

It is a fundamental part of the biblical picture of reality that we live in a world that has been cursed by God because of the sin of man. Cursed and made miserable, but with a view to its eventual restoration.

“The Larger Story/A Groaning Life”

Romans 8:18-27

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As he ended the previous paragraph Paul had introduced the thought that believers in Jesus Christ, becoming God’s children, are also God’s *heirs*, co-heirs with their brother, Jesus Christ. That is, there is something coming, an inheritance, that we do not yet have. But he had also added the enigmatic afterthought, “if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” Sharing in the sufferings of Christ is a frequent and an important theme in Paul’s writing. For example, in Phil. 3:10 he remarks that it is to be the believer’s goal that he or she come to know the fellowship of sharing in Christ’s sufferings, “becoming like him in his death.” The path of submission and self-denial is the one path to heaven; it is for us as it was for the Lord Jesus.

But it is also a characteristic thought of the Apostle Paul that there is an organic relationship between our suffering in this world and the glory that we will enjoy in the next. Paul says this frequently in his letters. For example as he says in another place, “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” [2 Cor. 4:17] It isn’t simply that the glory of heaven is compensation for the troubles we must endure in this world; the glory grows out of and is produced by our sufferings, *as it did in the life of the Lord Jesus*. It is bearing the cross here that leads us to glory there. [Bruce, 168] Paul begins by saying, “I consider that...” He is working out an understanding of reality based on what has been revealed in Christ and in the Word. That is what he is calling upon us to do. Consider; think it out; go from the data that we are given in the Word of God to a theology of your daily life. That is what Paul is doing here.

Text Comment

- v.18 If heaven is a place of everlasting joy and if the price of heaven is fidelity to Jesus Christ no matter the consequence, then it could not be otherwise. Paul’s logic is irresistible.
- v.21 In Genesis 3 we read that the earth was cursed on account of the sin of man. The fall of the creation however, however much it represented the judgment of God, was also with a view to its ultimate redemption and perfection. It was subjected *in hope*... James puts this same thought in a different and interesting way when he writes (1:18) that the recreation of fallen human beings had in view that they might be “a kind of firstfruits of all he created.” As man was the cause of the creation’s fall, his redemption and recreation will be the means of creation’s renewal. I think that is a wonderful thought. We got the world into trouble and through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the transformation of our lives we are going to get it out of trouble or at least have some part in it being renewed and remade.

- v.23 It is striking that Paul here links the resurrection of the body to the redemption of the entire creation. The body is the physical, natural part of man *and so the part of him that links him to the rest of the material creation*. It is because we have a body that we can be rightly described as part of the animal kingdom, that we belong among the *primate* order of mammals, and that the processes that govern our physical life can be compared to those that can be found elsewhere in nature. We are part of nature.

To say that we await “our adoption as sons” does not mean, of course, that we are not already the children of God; Paul has just said in the previous paragraph that we are. Paul’s entire presentation of salvation throughout his letters, however, has this “now, but not yet” quality. We have it, but we are waiting for it. We have it in principle and in its beginnings; what we wait for is its consummation and, as here, its public demonstration. The day of our adoption will be the day in which we come into the *full possession* of our new life – body and soul – and are publicly and universally acknowledged to be what we are: the children of God.

- v.26 This is a very important statement: “We do not know what we ought to pray for....” We don’t because we do not know the future or how the happiness and holiness of our lives and that of others is best to be brought about. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, remarks on his mother’s prayer that he not leave North Africa to go to Italy. But he went nevertheless, against his mother’s wishes, and it was in Italy that he became a Christian. Thus, says Augustine, the Lord “denied her special request to grant her life-long request.” She did not know what to pray for; but the Spirit did!

You see how Paul is constantly connecting up the dots of his argument. He had been talking about the Holy Spirit and his ministry in the believer in verses 9-16. We haven’t heard anything about the Holy Spirit in the last few verses but he picks up that thread here and speaks of another thing that the Holy Spirit does in us and for us. It is one of the truly astonishing things that we are taught about the ministry of the Holy Spirit that he prays alongside us in our weakness and does so so forcefully it can be described as a “groaning” prayer. This is a magnificent demonstration of the triune nature of God. If there are not three persons, who is the Holy Spirit praying to? And, of course, there is perfect knowledge of the Spirit’s will by the Father; a perfect communion of mind and heart between the first and the third persons of the Godhead, both taking an intensely personal interest *in us and the circumstances of our lives!* What a grand mystery! We have an intercessor in heaven – the Lord Jesus – and one in our hearts: the Holy Spirit. And what an encouragement to pray! The more *we* pray, the more the Holy Spirit, the more God himself prays for us!

It is one of the startling and unique features of our faith as Christians that suffering, trial, and tribulation loom so large in the account of it we are given in the Bible. This is really quite unlike the other religions of the world and quite unlike any human philosophy of life. It was by suffering, of course, the suffering of Jesus Christ, that we were redeemed and delivered from sin and death. And the link between Christ’s suffering and ours is often made. They persecuted him, so they will persecute his followers, the Lord Jesus tells us in the Gospels. A righteous man or

woman is inevitably going to suffer in different ways than an unrighteous man or woman will because the sinful world will be so unwelcoming of him or her. It is by suffering that our hearts are purified and that the grip of this world and its pleasures are broken. We know about that. The Lord Jesus introduced suffering into his profile of the Christian life in his “Sermon on the Mount.” Remember the beatitudes with which the Lord opens that sermon: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven...”, again the connection between suffering here and glory there. The Christian life is and must be a life of trial.

Earlier in Romans and, perhaps somewhat jarringly, Paul had said, without going on to explain what he meant:

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings...” [5:1-5]

He doesn't go on then to explain why and how but he is doing that now. I suspect that for many Christians through the ages this constant attention to the specter of suffering, tribulation and spiritual pain hanging over the Christian life has seemed very natural. If you were facing, as they were, overt hostility from the surrounding culture *because you are a Christian*, if you went in fear of your safety, if you found many opportunities denied you, if you feared for the welfare and safety of your children, if being a Christian had caused you loss and pain, it would make perfect sense to you that your faith in Christ would inevitably be described in terms of the difficult life that followed from it. It certainly was for Paul. He began his Christian life being told how much he would have to suffer for the gospel's sake and ever since he had suffered in all manner of ways. When a man admits, as Paul did, that for the sake of Christ “he had suffered the loss of all things,” you know that his understanding of what it means to be a Christian must have been bound up with suffering and loss. In the few years before his writing Romans Paul had suffered in a variety of ways: physical attacks, imprisonment, living under the specter of the active hatred of his fellow countrymen, the hardship of constant travel and exhausting work, his physical ailment, whatever it was, and so on. So for Paul too it was altogether natural to think of his being a Christian in terms of what it had cost him and would cost him to follow Christ.

But the reality of suffering in the Christian life is still something that needs to be explained. After all, so far in the argument of this letter Paul has said that those who believe in Jesus have been forgiven and declared righteous in God's sight. God has poured his love into their hearts; they have become the children of God. It is not obvious that those who have been so loved and so blessed by God would continue to suffer. There is something here that needs explanation.

The Bible is not after all, first of all a book of moral truth; it is not even in the first place, a book about how to be saved. It is instead, first and foremost, a book about the way things are. It is an account of reality. All wisdom begins with an acceptance of the way things actually are. Most people in this world and all of us too much of the time live as if things were different than in fact they are and the Bible is constantly reminding us of the way things actually are.

Further, what we get in the Bible is a *big picture* account of reality. You will not find, or not often find, an explanation for your particular experience. You will not learn why a certain thing happened *to you* or why life has turned sad or difficult or painful in some way *for you*. But you will learn in the Word of God why life is painful, sad, and difficult. And that is what Paul gives us here: a big picture account of reality. There is something about this world that makes it a hard and unforgiving place in which to live. We live in a fallen world, a cursed world, a world that has been punished in the punishment that befell man because of his sin. This world, after all, is fundamentally important *because it is the place where man lives*. It is its connection to human beings that is what makes this world important and what determines its destiny. This may not be the view of our modern elite culture; it is certainly not the view of modern environmentalism; it is a view utterly incompatible with the theory of evolution; but it is most assuredly the view of the Bible. The creation of the world in Genesis 1 and 2 is the creation of the place in which man will live and work and commune with God; it a place designed precisely so that man might be its steward and its ruler under God. It was filled with wonderful things for man to enjoy and wonderful things for man to do. It was made full of opportunity and full of the raw material for the exploiting of man's God-given creativity and genius.

And so it was only natural that when man fell and was no longer perfect, the environment that God had made for him was corrupted too so that man might no longer enjoy the perfect world which God had made for a perfect man to enjoy. The curse of the world in which man lives is part of man's punishment. And so the ground began to produce weeds and thorns and in so many other ways death and corruption spread their tentacles out into natural life.

The Bible is not a scientific book in the modern sense. It shows little interest in the processes of nature. You cannot read about embryology or biochemistry in the Bible; you search in vain for an explanation of the geology of the earth or the forces that control the movement of the sun and moon. The Bible's interest is in ultimate causes, not secondary ones. When we read in Psalm 139:13:

“...you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb,”

we understand that we are being told that God *made* us, that he is our creator. We are not being told *how* he did so because that is not the important point. The psalm-writer knew enough biology to know that babies were the product of the sexual union of a man and a woman and knew that the male provided the “seed,” and so on. This knowledge was important in its own way, to be sure. But far more important was the fact that the natural process – of which we certainly know more detail nowadays – was only the instrument by which *the Lord God himself* brought a new life into existence. It is marvelous to see what advances have been made in scientific knowledge in our day, whether geology, biology, or astronomy. The deepening understanding of the biochemistry of the cell, of the biochemical machines that operate our bodily life, is literally breath-taking. But all of that knowledge hasn't changed the world in any fundamental way. Such developments have led to many new discoveries and technologies, but what a human life is and what the world remains as man's habitation, these things remain the same. Modern science hasn't added a thing to our knowledge of *such things*. Nor has it changed the nature of the world as a world subjected to frustration and death.

The world we live in is fallen and given over to death as surely as it was when Paul wrote his great letter. And human beings and Christians indeed suffer as a consequence of the nature of this world as fallen and cursed in just as many ways today as they did then. If we have conquered some afflictions and eliminated some sorrows – such as toothaches and smallpox – we have added many more. Think of car accidents, recreational drugs so called, the cancer therapies that so often fail but make life for the patient a living death while he or she is being treated with them, or of internet pornography that has destroyed countless relationships and blighted so many marriages. Nor are there less famines or earthquakes or hurricanes than once there were.

Christians live in a world subjected to frustration. Even the most comfortable life is comparatively short and must end in death. And how fast that life passes away! It is almost the end of 2009 and the first decade of the new century and the new millennium. Does it not seem to you, as it seems to me, that it was just yesterday we were worried about Y2K and we were celebrating the new millennium? Our lives are speeding to their end. We have but a short day in this world. Paul says every one of us is part of a much larger story: the story of mankind, to be sure, but the story of the entire universe as well. It isn't only man who has fallen; the entire creation has been groaning, subject to frustration. There is something deeply wrong with the natural world. It too is enslaved. And much of what happens *to us* happens because we remain in this world.

If you were somehow to be dropped into the middle of an immense desert with no shade and little or no water for a thousand miles in every direction, you would appreciate that your troubles had everything to do *with where you were*. The desert had no particular interest in you; but it would make your life brutishly hard nevertheless. Your skin would burn, your throat would parch, you would lose your way, unable to tell in what direction safety was to be found. And every day would grow worse. Of course; it must be so. Such is the desert.

Well, that is what Paul is saying. Life is hard because we are living in a world subjected to frustration; a world that has been cursed. We do not have here in Romans 8 an entire biblical doctrine of suffering. There is much more to say about the purposes that suffering can fulfill in the life of God's people. We know how faith is exercised in times of trial and strengthened thereby; we learn elsewhere how we are humbled by our troubles and made to see things as they really are so much more clearly than is possible when all is well. Adolph Schlatter, a believing German biblical scholar of international reputation who lived in second half of the 19th and the first third of the 20th century confessed this about himself. He had lost his son, Paul, in the First World War and had been devastated by the carnage of that utterly foolish war that, when begun was supposed by everyone to have lasted just a few weeks, but then took on almost apocalyptic dimensions. He felt that the collapse of the imperial government at the end of the war was “divine judgment on Germany, yet at the same time “divine grace.”

“The outcome smashed our illusions and precisely thereby became a rich blessing. For the destruction of our illusions is a work of divine grace.... I remind myself...with burning regret that I, too, required the terrible events of 1914-1918 so that my participation in our nation would be moderated by the fervor of repentance.”

And, later, regarding the disastrous inflation of 1923: “[I] can only be thankful for that which the so-called ‘inflation’ brought to me. [For it] gave me...a view into the glory of Jesus.... In all honesty, before that time his Word about ‘treasure in heaven,’ which makes the poor rich remained opaque to me.... Now the visible harvest of my work was swept away, and I retained nothing more than what Jesus had called treasure in heaven... [W. Neuer, *Adolph Schlatter*, 128-130]

How many Christians would say the same about their trials!

I walked a mile with Pleasure
 She chattered all the way,
 But left me none the wiser
 For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow,
 And ne'er a word said she;
 But oh, the things I learned from her,
 When sorrow walked with me.

You know how much the Bible has to say about our trials and tribulations. Christ *himself*, we read in Hebrews, had to suffer in order to develop his holy character in its fullness. As a man, even a perfect man, mysterious as this may be, he had to suffer in order to become what he needed to become.

“Although he was a son he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect [by that suffering], he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him...” [Heb. 5:8-9]

“Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” [2:18]

If suffering was necessary for the spiritual manhood and the effectiveness of the Lord in his office, how much more for us who not only must grow in righteousness and goodness and wisdom, as he did, but must do so by the destruction of so much that is sinful, prideful, and foolish in our hearts. Suffering and affliction accomplish what nothing else will in the cultivation of the soul. That is why there is so much of it in this world. All of that is part of Paul’s theology of suffering as it is developed elsewhere in his letters.

Here, however, Paul offers nothing of that. He is not concerned to explain the use that God makes of suffering in the life of his people. Here he is more interested in the fact of it and one fundamental reason for its existence, viz. that, like it or not, we live in a cursed and dying world. You see, this is an extraordinarily important part of the working theology of a Christian man or woman. It goes a long way toward our gaining an understanding of our lives and the lives of others around us. Paul is talking here about creation and fall, the fundamental superstructure of human reality. God made the world good; that is why it is so surpassingly wonderful and beautiful and fruitful in so many ways. It is good far, far beyond the power of such a theory as

that of evolution to explain. That is why comparatively few people still today remain convinced that the existence of this wonderful world can be explained simply as the random result of billions of biochemical accidents.

But the world is also blighted by the Fall of man into sin and the consequent judgment of the natural world. “Subjected to frustration” is how Paul describes the world’s condition here. The world not only provides us an unending stream of beautiful things to look at, wonderful things to eat and drink, and the raw material from which so many great things can be made, it also crushes us under a mountain of water that comes unannounced from the sea; shakes our cities apart and collapses buildings upon the people living or working in them; dries up rivers and streams or floods the land, in either way destroying homes and livelihoods. It kills our babies in the womb and after birth or prevents them from being conceived in the first place. It sends diseases to the young and old alike, plucking life from the living with what seems to be utter indifference to the agony of heart that death brings in its train.

Most of you will not have known an elderly member of this church whom I remember very well. Gayle Warner was married for only a year when her young husband was killed in the Tide Flats, crushed by logs falling from his truck. They had welcomed a baby daughter just a few weeks before his death. I took her funeral service in February, 1988. She had died just a few months short of her 93rd birthday. Like Anna in Luke 2 she had lived virtually her entire adult life as a widow. I’ve always remembered Gayle as a picture of what the world can be like for so many people: so much promise; such cruel disappointment. *Why should it be so?* Because this world lies under a curse that only God himself can remove.

And, this world has become the habitation of sinners who add still much, much more woe to the life of human beings who must live in this cursed world. When Paul speaks, in v. 18, of “our present suffering” he has in mind more the troubles that human beings cause other human beings. He is not speaking so much of earthquakes as hatred, of drought as persecution, the sort of persecution he faced and the Roman Christians faced every day; the sort he is going to describe in detail in the later verses of this chapter 8. He is speaking of the heartsickness and fear and sorrow that is the regular experience of human beings because they live in the same world with other human beings: broken relationships, the unmarried and married who despair of love, the parents who cannot sleep for the fears they have for their children, unemployment, poverty and need, injustice in the workplace, crime in the streets, warfare raging, and all the rest of human woe.

Now, I want you to consider what this world must look like to someone who has no understanding that the world is cursed; that it is, in other words, not the place it ought to be; not the place it was made to be. To them the world is not God’s wonderful world subjected to frustration as punishment; it is simply the world. To that man or woman, the world is simply what is. And for its misery there can be no explanation and there can be no mitigation; no comfort and precious little hope. If troubles come that can only be our misfortune. There can be no explanation and no comfort. As the poem of the English journalist, Steve Turner has it:

“If chance be
The Father of all flesh,

Disaster is his rainbow in the sky,
 And when you hear
 ‘State of emergency!’
 ‘Sniper kills 10!’
 ‘Troops on rampage!’
 ‘Youths go looting!’
 ‘Bomb blasts school!’ –
 It is but the sound of man
 Worshipping his maker.”

But that is not Paul’s understanding at all. This world is the wonder that it is *because God made it*. It is the mess it is *because God cursed it*. It is our home and we messed it up. The first man and then all men and women ever since. But precisely because it is God’s doing – the curse that rests upon this earth as upon sinful mankind – that curse has a good and holy and happy purpose. The world is subjected to frustration, Paul says, *in hope*. So much is this the case that it may be said that the creation itself *waits in eager anticipation* for the sons of God to be revealed. It has a glorious future just as we do. It will be renewed and perfected when Christ comes again, just as we will who have trusted in him. It will be liberated from its bondage to decay just as we will be when we come into the fullness of eternal life.

If the world is wonderful now as it is in so many ways, just imagine what it will be when it is freed from the curse and set free to be all that God intended it to be when first he made the world. One of the illustrations that God uses in Genesis 3 to describe how the world would change because God had cursed it because of human sin is that women would give birth to their children in pain. The natural and normal processes of life would become complicated and painful. Paul uses that idea here in v. 22. “The creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”

Back in the old days, some of you remember, the husband paced the waiting room while his wife was giving birth. He anxiously awaited the news: was it a boy or girl? Were his wife and baby safe and sound? Nowadays, of course, the husband is in the delivery room with his wife – no doubt because the medical community discovered that the secret of a really successful experience of childbirth was having the husband present to tell his wife what to do! But the result is that we all know something about the pains of childbirth. We know how much it hurts and how hard it is to endure it because we have witnessed our wives in the throes of that pain. Especially those of us whose children were born in those years, the 70’s and 80’s, when women regularly practiced natural childbirth and forswore anesthetics; the only kind of childbirth that Paul was familiar with, of course, a childbirth in pain.

And what is it that sustains a woman in such pain and what is it that makes her willing to endure it not merely once or twice but over and over again? Is it not the prospect of the baby soon to lie in her arms? Well we are to think of our sufferings in the same way. We have something glorious awaiting us that will make our suffering and pain, our trial and tribulation seem inconsequential in comparison. Indeed, we will value those tribulations because by them we came to enjoy this glory! Remember, Paul suffered a great deal – years in prison, beatings, ostracism by former friends, great personal disappointments and apparently he was sick in some fashion almost his

entire adult Christian life – he knew suffering to a degree only a few of us can say we do but he had also seen something of the glory, there on the Damascus Road and in a vision of heaven that he was once granted. We are reading this morning a man who knew very well, better than any of us, what he was talking about! He could say with the authority of personal experience, in a way we cannot, that no matter how great our difficulties in this world, we have something beyond wonderful awaiting us. And if our sorrows are necessary to get us there and are hurrying us along, then God be blessed for our sorrows.

The destination to which Christ is taking us, Paul says, is not simply the end of suffering. It is so much more; gloriously more. Our sufferings are not worthy to be compared with it. Be as realistic and honest about your sufferings as you can be. Don't make light of them. They are not light. They are often only too real and only too heavy. But then hear the Apostle say that they are not to be compared to the glories to come. That day will be so wonderful, Paul says, that it is as if the creation itself is craning its neck to see it; to see the day when, as Isaiah has it, "the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you and all the trees of the field will clap their hands." [55:12] We are saved *in hope*. We are saved with a view to what will be ours one day and then forever because the world where we are going to live then is going to be so gloriously better and beautiful than it is now. You don't hope, nobody does, for what you already have. But if you are sure that day is coming then you can wait for it patiently. It is coming! Don't live a day of your life without telling yourself what is coming! Live waiting!