

PRESENT SUFFERING AND FUTURE GLORY

“PRESENT SUFFERING VERSUS FUTURE GLORY”

Romans 8:18-30

Theme: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (8:18)

Introduction

An attitude of thanksgiving and unspeakable joy is exceptionally difficult to maintain while living in a fallen world. When God told Adam that he would painfully work the ground to feed himself (Genesis 1:17-19) one would think this applied to all of humanity on an equal basis. In Psalms 73 Asaph wrestled with God’s treatment of both good and evil people. He wondered why those with callous hearts, full of evil imaginations and inclinations would be blessed with an easy life of riches while those who obey God’s commands seem to struggle just to feed themselves? Living in this fallen world one soon comes to realize that God allows the rain to fall on the righteous and unrighteous (Matthew 5:45) and chance often happens to everyone (Ecclesiastes 9:11). We as Christians often cry out to God and ask: Lord how can you expect we who are suffering to exist in a fallen world to be filled with inexpressible joy (1 Peter 1:8)? How are we to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving (Psalms 107:22) when we ourselves are being persecuted and barely able to feed ourselves?

Point 1: Creation and Frustration

Creation. After God had created the heavens and the earth in six days He looked upon Creation and said “it was very good.” (Genesis 1:31). This was a world in which there was no violence for both man and animals only ate plants and not flesh (Genesis 1:29-30). Adam and Eve’s only chore was to tend a garden that grew on its own (Genesis 2:15-19). This was also a world without sin. Without the hindrance of guilt or shame (2:25) nothing hindered them from physically walking and talking with God (Genesis 3:8) in His paradise.

Frustration. Creation was not subjected to frustration by its own choice but by God’s choice as a response to our sin (Genesis 3:17-18). We are the ones who chose to reject God’s utopia in which Jesus walked and talked with us in the garden. We are the ones who chose to embrace evil and allow it to take us into bondage (Romans 6:16). Creation has suffered immensely ever since for our sins. We are the ones who go to war, pollute the atmosphere, mistreat the animals while at the same time God is one who creates all sorts of natural disasters that ravage the lands as a means to discipline us. Frustration according to James Edwards means “emptiness,” “futility,” or “absurdity.” For the guiltless creation all things are truly meaningless (Ecc. 1:2) as it patiently waits for the children of God to be brought into glory.

Promise. Creation has been given the promise in verse 21 of liberation from bondage when God restores humanity to the likeness of His Son. Verse 22 “groaning in pains of childbirth” means that suffering while we often think is only limited to us individually is actually

experienced by all things God created. Paul here gives us hope in two different ways. First, the metaphor “pains of childbirth” was a metaphor often used to predict the coming of the Messianic kingdom (Matt. 24:8, Mark 13:8, Rev 12:2). Second, like a woman pregnant there is that wonderful promise of new life that is about to come into existence. “We know” that this new life will come not because we can see signs of this earth healing but see signs of its pain. The final cry of this universe will not be its destruction but its rebirth (2 Peter 3:7-13, Rev 21:1,5; Colossians 1:20). Creation’s will be freed of its “slavery of corruption” when the effect of sin is no more.¹

Point 2: Humanity Waiting for the Final Redemption

Frustration. Paul begins in verse 23 by saying “not only so” to indicate that we share in the same frustration as creation. “Paul uses the words “groans together and travails together”, a vivid expression for the troubled state of nature.”² Ever since God said “by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground” (Genesis 3:19), people have been living in a “bondage of decay.” This of course can be clearly seen in this world where violence, disease and broken relationships are the norm. While James states we are to consider it pure joy when faced with trials (James 1:2), we often inwardly groan waiting for our ultimate deliverance and redemption of our bodies (8:23). This groaning is a deep sorrow welling up within our souls to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling (2 Corinthians 5:2-4). How we long to return to the Garden of Eden where we walked and talked with God!

“Our knowledge leaps exponentially and our problems no less so. Books proliferate and ignorance abounds, harvests increase and hunger spreads, production grows and poverty deepens. Mechanization makes our lives easier but threatens our worth as persons, and the time it saves us reveals only the meaninglessness of life around us. People live longer but fear growing old, they worship sex but fear getting pregnant. Counselors, clinics, and agencies abound, but the divorce rate soars and youth lose their way. Symbolic of it all is nuclear weaponry which, with each advance in technology, makes the world less secure. Human solutions, which once rose like a Phoenix from the ashes of the past, return like Harpies to prey upon us!”³

Promise. Paul goes on to state that a fallen, frustrated humanity is not to be the final world for the “firstfruits of the Spirit” is a deposit guaranteeing future redemption and restoration (Ephesians 1:14; 2 Corinthians 1:22). “Firstfruits” in the OT was the legal practice of the Israelites of bringing God the first-ripe elements of grain, fruit, etc. (Exodus 23:19; Neh 10:35).

¹ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 322.

² Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 323.

³ James R. Edwards, *Romans*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 214.

In the NT Paul usually refers to “firstfruits” metaphorically as to what God gives to us. The Holy Spirit has been given to humanity as a foretaste of the blessings that will be received when there is a new heaven and a new earth. We are currently children of God, yes, but more will be revealed and given once Christ returns (1 John 3:2). Since flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, the physical body must return to dust to make way for a spiritual body in the likeness of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:4; Phil 3:21).

Hope. Salvation for Paul, has past, present and future aspects. It was Christ’s death and resurrection in the past that created the path (John 14:6) for a sinful humanity to be reconciled unto a holy God (2 Corinthians 5:17-20). It is belief in the atoning sacrifice of Christ (John 3:16) that seals a person in the present as God’s child. Paul reflects on how awesome these two gifts are but at the same time says he has “hope” for what he knows he will yet receive. The ongoing trials and tribulations that comes from living in a fallen world must be patiently endured as we wait for our full inheritance.

Help. Hope is not just limited to this future promise but is to be seen in the present. Since our sympathetic high priest (Hebrews 4:14-15) knows how hard it is to live in this fallen world and not become like it (Romans 12:2); He provided us a Comforter, the Holy Spirit (John 14:16). In genuine honesty, Paul is saying that in our sin we simply do not see clear enough to even ask God for the right kind of help! For example, we often believe a million dollars, a muscular body or popularity are the keys to happiness but once received they only snare us deeper into our lusts for the things of this world. Paul’s request to remove the thorn in his flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-9), Moses’ request to enter the promised land (Deut 3:25-26) or Jeremiah’s plea to save the Jews from the Babylonians (Jer. 15:1) were all answered “NO” by God for He had much better things to offer. Even when our needs go beyond our understanding or ability to express, the all-knowing Spirit (1 Cor. 2:10) intercedes for us to get us help from God. The Spirit takes our flawed thoughts and words and transforms them into a “sweet aroma” unto God! Praise be to God that the Spirit’s requests are always answered YES because He always knows and prays in accordance with the will of God.

According to His Plan. No matter how bad life truly gets one must not forget that God has a purpose that will not be overthrown! Those who have been embraced Christ’s call to leave the darkness and come into the light are assured that in all situations their endurance and trust in God will pay off because the “final good” of His plan will be realized in their lives. This “final good” is that Christ chose us before the creation of this world to have every opportunity to become like His image (8:29), holy and blameless (Ephesians 1:4). Humanity is invited to become brothers and sisters and to have God as our heavenly Father. This adoption promise is not based on our merits or efforts (Ephesians 2:8) but is the result of the atoning death and resurrection of Christ. This means for Paul, then, that salvation is a gift offered that can be received by anyone answering Jesus’ call of reconciliation.