

This salvation-historical perspective was not Paul's innovation; he was simply recognizing and interacting with the perspective of the Old Testament scriptures. Throughout the ages God Himself had insisted that, when He brought His great redemption through the promised Seed of Abraham and Son of David, this One's work of recovery and renewal would extend to the entire created order.

- His royal dominion and the characteristic peace of His kingdom would know no bounds (Isaiah 9:1-7), even as the knowledge of Yahweh was to fill the earth through His Servant's transformation of the present order and His ingathering of the nations (Isaiah 11:1-12:6, 42:1-44:5, 61:1-11).
- The calamity that had begun in the Garden was to be completely rectified; the redeeming work of Yahweh's great Prince and Shepherd was to bear the fruit of a new heavens and earth in which righteousness dwells (Isaiah 35:1-10, 55:1-13, 60:1-22, 65:8-25; cf. 2 Peter 3:1-13; Revelation 21:1ff).

This all-encompassing, redemptive-historical perspective was the framework within which Paul regarded *present suffering* and *future glory*. The redemption that has secured the sonship and inheritance of men extends to embrace the whole of creation. Thus the creation itself, and not merely men, is characterized in the present age by anguish and the hope of glory. It, too, awaits the return of the Savior. This is a key theme in Paul's gospel, and one which helps to bring definition and clarity to his radically Christ-centered perspective on life. God's ultimate, eternal design for His creation is that *all things* in the heavens and the earth are to be summed up in Christ (ref. Ephesians 1:3-10; also Colossians 1:19-20).

- 1) Thus Paul declared to the Romans that the creation itself stands in anticipation of a day of consummation: it also "*waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God*" (8:19). Interestingly, the grammatical subject of Paul's statement is not the creation, but the "anxious longing" he ascribes to the created order. The NASB accurately recounts that "the anxious longing...waits eagerly." At first glance this appears to be an absurdity, but Paul's intention in constructing his sentence in this way was to draw his readers' attention to his focal concern regarding the creation, namely its posture of eager, watchful anticipation.

Referring to the creation with this language has led some commentators to conclude that by the noun *creation* Paul was referring to humankind. For how can the subhuman created order (let alone that which is inanimate) wait and watch with hopeful longing? Despite this apparent difficulty, it is clear that it was precisely the subhuman creation that Paul had in mind.

- The first proof is the context itself. For in the larger passage Paul specifically compared *human* anticipation of future glory with the longing expressed by the rest of the created order (ref. 8:22- 23).

- Secondly, Paul's personification of the inanimate creation simply follows the literary pattern established by God in the Old Testament. For whenever the creation is considered in the light of Yahweh's promised redemption, it is presented as looking for and rejoicing in that promise as it awaits its own recovery and renewal (cf. again Isaiah 35:1-2, 42:1-12, 55:1-13; also Psalm 96, 98; etc.).

2) Specifically, the creation waits in eager anticipation for the "*revealing of the sons of God*." This assertion, too, has caused debate among scholars over the centuries. And yet it is clearly evident that Paul was insisting upon the fact that the future glory of the whole creation is inseparable from and dependent upon the final glorification of the sons of God. This truth is the focal point of Paul's clarifying statement in 8:20-21.

The fundamental proof for this connection is the *created relation* between man and the rest of the created order.

- Man was created as divine image-bearer, first for the sake of true communion with His Creator, but secondly for the purpose of exercising God's dominion over His works. Man is inseparably connected to the creation as its *lord* and *steward*; he was created to mediate God's rule over it as vice-regent.
- Therefore, man's estrangement from God resulted in the estrangement of the created order; when man was cursed the creation was cursed with him (Genesis 3:17-19). The dominion principle by which man is related to the rest of the creation insured that the curse of corruption and death flowed out from him to it. *For the same reason, the restoration of the cursed creation presupposes the restoration of its lord.* Unless man is renewed, it is futile to renew that which he rules over; his own continuing defilement will only act to again plunge it into ruin.

This proper understanding of the relationship between man and the rest of the created order provides helpful insight into Paul's expression, "the revealing of the sons of God." He was not denying the believer's present status as a son of God, nor was he indicating that somehow the creation is waiting for a future day when that sonship will finally be made evident. Rather, he was making the point that the created order – which, like man, stands even now in the reality of Christ's completed redemption (ref. Colossians 1:15-20) – can only find its own promised renewal in conjunction with man's final glorification. Thus the creation waits longingly for redeemed men to attain the consummation of their redemption (8:23), and so be "revealed" in the fullness of their glory. *It is when man enters into his glorification in the resurrection of the last day that the creation will at last enjoy its own everlasting renewal.*

- 3) The subhuman and inanimate creation finds its own relation to God through man. Therefore, man's calamity was its calamity, and man's glory is its glory. Thus Paul's assertion that "*the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God*" (8:20-21).

The creation did not subject itself to the futility of the curse; it was brought into this subjection by man's sin. But both Adam's sin and its cataclysmic effect were in accordance with the eternal will of God. His purpose for creating all things was that He would be glorified through their redemption (ref. Ephesians 1:3-6; 2 Timothy 1:8-9). *This means that the original perfection of the creation was not God's intended end, but only the first step in the eternal plan that would culminate with the summing up of everything in Jesus Christ.* In this sense Paul could rightly affirm that it was God who subjected the created order to futility.

But, as just observed, God had a specific and glorious purpose in this subjugation: the created order was made subject to the futility of the curse in order that it, like man who brought the curse upon it, would be "*set free from its slavery to corruption.*" Paul has shown at great length that Adam's sin has resulted in the enslavement of his progeny (6:1-8:2). Regardless of their self-perception, all people are sold into slavery to sin and death. But what is true of man the vice-regent is true of the realm of his dominion; the creation under him shares his enslavement to corruption.

But when those who are of the new humanity initiated in the new Man, Christ Jesus, are finally set free from every vestige of corruption with the "swallowing up" of death (1 Corinthians 15:12-26, 35-58), then the entire creation will also enter "*into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*" In Paul's words, it will be "liberated into the freedom associated with the glory enjoyed by the children of God"; it will find its own final, everlasting liberation and glory in theirs.

- 4) Thus the entire creation, and not simply the Christian, lives in *hope*. Its hope is the believer's hope, which is unwavering confidence in the complete fulfillment of the eternal purpose of the triune God. But because it presently exists in hope of *future* glory, the creation now "groans." Yet its groaning is that of a mother in the process of bringing forth new life; it groans as it "suffers the pains of childbirth." By this language Paul again emphasized the *imminence* of the awaited eschatological renewal. He depicted the creation as even now straining to give birth to the newness promised to it. And it does so in the context of *togetherness*; not together with believers, but as a "symphony of sighs" within its own diverse unity. In that day the thorn bush and briar will yield to the cypress and myrtle, the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the dust shall be the serpent's food.

- c. Because the believer has been joined to Christ by the indwelling Spirit, he shares in the triumph of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. He has been crucified with Christ and raised in Him to walk in newness of life as a son of God and heir of glory (6:1-11). But the Christian's participation in Jesus' triumph and inheritance includes his share in His suffering; as was the case for his Lord, future glory presupposes present suffering. But precisely because it serves a determined outcome, this suffering represents God's glorious *promise* to His children. This is the reason Paul could insist that it is not worthy to be compared with the glory to be revealed in the Father's suffering sons (8:18; cf. 2 Corinthians 4:7-18).

This present suffering takes many forms, being associated even with the believer's continuing sinfulness. But in the present context Paul was not so much concerned with *individual* matters of suffering, such as physical illness, financial problems, or relational difficulties. This is the way many read this passage, but to do so misses his point. Consistent with his overall perspective, Paul was viewing suffering from the vantage point of macro, salvation-historical realities. His concern was with the suffering that is the *eschatological angst* resulting from Christ's redemption. That is to say, he was speaking of the expectant groaning that characterizes those whose "spirits are alive because of righteousness," but whose "bodies are dead because of sin" (8:10-11). The Christian lives in the reality of the "already but not yet" kingdom – even now he is *in substance* all that he will be in the day of consummation. But since he waits for the consummation to come with Jesus' return, he lives in a state of *incompleteness*.

- The inner man is *being renewed* day by day, while, at the same time, the outer man is perishing (2 Corinthians 4:16).
- The Christian is a *new creature* (2 Corinthians 5:17), and yet the corruption of his mortality continues (1 Corinthians 15:35-53).
- As a new creature, he now *knows*, but he knows in part; he *sees*, but he sees dimly as through darkened glass (1 Corinthians 13:12).
- Even now the believer is a *son of God*, yet what he will be in the fullness of his sonship is not now present (1 John 3:2).

Because he lives in the reality of "already but not yet," the Christian suffers the angst of expectant longing for the perfection to come. Like Paul, he groans in himself, being burdened, because he does not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed with his dwelling from heaven, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life (2 Corinthians 5:1-4).

That this is the sense in which Paul was viewing suffering is evident from his implicating the whole creation in his argument. For the non-human creation does not suffer from physical pain, financial downturns, or relational struggles. And yet Paul indicated to his Roman readers that it shares the same suffering they endure.

It, too, “groans and suffers the pains of childbirth” as it waits with eager expectancy for the day when it will be freed from its own slavery to corruption (8:19-22). The creation *suffers*, but it does so in hope as it awaits the revealing of the sons of God. Thus Paul’s overall point in this context: the created order is to find its own deliverance from its corruption in the corresponding deliverance of the children of God. Its suffering is their suffering, and so also its hope is their hope. And if the creation lives in the confident hope that its present suffering under the curse is not worthy to be compared with the glory to come in the revealing of the sons of God, how much more should these sons live in hope? *The Christian is to be preeminently a person marked by joyful, eager, confident hope.* To do otherwise is incur the rightful rebuke of the cosmos itself.

- 1) And so the eschatological angst of the creation as it looks earnestly for the day of redemption is replicated in the saints: “*We ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body*” (8:23).

The non-human created order longs for the revealing of the sons of God, because their revelation in glory means its own glorification in the comprehensive renewal of a new heavens and earth. It groans in eager expectation for their glorification; how could they do otherwise? As the sons of God share the suffering of the cosmos, so they share its longing, which truth Paul made clear by using the same language of groaning and expectation with respect to both. This common sharing is more pronounced by his emphatic declaration: not only the creation, but we ourselves – *even we ourselves* – groan within ourselves in the same way.

And like the created order, the saints groan within themselves, not out of desperation or hopelessness, *but for exactly the opposite reason*: they groan because they live in unshakable, joyful hope. In a marvelous paradox, their inward groaning in suffering is the very expression of their confident longing. They groan because they eagerly long. Moreover, the basis of their confidence is not their own godliness or progress in sanctity, but the *first fruits of Christ’s indwelling Spirit*. The concept of “first fruits” alludes to the Old Covenant offering structure in which the sons of Israel were obligated to present the first part of their various harvests to the Lord (cf. Exodus 23:19, 34:22-26; Leviticus 23:10-20; Numbers 18:1-13; etc.). Importantly, these offerings had a promissory significance, and it is this idea that Paul was drawing upon. For in offering the very first part of a given harvest to God, Israel was not simply acknowledging that He brings forth the earth’s yield. *They were also expressing their confident trust that, what Yahweh had begun, He would bring to full fruition.* The “first fruits” offering was the promise of the fullness of the harvest to come. Thus Paul referred to Christ as the “first fruits” of the resurrection: His resurrection constitutes God’s promise that Christ’s brethren will also be raised at His return at the end of the age (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

Accordingly, the “first fruits of the Spirit” refers to the fact of the present indwelling of Christ’s Spirit in the saints, *but also of its significance for the future*. The indwelling Spirit is the evidence of their union with Christ (8:9-11), and He is the One who testifies with their spirits that they are even now children of God (8:15-16). At the same time, He is the sure promise of future glory: the Spirit’s presence insures every believer’s full transformation into the likeness of Christ, which transformation includes the glorification of his body in the resurrection (cf. again 1 Corinthians 15:12-58; 2 Corinthians 3:1-18; Ephesians 1:13-14; Philippians 3:1-21).

“[First fruits] alludes to both the beginning of a process and the unbreakable connection between its beginning and its end. As applied to the Spirit, then, the word connotes both that God’s eschatological redemptive work has begun and that this redemptive work will surely be brought to its intended culmination. The Spirit, in this sense, is both the ‘first installment’ of salvation and the ‘down payment’ or ‘pledge’ that guarantees the remaining stages of that salvation.” (Douglas Moo)

The Holy Spirit is thus the connecting element that binds together the *already* and the *not yet* aspects of the believer’s present existence. Because He is the “first fruits” of their salvation, He is also the reason they “groan” with eager expectation of its consummation. He makes men sons of God by joining them to Christ, and He testifies with their spirits to the fact of their adoption. And having already made them sons of God, the Spirit is also the promise of their future inheritance (Philippians 1:6; cf. Ephesians 1:3-14; Colossians 1:3-14; Hebrews 9:15; 1 Peter 1:3-5).

It is that imperishable inheritance for which they long with the steadfastness of true hope: they “*wait eagerly for their adoption as sons.*” Paul’s point was not that the adoption of Christian sonship awaits the renewal of the last day; he previously affirmed that believers are already sons. What the Christian waits for is the consummation of his adoption that is the *redemption of his body*. The believer’s sonship has its goal in the inheritance that is his revelation in glory, and this glorification is the perfection of his humanity in Christ (Colossians 3:1-4). Thus adoption implies the end of corruption and mortality in the resurrection of the body.

By referring to the final resurrection as the “*redemption of the body,*” Paul was emphasizing that this physical renewal is the body’s participation in Christ’s redemptive work. At present, believers’ bodies do not share in Jesus’ resurrection life; they remain “dead because of sin.” Only their spirits are “alive because of righteousness.” In this sense the Christian’s physical body is yet awaiting its own deliverance from its enslavement to corruption and death; it waits for the redemption through which humanity will be finally and fully summed up in the New Man and true Son.

- 2) The Christian life is a life of hope, and in 8:24 Paul brought his discussion back to this focal emphasis. Hope has been his central theme since the beginning of chapter five, and all of his argumentation from that point has served to establish and exalt it. Whether one considers justification by faith, peace with God, imputed righteousness, deliverance from law, or death to sin's dominion, each issue supplies a basis for Christian hope.

Even more, each is fundamental to the overarching reality of the believer's sonship, so that Paul appropriately presents sonship as the pinnacle reason that the Christian lives in hope. Sons are heirs, and heirs await an inheritance. So it is that believers have been saved in order to obtain the adoption of sons, which adoption brings the promise of future glory in the inheritance of all things in Christ: *it is in hope that we have been saved*.

To Paul, the believer's salvation is much more than a past occurrence or a present reality. In the case of perhaps the majority of Christians, they view their salvation primarily in terms of their having come to Christ and gained forgiveness of sins. Their sense of their salvation is, for all practical purposes, past tense; at some time in the past they were saved. The result is that many live day-to-day with no real consciousness of their new life in Christ and standing as children of God. And even among those who do consciously live with a sense of their salvation, *few really live in hope*. The best evidence of this is that the Christian community is largely characterized by the same fears, doubts, insecurities, discouragements, disillusionment, frustration, and worldly perspective and orientation that define those who are not joined to Christ.

But Paul's insistence is that confident hope is the very context in which the Christian's salvation exists and operates. Believers *have been saved*, but they have been saved *in hope*. This means that the Christian life – which is grounded in present salvation on the basis of past union with Christ – is *forward-looking*. For the nature of hope is that it pertains to what is yet future; though it always presupposes certain present realities, hope is ultimately concerned with what is not seen. Thus Paul's simple observation: "*Hope that is seen is not hope.*" The obvious proof of this is that hope ceases to exist the moment the thing hoped for becomes present: "*For why does one hope for what he sees?*"

- 3) The glory to be revealed in the sons of God – their glorious revealing that will be attended with the renewal of the whole creation – is a glory that is not yet visible. What presently meet the eye are only weakness, infirmity, corruption, and mortality. Nothing evident gives any indication of the glorious consummation that lies on the horizon. Quite the opposite, what is apparent is that "everything continues as it has from the beginning." Nothing indicates that the present order of things is to be done away and replaced with a new heavens and new earth (2 Peter 3:1-13).

What has been promised and secured in Christ's redemption is not visible in the present age, either as it concerns the created order or the world of men. And so, the final summation of all things in the heavens and earth in Christ is entirely a matter of hope: every Christian is constrained to "*hope for what he does not see*" (8:25a).

Paul's point is clear: the Christian life is a life of hope; it finds its focal point in what is yet future. At the same time, it is a unique hope in that it pertains to things that have no visible or tangible substantiation in the world. Hope is intrinsic to human experience, but people usually hope for what they have a good expectation of realizing. They hope for what is reasonable and evidential. But Christian hope is of a different character:

- First of all, it is a hope that is set upon a future commodity that the present order argues against. In terms of what meets the eye, it is a hope that is *unreasonable* and *without evidence*.
- But, secondly, it is a hope that is *unshakable*. No one can live without hope, but the hopes of men are as fickle and transitory as are their own lives. People hope for things that are reasonable, but without exception their hopes are never fully realized. Frequently, hopes are shattered, and men are left to pick up the pieces and set their hope elsewhere.

Together these two observations show that Christian hope is an expression of **faith**. *It is a hope that believes and trusts God and His promise rather than evidence and reasonable expectation supplied by the existing order of things*. And yet, this hope is not without evidence of any sort. It looks to the "down payment" that is the indwelling Spirit of Christ, and believes God's promise that the "first fruits" of the Spirit is the guarantee of the full harvest. He who redeemed all things in Christ will most certainly bring about their glorious summation in Him, for His Spirit cannot fail.

Because the believer's hope flows out of his faith, it is an enduring hope: "*with perseverance he waits eagerly*" for the inheritance that is the revealing of the sons of God in glory (8:25b). He waits with what one man has appropriately called "patient fortitude" – he is immovable, not because of what he sees in himself or the world around him, or because of what the present order of things leads him to reasonably expect. He perseveres in hope solely because of His faith in the purpose and power of God and the certitude of His promises, all of which are "yes and amen in Christ Jesus."

"According to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation." (2 Peter 3:13-15)