jesus. The devotional's promise is hope in Christ, not a general prediction that every person's story ends the same way.***

If Someone Asks, "Does Everyone Receive This Hope?"

You might say: "The gospel invites everyone to come to Jesus. But the promise of sharing his resurrection life belongs to those who belong to him. We receive him by faith, not by earning our place."

If Someone Asks, "Can This Hope Become an Excuse to Ignore Today's Problems?"

You might say: "It can be misused that way, but that is not where the gospel leads. Because God cares about bodies and creation, we should care about suffering people and the world he made."

Future hope gives present love a foundation. We do not have to fix everything to do something meaningful.

Transition: "The devotional ends with a simple visit. Let's consider why such an ordinary act can express such an extraordinary hope."

PUTTING HOPE INTO PRACTICE

Return to the Friend Who No Longer Plays

Ask: "What might keep someone who once played every Saturday from leaving home or staying connected?"

Possibilities: Illness, caregiving, depression, grief, limited mobility, and financial pressures may all affect someone's ability to participate.

Then ask: "What could a visit communicate that a quick 'We miss you' might not?"

A visit can say, "You still matter. You have not been forgotten. Our friendship is larger than what you can do on a golf course."