

Romans 8:18-39: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Romans chapter 8 verses 18 to 39. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption, and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined, he also called. And those whom he called, he also justified. And those whom he justified, he also glorified.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died, more than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, for your sake we are being killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

[2 : 2 9] No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. In addressing the question of suffering, among other things in the second half of Romans chapter 8, Paul is returning to some matters that he raised earlier in the letter, in places such as chapter 5 verses 3 to 5. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Present sufferings are put into perspective by the hope that we await, much the same point that Paul has made in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 17. For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

The incomparable glory that awaits us makes all of our present struggles and suffering seem small and of little account by comparison. Indeed, for Paul, the glory that awaits us is not merely awaiting us, but is awaiting the entire creation. The creation cannot be set to rights until mankind has been restored. The creation eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God, because their revelation is a sign of its longed-for deliverance from the futility to which it was subjected. Until that time, the creation itself exists in a state of bondage. Much as the Gentiles had to wait until the Messiah dealt with Israel's problem before they could be brought in to enjoy freedom as one people with the Jews, so the creation has to wait for the revelation of the family of God. Mankind was created to steward the creation, to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and exercise dominion over its creatures. This is the purpose for which Adam was created. He was created because the earth needed someone to till it. Until mankind is set right, however, the problems of creation cannot be properly addressed. The creation is stuck, its intended transformation arrested. At the fall, on account of sin, creation was subjected to futility. The creation was subjected to the frustrating power of death, corruption, and decay in ways that rendered it futile and unable to reach its intended goal.

Genesis chapter 3 verses 17 to 19, the judgment upon Adam, describes this. Why was the creation subjected to futility? Perhaps to limit the spread and power of sin.

If a sinful and fallen humanity had access to the full power of creation, a creation that wasn't subjected to futility, humanity could have done immense damage, far more than it has been able to do in a creation subjected to death. It was for this reason, for instance, that man was cut off from the tree of life. If man lived forever, then his sin would have much greater and far less mitigated effects. The sinner is ultimately the one subjected to the futility in the creation. The description of Ecclesiastes is a good example of this. Life under the sun is described as vaporous. Vapor is something that you can't easily see through. It masks and obscures things. It's not something that you can grasp hold of. You can't master it and control it and move it where you want it to go. It's something that leaves no mark behind. It vanishes. It is something that lacks solidity. In all of these respects, our lives have a vaporous character to them. In Christ, however, we see power over the creation, especially

Christ's power to overcome the futility of the creation and the power of death at work within it. The wind and the waves obey him. He can raise the dead. He can restore that which is lacking and repair that which is broken. Subjecting the creation to futility was always only temporary.

[7 : 04] The intention was always that it would, at the appropriate time, be released from that futility, when its stewards were restored. The salvation of humanity then occurs against a cosmic backdrop.

We were created in large measure as servants within the creation. Salvation should never be narrowly focused merely upon individuals, nor yet merely upon humans. We were saved for the sake of a greater purpose, so that we might be righteous and effective stewards of God within his world once more. The creation is described as groaning in labor. The theme of labor pangs are commonly used in scripture to speak of the pain through which a new order is brought to birth, most notably in John chapter 16 verse 21, where Jesus describes the woman whose hour has come, and the pains that come upon her as she's trying to bring a new child into the world, but then the joy that follows. We should remember that the earth is like a womb. We have that expressed in the poetry of scripture. Naked I came from my mother's womb. Naked I will return that. Knit together in the lowest parts of the earth.

The earth is our mother, the Adamah from which the Adam is formed. For most of history, however, the womb of the earth has been a barren one. Christ opens the womb of the earth, the womb of the tomb, in his resurrection. He is the firstborn from the dead, and as a result we have the first fruits of the new creation. A creation that is no longer trapped in futility and death, with man returning to the dust, man returning to the tomb, the mother from which he first came. As the people of God, the sons of God, we share in the cosmic groaning of the creation, on account of the fact that we have possession of the first fruits of the Spirit. The Spirit is the one by whom we are begotten again, but the new birth that the Spirit brings about still isn't complete until our bodies are raised. The Spirit's work has begun, but we now join with the creation in longing for the deliverance that is yet to come. We have the first fruits, which serve to guarantee that we will one day enjoy the life of the Spirit in its fullness, but we still wait for that day. Many theologians have used the expression already not yet to express the tension in which Christians must live. The Spirit that we have received is already an anticipation of a future that has very much not yet arrived. The already not yet dynamic can affect some of the way that basic dimensions of salvation play out. For instance, justification is already received, on the basis of Christ's death and resurrection in the past. However, we await a justification in the future, as we will be vindicated by God on the last day when we are judged according to our works.

The same is true of adoption. We have already been adopted, in some senses. We are already children of God. Yet in another respect, as we see in this chapter, we still await our adoption, which comes when our bodies are raised. Our salvation, while definitively one in Christ, has not yet been realised in practice. Our salvation is largely an awaited salvation, albeit one that God has assured us of.

Our salvation is in large measure something apprehended by hope. It can't be seen, as it isn't yet here. However, it can be grasped by the confidence of Christian hope. If we have such a hope within us, we will wait patiently, aware of the glorious character of that which we are awaiting.

[10 : 41] The Spirit is present with us in our struggles as we patiently await. The Spirit intercedes for us, and also equips us in the manner and the material of prayer, teaching us how to pray. As the Spirit inspires our prayers, His groanings and longings become ours. Paul has earlier spoken of the way that the Spirit grants us a sense of intimacy with God in prayer, as by the Spirit of adoption we address God as Abba. Now he wants us to see that the Spirit empowers our prayers in other ways, in ways that snatch us up into the great cosmic drama. God is at work within us, renewing us, so that we might become not just sites of His restoration work, but fellow workers with God in that task.

Verse 28 is one of those verses that is routinely abstracted from its context, and treated as a sort of general promise text. God works all things together for good to those who love Him, the people He has called for His purposes.

Those who love God, and those who are called according to His purpose, are synonymous. God, in calling us, poured out His love in our hearts by His Spirit.

The people in question are the body of people that God has called. In God's call, He secures the appropriate response. God's grace is the basis of our spiritual, no less than our natural, life.

This is the body of people that God is forming in the fullness of time, the sons of God that Paul spoke of earlier. It's a very specific group of people of which Paul is speaking here. Paul is also speaking of things working together for good in the context of the suffering, weakness and groaning that he has been discussing to this point. The things that are working together for good are the sufferings and the trials in our lives. The meaning of working together for good should also be carefully considered. This is not just a matter of things generally panning out fairly well for people who believe in a Heavenly Father. No, good is a far weightier word in this context, as we will see in the verses that follow. The deeper cause of our assurance here is the expression, according to His purpose.

[12 : 52] God has an intention in calling us, and He will achieve that whatever might befall us. In verses 29 and 30, Paul traces things back to this deep purpose of God. Once we realise that everything is grounded in the purpose and the promises of God, we will have much more assurance.

It all begins not with us, but with God's foreknowledge. God's foreknowledge is His eternal loving will for our existence as a people for Himself. To God's foreknowledge is added His predestination, His determination in advance that we will be conformed to the image of His Son, so that a Christ-shaped people might be formed. This is the great governing design in all of this.

Some, by treating Christ more as if He were the means of executing God's election or predestination of a certain set of individuals, rather than at the very heart of it all, the one that it's all about, have rather distorted our sense of what Paul is referring to here.

At the centre of God's purpose of foreknowledge and election is not a random set of individuals called the elect, rather it is Christ Himself. He is the one that exists at the heart of God's purpose in history, and we are formed around Him and conformed to Him. Having ordained that this people be formed, when the time came He called them into new life by the powerful word of His Spirit, which awakens the spiritually dead and brings into existence people who are no people.

Calling these people, God declares them to be, even though ungodly, people in good standing with Himself. He justifies them. Once again, this isn't a timeless truth about salvation, so much as it is a claim about what God is doing in this new work in Christ, in the fullness of time, and the confidence the Roman Christians could find in this fact. This work of God in salvation was something hidden from the foundation of the world. But in this moment in history, as a result of Christ's work, it is being revealed and worked out. Not only has God declared the called people to be in good standing with Himself in justification, He has also glorified them. We are now, as Paul says in Ephesians chapter 2 verse 6, raised up with Him and seated with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. This glorification, like the adoption that he spoke of earlier, or our justification, which anticipates final justification, is anticipatory. We still wait to be clothed with the glory of the resurrected body. However, even now, we already have the firstfruits and the guarantee of that future glorification in the gift of the Holy

[15 : 30] Spirit. This isn't just an irresistible divine purpose though. When everything is seen, it is not an austere divine plan with which we are dealing, but an unfailing and enduring and persistent divine love, a love that will never surrender us to another, no matter the force that tries to obstruct it.

Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions before launching into a triumphant proclamation at the end of the chapter. The first question is, if God is for us, who can be against us? The fact that God gave us His Son assures us of everything else. God has done the really great thing. Then why be anxious about all that is small by comparison? This is the point that he made in Romans chapter 5 verses 8 to 10.

But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since therefore we have now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God.

For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life. The second question he asks, who shall bring any charge against God's elect? This is an imagined law court. Who is going to come forward and bring some charge against this person? If anyone were to bring a charge, they would be found to be at odds with God Himself. He has declared us to be in good standing with Himself. God has justified. Who can stand as an accuser now? The third question is similar. Who is to condemn? Christ Himself has died for our sins. He was raised for our justification. He is now interceding on our behalf in heaven.

The surety of Christ's definitive and continuing work leaves no ground for condemnation. The fourth question, who shall separate us from the love of Christ? As if trying to figure out the answer, Paul goes on to give a roll call of the forces, the powers and the extremities of creation, not one of which would be able to cut us off from God's love. God's love in Christ descended from the highest heights to the deepest of all depths. There is nowhere where people are beyond the reach of God's grace and love.

[17 : 46] When grasped by God's love, there is no greater power that might wrest us out of His hands. Most particularly, all of the sufferings, trials, dangers and difficulties that come our way cannot separate us from God. Quite the opposite. In our sufferings, we are marked out for loving sacrifice to God. We are also being conformed to His dearly loved Son, who was led as a lamb to the slaughter. In the light of all of this, we can persevere in tribulations, in hope and in confidence.

A question to consider. How has Paul developed the theme of the love of God in the epistle of Romans Romans to this point?