

The Believer's Joy and Security

Summer School

January 18-21, 2010

Session 3: Freedom in Frustration (Romans 8: 18-27)

There is much interest in the environment. There is much frustration in living (within and outside of us). Questions are raised about (a) our purpose, hope(lessness), future, (b) where to put our energies, and (c) how to think, (how to reconcile a sovereign Creator and loving God with what we see and experience).

Romans 8: 18-27

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

These verses help us greatly. Listen to David Seccombe:

*"The sickness of the world is plain to all. What the scientist knows as the law of entropy – the universal tendency of ordered systems to disintegrate into chaos which drives everything to its death – the Bible reveals to be not just a brute fact of nature but an imposition by God. However, it is a temporary imposition; entropy will be reversed (8:21). The death sentence under which we live our lives is part of God's strategy to win back to himself a people to whom he can commit the future world. Thus it becomes clear what it is that will signal the end of the curse and the renewal of the heavens and the earth, of which the Bible often speaks. It is **the revelation of the sons of God**. When the last of God's chosen ones finds his or her way to Christ, the restoration of all things will be at*

hand. The creation itself in its own way also longs for this day, for it, too, is to share in a resurrection like that of the believer.” (p 141 Dust to Destiny)

Paul has prepared us for this in the wonderful promises of 8:17. 18-27 show three clear sections that follow and build on each other, each displaying God’s gracious and glorious purpose for His children and His world, and all with that biblical realism that keeps us from the (a) false hopes (of heaven on Earth) and (b) disappointment with God.

18-21 focuses on the frustration of the creation

22-25 focuses on the groaning of the believer

26-27 focuses us on the Spirit’s help in it all

As Christians we have a biblical revelation that keeps us from *dualism* (where Satan and God have equal power and the final outcome is either uncertain or rests upon our prayers or efforts) or Greek *Platonism* that separates our body and soul (remember our creed, ‘We believe in the resurrection of the body’, not the immortality of the soul) David Seccombe once again:

The assertions of Paul are important in correcting the view of the future which is held by many people in the churches. The Christian world has largely substituted Plato’s understanding of the future for that of the Bible. Plato saw human beings as immortal souls trapped in a hostile body of flesh. Indeed, all matter was by its nature tainted and temporary. The hope of the future lay in the soul’s escape from the world of the material into the realm of pure spirit. We see that this view places a very low value on God’s creation. For Paul, however (and the rest of the Bible), God’s creation, including the physical world, is essentially good. Though it labours for the present under a curse, we and it will ultimately be liberated, not from each other, but from the twin curses of sin and death. God’s children will be given life, their bodies will be transformed and renewed, and the environment itself will be restored. The future of human beings lies not in the clouds of heaven, but in a fully renewed world in a fully renewed universe. (DTD 141)

Verse 18 “I consider”... This is a conclusion born out of reason, scripture (2 Corinthians 12:7) and Paul’s own experience e.g.: He knew prison, pressure, persecution, pain and problems (2 Cor 11:23-29) and had already written as an experienced pastor 2 Cor 4:16-18. This statement was no untried, untested proposition of a person molly-coddled by riches and ease, but from a mature believer who knew God and trusted Jesus and His love via the Holy Spirit. Our apostle, who knew the scriptures and the frustrations of the world, put these words together in the way God intended, for himself and for us.

We must be thinking Christians who ignore neither the scripture nor the suffering, if we are to stand firm. “I consider” expresses “*a firm conviction reached by rational thought on the basis of the gospel*” (Canfield, quoted by Stott 237)

The sufferings include the opposition of the world (persecution), and all our human frailty, both physically and morally.

Notice that just as suffering and glory go together in Jesus’ life (v17) they do in the believer’s life (18).

FF Bruce says “*it is not merely that glory is a compensation for suffering; it actually grows out of it. There is an organic relation between the two for the believer as surely as there was for his Lord*” (see

also e.g. Romans 5: 3-5 “suffering produces...” James 1:3 “...develops perseverance.” 1 Peter 1: 6-7 “...faith... proves genuine”)

18c “glory...will be revealed *in us*” This introduces a real word of hope for us. Glory will come when Christ returns. The “when” is in terms of v19... the “sons of God” will be revealed. [to us (as RSV) and in us (Stott “*We will share in it and be changed by it*”)]

Verse 19 The world, the creation, waits eagerly for this revelation of the sons of God. Suffering was not God’s purpose for his “good creation” (Genesis 1:31) but it serves His purposes to bring non-Christians to Himself and to grow His children to be like Christ.

But we live in the Genesis 3 world. This was introduced by Paul in 5:12. Sin, via Adam, leads to death as the dreadful, but logical outcome of rebellion in Romans 1:24,26,28 with the chilling expression, “Therefore, God gave them over...”

This reminds us that the creation looks forward to something far better. The thought is captured by JB Phillips’ memorable paraphrase “*the whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own*”. We will never make sense of life; never find real hope (as distinct from wishful optimism) unless the rebellion of Genesis 3 is fully factored into our thinking. Rebellion brought dislocation (Adam and Eve hid from God, Adam blamed Eve, Eve moved outside the God-given order), leading to separation from God, pain in childbirth, dislocation of husband and wife, thorns, etc.. and leads to judgement.

Verse 20 The creation did not sin, Adam and Eve did. It was **God** who subjected it **all** to frustration (v20b) but yet it was not endless, not thoughtless, not hopeless, but rather it exists ‘in hope’ of ‘glorious liberation’ (v21)

Let’s consider some implications.

1 Adam sinned at Satan’s tempting lies, but God is in control. This does not throw Him nor thwart His purposes (cf v20, the *One* who subjected it in hope is clearly God)

2 God’s purpose of a perfect creation inhabited by His children who are free from sin’s bondage will come to pass

- The pattern was Genesis 1-2
- A glimpse can be seen in Jesus life, His ministry and bodily resurrection
- The promise to us is the gift of God’s Spirit (v23)
- The ‘parousia’, that is the coming/return of Jesus (v19) will be the time of God’s glory being revealed, which will have the triple characteristics of
 - o Jesus’ vindication
 - o The believer’s adoption confirmed and revealed to all
 - o The new heavens and new earth will be inaugurated forever, where decay (v21) frustration (v20) and suffering (v18) will be no more.

3 Sin will not enter; the new heavens and earth are more than Eden regained. There will be no Satan and no sinners. All who are there will have made the choice to honour Jesus. The fall will have served God’s purpose to magnify His love, prove His promise (in hope v20) and exalt His Son.

4 Creation is important – despite our sin and God’s judgement it is neither to be seen as evil, unimportant or less important than the spiritual world. With this understanding...

- we should care for and conserve the creation *and* thank God for it.
- we honour all work
 - o creation type work e.g. farming, production, nature, research, government, family
 - o new creation type work e.g. ministry mission etc
- we work under, for and with God in his created world, not *as* God. We are stewards not masters.

Verses 22-25 But all this is still in the future. At the moment we still live here and are, to borrow John Stott's phrase, as "*half-saved people*" [we have been... we are being... we will be].

We *are* adopted (v16), there *is* no condemnation (v1) but along with the creation 'groaning', so too do we who are believers (v23)

This groaning, which because of the fall consists of suffering, frustration and decay, is (a) inevitable (as in childbirth), (b) painful (as in childbirth) and (c) continuous (indicated by 'the present time' and 'the present tense' v22)

And v23 is especially so amongst us Christians, who not only experience the general groaning of the fall (death, disease, drought, divorce, deceit, etc) but because we have the Spirit. So we groan over:

- our struggle with sin (7:24)
- sin amongst us as brothers and sisters,
- sin in the world (hopefully not self-righteously but with hearts full of loving concern; not only for those close to us but for all others, including our enemies)
- the unbelief of others, especially those closest to us (as Paul did in 9:2)
- God's name not being honoured (1:21 and 12:9)

The reason for this is because we have the Spirit; who by dwelling within us, leading us, making us increasingly alive to God (v11) and leading us in prayer to our Father (v15, v26), sensitises us more to God and His ways (12:2) and away from the world's way of thinking. Of course there will be groaning.

BUT God uses the groaning to assure us of His love and to help us experience more of Him (in this way thwarting Satan and exalting His Son). This occurs in three ways:

1. The Spirit, whose very presence adds to our groans yet takes us out of ourselves to the gospel of Jesus (v23)

He is the firstfruit, which guarantees a full harvest, including

- Full adoption i.e. living with our Father, with His Son and all our brothers and sisters.
- Redeemed bodies (not spirits) – bodily resurrection (as per the Creed) e.g.: Philippians 3:21 and so, (v21) bondage to decay (be it Alzheimer's, cancer, quadriplegia, MS) will give way to glorious freedom

So we pray for this freedom. We work through scientific research, loving care, balanced meals, wise medical diagnosis and exercise to stem the decay, but we also need to be wise enough to 'wait for it', meaning we certainly won't give people false hopes. Heaven sets our agenda but heaven has not yet come.

2. We are people of hope – solid hope. This is not wishful thinking or vague optimism, but hope based on the gospel of Jesus.

- a. no condemnation because of the cross v3
- b. a new Spirit because of the resurrection (v11, Ephesians 1:13-14, 2 Corinthians 1: 21-22)

- c. salvation (v24) through conversion (the tense indicated the past decisive event Ephesians 2:8)

Our hope is therefore based on the past and it is given to us not to create arrogance or laidback indifference but to enable us to like the inanimate creation (v19), to wait eagerly for our adoption as sons with redeemed bodies [v23, including freedom from the sinful nature (what joy!)], and to wait patiently v25 i.e. with endurance. So we won't give up, we will be patient with ourselves (we will never be free from sins' presence this side of heaven), patient with our fellows (there is only one person we can go to church with – a fellow sinner) and patient with God (holding His promises in balance relying upon Jesus and living humbly). We must always be like sinner in Luke 18:13, never the Pharisee.

NB Whilst not wanting to promote cheap grace, this passage rules out perfectionism and deeper life teaching that denies 1 John 1: 8-9

3. God understands the groaning world (v20) and can be counted upon to keep us, at every step of the way. Our assurance is the Spirit's help and intercession (26-27) It is an assurance that grows with practice and so strengthens us to affirm and join Paul in his "I consider" of v18. So once again, the work of God's Spirit is affirmed in today's section (vv18-27). Stott summarises the four ways the Holy Spirit helps us: *"He subdues our flesh (sinful nature), He witnesses to our sonship, He guarantees our inheritance and helps our weakness in prayer"* (MMN 99)

Verse26 'in the same way...' Just as our hope sustains us, so too God's Spirit OR just as the Spirit helps us in these other ways so too in our praying and in our weakness at this point.

The experience of being overwhelmed with disappointment, with uncertainty, with anguish, with confusion, with opposition, with indifference, with sadness, with depression, with hardness of heart, with our own failure, with our coolness towards God and others is not uncommon amongst God's children. It can leave us speechless and unable to articulate our prayer requests or even unable to know what to say. This weakness is met twice with the promise/statement - v26b "but the Spirit himself intercedes for us..." and 27b "because the Spirit intercedes for the saints..."

What can we say about this?

1. Is the Spirit's intercession praying in tongues?

It may not exclude praying in tongues, but it covers *"all those longings and aspirations which well up from the spiritual depths and cannot be imprisoned within the confines of everyday words"* FF Bruce

He adds the words of James Montgomery

*'Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Uttered or unexpressed,
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.*

*Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear,
The upward glancing of an eye,
When none but God is near.'*

In such prayer it is the indwelling Spirit who prays, and His mind is immediately read by the Father to whom the prayer is addressed. Moreover, these 'inarticulate groans' cannot be dissociated from the groaning of verse 23, with which believers (together with all creation) long for the coming resurrection glory, which will consummate the answer to all their prayers. (FF Bruce 175)

2. We can see how much our heavenly Father loves us. We read FF Bruce again:

"...when the spirit of man is in closest harmony with the Spirit of God words may not only prove inadequate; they may even hinder prayer. But God, before whom the thoughts of all men are like an open book, recognizes in those unspoken 'groanings' deep in His people's hearts the voice of the Spirit interceding for them in tune with His own will, and answers them accordingly."

It remains for us – to trust Him. This leads to prayer even when it is hard – to prove His love as we pray [despite how we might feel] – to never assume that God is far from us because we cannot find the words [though unconfessed sin will keep God from hearing our prayers (Isaiah 64:6), our weakness and sufferings will not]. The provision He has made should fill our heart with joy.

Stott puts it like this:

So three persons are involved in our praying. First, we ourselves in our weakness do not know what to pray for. Secondly, the indwelling Spirit helps us by interceding for us and through us, with speechless groans but according to God's will. Thirdly, God the Father, who both searches our heart and knows the Spirit's mind, hears and answers accordingly. Of these actors, however, it is the Spirit who is emphasized. Paul makes three statements about him. First, 'the Spirit helps us' (because of our weakly, half-saved situation); secondly, 'the Spirit intercedes for us' (because of our ignorance of what to pray for); and thirdly, 'the Spirit intercedes according to God's will' (and therefore God listens and responds)." (BST 245/6)

When we add to the Spirit's gracious intercession (which in v26 Paul uses a long word for help meaning to lend a hand together, to come to someone's aid), the intercessory work of Jesus, our risen Lord and Mediator (8:34), we capture the love of God which through the gospel offers us

- no condemnation
- no aloneness – adopted as children and indwelt by His Spirit
- real hope

Tomorrow we trace this overarching theme to see that there is no separation from the love of God in Romans 8:28-38.

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