

Romans 8:18-30: The Spirit's firstfruits

From the preceding section, Paul shows that God's saving purpose beyond Israel includes not just Gentile believers but the whole of creation. The inheritance of the redeemed people is no longer simply the Promised Land (Palestine) but the whole world (cf. 4:13). God's plan is the reversal of Adam's fall and its consequences. Therefore, the analysis of the human condition which began in terms of Adam (cf. Romans 1) is shown to climax in the restoration not only of the sons of God to the glory God intended for man from the first but also of the cosmos.

The word 'glory' (Gk *doxa*, δoξα) appears both in verses 17 and 18. It is a familiar idea in Paul's writings that sharing in the glory of Christ (Romans 8:17) also means sharing in his sufferings (2 Corinthians 1:5; Philippians 3:10; Colossians 1:24). There are some people, regrettably in an evangelistic context, who falsely make out that the life of the believer is somehow easier than the life of the unbeliever. The only way that the Christian life can be easier than the life of the worldly person is if we are doing it wrongly. In the New Testament, Paul, as the Lord Jesus, never tries to hide the fact that believers suffer. If believers are following in the way of Christ who was rejected, betrayed, tortured and crucified then it almost goes without saying that the way is not going to be easy. Christians must expect to share in the rejection and the trials that Christ himself experienced. Robust Christian faith will always challenge the world around it. Nevertheless, Paul puts things into perspective:

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

The word translated 'I consider' (Gk *logizomai*, λογίζομαι) has the sense of the expression, 'I am firmly of the opinion' or 'it is my conviction'. Paul is firm about this because he is making the important point that present sufferings are not to be compared with (they are not of like value to) the glory that will be 'revealed' (Gk *apokalyptō*, αποκαλυπτω). It is this word, translated 'revealed', from which we get the English word 'apocalypse'. It means to reveal, or to disclose, in the sense of 'to take the lid off'. The final unveiling of God's eternal plan is yet to be disclosed but when it is revealed it will show that the temporary sufferings of this world are as nothing compared with the eternal glory.

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God
to be revealed.
(Romans 8:19)

Paul has already extended hope in Christ from Jews to Gentiles but now he extends it to the whole creation. God's saving plan extends even beyond humanity. In Genesis (1:26-30; 2:19) man was not only given authority over creation but also responsibility as steward. In a sense, Paul personifies creation, which is like an expectant relative looking out for the train on which a loved one is returning home. Creation waits in

'eager expectation'. These 'sons of God' are the children we met in v. 16 who are seen in glory when the Lord Jesus returns in glory (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, 1 Corinthians 15:42-52).

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ...
(Romans 8:20)

As Adam had authority over creation (Psalm 8:6), the idea is that creation was not party to Adam's failure but was drawn into it, sharing his fallen nature (Genesis 3:17-18). Therefore, the world around sinful men and women is caught up in an endless cycle of death and decay, showing the emptiness of the tempter's promise that a sinful man would be 'like God'. Nevertheless, the ultimate destiny of creation is in God's hands

that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.
(Romans 8:21)

Before the fall, mankind had a fitting environment and after the fall mankind still had a fitting environment, one which was likewise fallen. God's plan of redemption is that fallen mankind should be redeemed and, in order for redeemed mankind to have a suitable environment, creation also needs to be restored, 'liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God'. 'Liberty' and 'glory' are important themes in Paul's understanding of salvation (soteriology).

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.
(Romans 8:22)

Paul continues the personification of creation that he began in v. 20. In order to express the coming into being of a new order, Paul uses the metaphor of childbirth. The idea of a time of tribulation or anguish (the birth pangs of the Messiah) was familiar in Jewish thought – the thought being that a new creation will spring from the womb of the old. The metaphor of childbirth is a vivid one of suffering with a joyful outcome.

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.
(Romans 8:23)

The celebration of the firstfruits of the harvest (Exodus 23:16); 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:9-12) was marked by the feast of Pentecost (the Feast of Weeks, so called because it was seven weeks after the Passover). For Christians, Pentecost was associated with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2). At Pentecost, the first sheaves of the harvest, or loaves made from them (Numbers 15:20) were presented to God in thanksgiving.

The greater harvest was the whole of which the firstfruits were a part. Here 'the firstfruits of the Spirit' are a small part and the whole is the total harvest of risen men and women (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23). Paul wants to show that the final harvest that started with the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:20) has begun. Just as creation groans (v. 22), so believers groan inwardly, looking for deliverance from the world around and from the prison of the body eagerly awaiting adoption, 'the redemption of our bodies'. For the believer the two decisive moments, therefore, are the reception of the Spirit (at conversion, v. 9) and the redemption of the body (at the resurrection or when the Lord comes again in glory). The intervening period is characterised by a tension between the 'now' and 'not yet' of Christian experience. The believer has the firstfruits of the Spirit but the reception of the Holy Spirit at conversion is the beginning of a much greater process which will end with the resurrection, the redemption of the body. Between these two events is the time of 'groaning' (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:1-5; Romans 7:24).

Here we must make a distinction between the true believer and the casual church-goer. The true believer recognises, through the Spirit in his or her life, God's demand for holiness or Christlikeness (Stott, 1994:222). Believers realise that they are not what God wants them to be. Before conversion, making a mistake, losing your temper, doing something wrong was unfortunate but, there you are, everyone makes mistakes. So the respectable, unconverted person will want to turn over a new leaf, count to ten or try harder next time, while other people might not be all that bothered, especially if they were not found out or no lasting damage was done. The believer, however, sees things differently, is frustrated at not meeting God's standard and realises that this is because of human weakness, because of salvation begun but not complete. Paul also says that the believers eagerly await 'adoption as sons' (Romans 8:23) and yet earlier (Romans 8:14-17), Paul seemed to be saying that believers were already sons. This is a teaching that often appears in scripture and again shows the 'now and not yet' of the Christian life.

Many of you might know that what makes a person legally married is the saying of the prescribed words in the presence of the two witnesses. Some years ago, I conducted a wedding ceremony and immediately after she had said the words, the knowing-bride whispered to her new husband, 'We're married now'. Even before I had joined their hands, pronounced them husband and wife, said the prayers, sung the hymn, signed the registers. Even before they had the photographs, enjoyed the roast chicken and apple pie, endured the speeches and the bride and groom had been toasted, she knew that they were married. In a previous generation, where couples had more commonly only coyly held hands and certainly not lived together before marriage, wedding receptions seemed much shorter than they do today. Janet and I were married at 2.30 pm and away from the wedding reception before 7.00 pm. Of course, the bride who whispered, 'we're married now' was right and yet there was a now and not yet. Believers are already God's children – 'justified, reconciled, and brought into his family'. But we are not yet God's children in the way we one day will be — possessing the full inheritance, enjoying perfect holiness in resurrected bodies, and glorified' (Moo, 2000:267).

For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?

(Romans 8:24)

The idea is a difficult one. As far as hope is concerned we are already saved but, in itself, hope is not the completion of salvation. By definition, we hope for something that we do not see. We hope for that which is ahead of us, in the future, as yet invisible. In modern English 'hope' is a very weak word. This is not the kind of hope that hopes to win the lottery. Christian hope is a confident hope for those who are led by the Spirit, based on receiving the Spirit and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

(Romans 8:25)

In the present age the believer lives in the 'in-between times'. Although it is a time of groaning, it is also a time of eager yet patient waiting.

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.

(Romans 8:26)

Just as the believer is groaning with creation, so the Holy Spirit helps believers in their weakness. The believer is still subject to the human condition, the corruptibility of the body and the weakness of the flesh. In the in-between times, the believer is not sure what to pray for – surely an experience that every believer shares. To pray, without precision, can be frustrating and confusing. Thankfully, the Spirit prays for the believers in a way that is beyond words. We ought not to make 'beyond words' too mystical. One of the great things about being part of a football crowd is the atmosphere of being in the crowd, yet to produce a transcript of all that was said would be a challenge. It would be for me as I wouldn't know how to spell some of the things that the people around me say! But then, there are all those, 'oohs!' and 'aahs!' said in different ways to express different things, that mean something in the context of the football crowd but would be unintelligible elsewhere.

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.

(Romans 8:27)

There are places in the Bible where God's seeing into our hearts, where ambitions, values and motives are rooted, is a warning. Here, however, it is a word of comfort that, even when the believer is frustrated and confused, not knowing how to pray, that God knows us and understands us and the Spirit intercedes for us.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

(Romans 8:28)

Paul continues to look towards the end times. Despite the contradictions of human experience, the believer trusts that ultimately God will work his purpose out even through the frustrations of the in-between times. This is what Christians have traditionally called 'providence'. In whatever circumstances the believer finds him or herself, God is ultimately in control and he has two purposes for those who believe, our good and his glory (Wiersbe, 1989:541). It does not mean that things will work out in a way that is easy for a believer – but it does mean that God can use even our trials and tribulations for our good and for his glory. This hope is for those who love God and acknowledge him as their creator and Father. It is a general way of speaking of believers and does not mean that God works for good only to those who love him enough.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

(Romans 8:29)

This verse brings us face to face with the difficult and historically controversial doctrine of election (Ziesler, 1989:225). 'Foreknew' (Gk *proginōskō*, προγινώσκω) is not simply knowledge before the event but the knowledge that God has from the beginning. To our way of thinking divine predestination and human freewill are incompatible but this distinction was not so clear in Jewish thought. As far as Paul is concerned, believers may rest in the assurance that 'their part in the people of God is not accidental or random' (Dunn, 1988) but Paul's intention here is not to make a point about election but about the security of a believer under persecution. The resurrected body of the Son is the firstfruits, and believers are the fuller harvest. The divine image that was distorted in Adam is restored in the risen and exalted Christ (cf. Hebrews 2:6-10). 'Firstborn' was an important idea in the Old Testament. Israel was called God's firstborn (Exodus 4:22). The sonship of Christ is shared by all who have received and are led by the Spirit.

And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

(Romans 8:30)

It is clear that the initiative is with God. God's saving purpose is completed with glorification, when the believer is conformed to Christ (Philippians 3:21). Here Paul is not inviting the reader to consider the relationship between the foreknowledge and sovereignty of God and human freewill. Instead he is pointing to the eternal destiny of the believer.

When the image of God in the old creation was defaced by sin, so that (people as they now are fall) short of the glory for which (they) were made, the purpose of God was not frustrated. When the due time arrived, the divine image was displayed among (us) by the new Man, into whose image those who are united with him by faith are progressively changed – from one degree of glory to another.

(Bruce, 1963:172)

Although Paul's main point is to assure believers that God's plan for us is future glory, the thoughtful reader of scripture is faced with a sequence of ideas, election, predestination and eternal security. Those following what is commonly known as the Calvinistic school of thought insist that 'foreknow' (Romans 8:29) means 'choose beforehand' and that the sequence of ideas that follows shows God's sovereignty. Traditional Wesleyan or Arminian thought insists on viewing such passages as this in the whole picture. There are many places in scripture where people are presented with choices. From this the Arminian concludes that the whole process cannot simply be predetermined.

In considering these verses (Romans 8:29-30), Arminians maintain that 'foreknow' means 'know ahead of time' and conclude that what Paul is saying is that God inevitably knows, from eternity, who will believe or not believe and that a believer's 'election' is not 'unconditional' (as Calvinists maintain) but 'conditional' in Christ. This is an issue that has been rumbling for at least 400 years and is not going to be solved in a few minutes.

In our zeal for neatness, we can sometimes push too hard on one side or the other. Calvinists rightly affirm the sovereign grace of God and that salvation is all to the glory of God – there is no human credit in it. Arminians find it hard to understand how a God who so loved the *world* that he gave his only Son so that *whoever* believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16) could, at one and the same time, know that the benefits of the saving death of Christ were not really for the world, in the commonly understood meaning of the term, but only for the 'elect', those whom God foreknew and predestined. Although sometimes Charles Wesley's hymns are belligerent in their Arminianism (see preface to *Christian Hymns*, 1977, Evangelical Movement of Wales), some of them manage to hold variant views in poetic tension.

What shall I do my God to love,
My loving God to praise?
The length, and breadth, and height to prove,
And depth of sovereign grace?

Thy sovereign grace to all extends,
Immense and unconfined;
From age to age it never ends;
It reaches all mankind.

Throughout the world its breadth is known,
Wide as infinity;
So wide it never passed by one,
Or it had passed by me.

My trespass was grown up to heaven;
But, far above the skies,
In Christ abundantly forgiven,
I see thy mercies rise.

The depth of all-redeeming love
What angel tongue can tell?
O may I to the utmost prove
The gift unspeakable!

Come quickly, gracious Lord, and take
Possession of thine own;
My longing heart vouchsafe to make
Thine everlasting throne.

(*HP* 46, What shall I do my God to love)