

# The Love of God (Romans 8 : 18-39)

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## The Inevitability of Suffering

Paul begins the concluding section of chapter 8 with a glance back to the sufferings of Jesus, to which he referred in verse 17. Now he links them more closely to the sufferings which we are called to endure as Christians living in the world. This epistle was written some years before Christianity was officially persecuted by the Romans, but Paul had already been attacked by the Jews on several occasions, and he must have been aware that those who bore the name of Jesus would be expected to pay a price for it. Some of those to whom he was writing in the church had been expelled from Rome in AD 49, so they would have had at least one experience of persecution not unlike Paul's. However, it is probably best not to limit Paul's reference here to forms of persecution, since Christians were just as likely to suffer from all the things which continue to plague us now: handicaps, illnesses, bereavements and so on. The next verse, which refers to the groaning of creation, suggests that it is this wider framework of pain which Paul has in mind.

In verse 18, Paul makes it clear that suffering is to be expected in this age, with glory to come in the future, and he makes it very obvious that the glory to come is far greater than the present sufferings – indeed, the two things defy comparison. He then proceeds to draw out the contrast between them in the next few verses. The sufferings of the present age are described first, as the earnest expectation of creation. It is a matter of argument as to what exactly Paul means by this phrase, but it is fairly safe to say that it indicates the very close link between ourselves and the material world, as well as the importance of the latter in the sight of God. Christianity is a religion which believes in the resurrection of the body, which means that we as Christians believe that matter also must share in the redemptive work of Christ. However, we do not believe that matter is evil or sinful, since these categories can only properly be applied to human beings.

## The Suffering World Order

What we are told in Genesis is that man was given dominion over the creatures, and so when he fell, the creation was subject to an alien rule. It now labours under this yoke, and waits for its deliverance. In verse 21, Paul actually uses the same language of freedom to describe it as he has earlier

used to describe our release from the bondage of the law. Its present state is described in verse 22 as groaning and labouring, language which recalls the bondage of the children of Israel in Egypt. This is probably not a coincidence, since the slavery in Egypt was often used as a picture of our servitude to sin, and so it would have seemed natural to Paul to extend its use to include the creation as well. What we are not told here is whether the liberated creation will also be renewed and transformed, like the resurrection body, or whether it will be left in its natural state. Perhaps because Paul is talking about sin, and the creation does not sin, it does not seem necessary to go into this subject here. Any renewal of creation will not be connected with the removal of sin, and so the subject is not fully dealt with at this point. Nevertheless, we know from Revelation 21:1-2 that at the end of time the creation will also be transformed, so that in our resurrected bodies we shall live with a new heaven and a new earth.

Something of this kind seems to be what Paul is hinting at when he says that the creation is subjected to vanity and to the slavery of destruction. This means that in its present state it leads to a dead end; we cannot use it or glory in it in the way we should, because it suffers from a loss of ultimate purpose and from a perversion which leads to its destruction in the present age. This unhappy fate is not something which the creation has chosen for itself, a point which brings out the contrast between it and Adam, who freely chose to sin. On the contrary, God has obliged the creation to share in the judgement meted out to man in the hope that eventually it will share in the same experience of liberation as that given to the children of God.

## The Future Glory

When we turn to the other side of the equation, to the glory which will be revealed, we find that it is described primarily in personal terms. It will be the revelation of the sons of God, the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Some commentators take this to refer to the present situation, and argue that redeemed human beings are free to redeem the creation around them as well. They go on to say that it is possible for Christians to create an alternative society which is in some respects a foretaste of the kingdom of Heaven on earth. It was a vision shared by some of the seventeenth-century Puritans, and it continues to appear from time to time in different parts of the church, perhaps especially in certain forms of Calvinism. But although the idea is an attractive one, it is hard to see that it receives much support from Scripture. Elsewhere, Paul maintains the validity of the woman's subjection to the man because of the Fall (1 Timothy 2:11-15) and here he quite clearly places the revelation

of the glory in the future. For the moment, Paul seems to be saying, the children of God are present in the world, but their presence is a hidden one. The fact that they will one day rule the world in the company of Christ is not yet apparent, as is fairly obvious when we look around us. The Puritans who believed that they had ushered in the reign of the saints were jumping the gun and were sadly deluded, as their final defeat makes abundantly clear. So for the present we must go on saying that the promise of these verses is an expectation which has not yet been fulfilled in our experience.

The unity of suffering and hope which binds us to the creation is brought out in verse 23, where Paul says that even those of us who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, who have tasted of the heavenly gift, continue to groan in expectation of the inheritance, which is the redemption of our body. Nothing could state more clearly than this the principle which Paul has been developing all along in this chapter. As persons, created in the image of God, we are saved because we have been restored to the right relationship with him. But as creatures living in a fallen world we have not yet received the promised inheritance.

### **Saved by Hope**

Nevertheless, Paul reminds us that there is no reason to feel discouraged. We have already been saved by hope. The importance of hope, though it is readily acknowledged by Christians in theory, is often denied in practice, if only because the word tends to get lost between faith and love (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:13). Yet here Paul ranks hope with faith as the true cause of our salvation. This is possible of course, because in reality faith and hope go together. One might even say that hope is channelled faith, faith with a purpose. We are not merely called to believe in God in some kind of abstract or static sense; we are called to expect him to work in a particular way. This gives our faith a direction which is bound to spill over into the realm of practical action, because it looks forward to a particular consummation at the end of time. Christian faith is not blind trust in an arbitrary God; it is intelligent and responsible acceptance of God's plan for us and for the world. That acceptance, that kind of faith, gives us the hope by which our salvation becomes a practical experience. and not just a notional idea.

But in emphasizing the nature of hope, Paul returns even more vigorously to the assertion that as yet it remains invisible. If we could see it, says Paul, it would no longer be hope. Its invisibility does not mean that it is available to us, fully worked out, at some spiritual level in our lives, but rather that it has not yet been fully realised. The proper response of the Christian towards it can therefore only be patient waiting. The gift of patience is one of the most difficult challenges which we have to face as believers. On the one hand, some of us are tempted towards activism, towards drawing the kingdom of God into this world by claiming that it has already arrived. We associate our own ideas with the will of God, and proceed accordingly, building a visible structure which makes a mockery of hope and in the end results in a new kind of idolatry. The other problem, which is the exact opposite of the first one, is that we will allow patience to become an excuse for laziness and indifference. It is easy to say that

patient waiting means that we must refrain from the kind of activity which would deny the reality of hope, and conclude from that that the most spiritual thing is to do nothing at all!

### **Prayer-work**

It is therefore appropriate that Paul should go on immediately to develop his idea of what work a Christian should be engaged in, and we discover, perhaps to our surprise, that that work is the work of prayer. Prayer has a rough time of it in Christian circles. Activists do not pray at all, or if they do, it is usually so perfunctory that an observer would hardly know it has happened. Sometimes the tone of an activist's prayer may be tinged with resentment; when there is so much to do, why do we have to waste time on something as useless and unproductive as prayer? The pacifist, on the other hand, integrates prayer into his scheme of pious laziness. There is nothing quite like prayer to give people the impression that you are deeply concerned about something, when in fact you have no intention of doing anything about it and may even regard the activity of mouthing a few pious phrases with your eyes shut as a kind of magical incantation, which will charm any problems away. Each of us tends naturally to one or the other of these extremes, and the discipline of an ordered prayer life is the basic ingredient of the patient waiting which is expected of us as believers.

Fortunately in our weakness we have the power of the indwelling Spirit of God, who makes up for our failures and gives us an ability to pray, even when we are quite incapable of it ourselves. We may not know what to say, but the Spirit comes to our aid with "groanings which cannot be uttered". This curious phrase has been the subject of much discussion. Some believe that Paul is talking here about the phenomenon known as speaking in tongues, though the fact that the groanings cannot be uttered would seem to rule out any form of audible speech. What we are dealing with here is a spiritual reality which takes us beyond the physical, external world to the hidden depths of our life with God. The great struggles of the Christian life are usually unseen and may be quite unknown to those with whom we associate every day. Jesus told his disciples that when they fasted they were not to make a great show of it, but were to carry on as normal, so that others would not notice what was going on. It is the same here with the work of the Holy Spirit in prayer. Prayer in the Spirit belongs properly to the secret place in the centre of our lives, where we do battle with the forces of evil.

To say that it is secret does not mean that it is unknown to anyone else whatsoever. Paul reminds us in verse 27 that there is one who searches the hearts of men, and he understands both what is going on in us and what the Spirit's mind and will actually is. It is not absolutely clear here whether it is the Father or the Son whom Paul is referring to, and it may well be that the ambiguity is deliberate, reminding us that searching men's hearts is a work of both the Father and the Son, in the Spirit. The fact that God is referred to in this roundabout way makes us think primarily of the Father, and reveals to us the hiddenness of the transcendent majesty of God. But we are also told, elsewhere in Scripture, that Jesus

knows what is in the heart of man, and so we learn that he too is involved in this process. Once again, we see that the Holy Spirit serves both the other two Persons, that he is the Spirit of both the Father and the Son. When this Spirit comes to our rescue, he does so because we are holy, or saints. It is our relationship with God, established in Christ, the imputation to us of a righteousness which is not ours by nature, which gives the Holy Spirit the freedom to act in this way. The Spirit which is holy can only make contact with people who are holy, and when he does so, he prays for us according to God's will. To know that will, we have to be in the Spirit, since only he can give us that understanding which escapes our natural minds.

### **Facing Tragedy and Suffering**

Now Paul adds that we know that for those who love God, everything works together for good. The way in which the Holy Spirit acts in us confirms both the reality of the love which flows back and forth between us and God, and also the fact that we have been called according to his plan and purpose. We cannot love God in our own strength; it is because he has loved us, sent his Son to die for us and given us his Spirit; because, in other words, we have been called according to his plan, that we have been given the power to love him and the understanding that whatever happens to us will turn out for good in the end. This is a very important promise, and one of the hardest things to believe in the whole of the Bible. Relatively few people turn away from God because they cannot believe in the resurrection, or in miracles, or in the Virgin Birth of Christ. Unbelief of that kind is an intellectual excuse which conceals a deeper level of rebellion, which intellectual people especially are often ashamed to admit exists. But many people turn against God because they cannot accept that what has happened to them could possibly be willed by him, or turn out for their good. A mother who loses a child, a man who is paralysed in the prime of life, even an elderly person who dies a painful and lingering death – these are far more powerful arguments for most people than anything about the inspiration of Scripture or the life of the historical Jesus.

In the face of human suffering and tragedy, it is not easy for the Christian to reaffirm that God has a purpose for us in these things. To walk through the valley of the shadow of death but to fear no evil is the hardest thing any of us will ever be called to do. We cannot pretend that we have a magic solution to it, that we will be left unscarred by life's experiences, or that a little prayer will heal the wounds which the suffering of this world brings. As sinful creatures who have inherited the curse of Adam, our life on earth is essentially tragic. We mitigate the consequences of our rebellion in different ways, and we are promised that one day the hope of salvation will be realised, and the tears and sorrows of this life will be no more. In the meantime though, we are called to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows as part of our calling to bear the cross of Christ. Yet if we have seen the vision of him who was crucified for us, we know that he bears the heaviest part of our cross on our behalf. To know suffering is a privilege, the privilege of being able to share, however weakly or inadequately, in the suffering of the Son of God. A

gospel which fails to talk about this is being unfaithful to the witness of Scripture and is preventing us from seeing that even our sorrows work for good, because they bring us into a deeper and more meaningful fellowship with the crucified and risen Lord.

### **The Mystery of Predestination**

Paul goes on to complete the picture by introducing us to the great mystery of predestination, which is the ultimate assurance we have that we are children of God. Many people find predestination hard to cope with because they equate it with determinism, or fatalism. Oddly enough, most of the world's philosophies and religions are deterministic in one way or another, and this is something that ideologies as apparently diverse as Islam and Marxism have in common. Christianity stands out from its rivals in being anti-deterministic, because we do not believe that a man's heredity or environment controls who and what he is. Nor do we believe, as Islam does, that man is subject to fate, identified in this case with the will of God. Determinism is rejected because it locates the purpose of man's existence in human, or material nature. Fatalism is rejected because it sees man's existence as governed by a spiritual force which cannot be influenced by any reality outside itself.

Predestination is different from these because it can be understood only in a personal context. God predestined us to be exactly like the image of his Son, in other words, to have a relationship with the Father which is identical to that of the Son, so that the Son will not be an only child, but the eldest of many brothers and sisters. To be made in the image of the Son is to be made in the image of God, to be given a freedom which belongs only to God, and which defines his being over against the creation. Predestination is therefore a liberation from the forces of determinism, and an entry into the presence and fellowship of the Triune God. The process by which this happens is outlined in verse 30. If God has predestined us, then he has also called us, justified us and glorified us. The order of these things is important, and we must look at each of them in turn.

First of all, he has called us. By this expression, Paul means that God has given us a name which reflects his love and purpose for us, and has used that name to speak to us on a one-to-one basis. Today we have reduced names to conventional symbols which have little meaning, but this was not true in New Testament times. Jesus was given his name, which is that of the prophet Joshua, because he was predestined to take Israel beyond the limitations of the Mosaic Law and by his death open up the promised land of the kingdom of Heaven. His disciple Simon was given the name Peter, or Rock because it was on the rock of Peter's faith that Jesus was going to build his church, Even Saul the Pharisee abandoned that name and became the apostle Paul, as a sign that although he was a pure Hebrew, he was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. To be called by God is to be given both a new identity and a new purpose for living, and that is what happens to all who are predestined according to his will.

Once we are called, we are also justified, and this is where the work of the Son acquires its importance for our lives.

We may be called by God, but as long as 'we are in a state of rebellion against him, there is nothing that we can do. Our calling remains dormant, and if it is known at all, it appears as a scandal to the world, because the life we live in practice is nothing like the calling which we have in theory. This is why the Jews had done such damage to the name of God, because they preached one thing but practised another. It is an old and common trap for us all, and we need to be very much on our guard against it. Without Christ, there would be little we could do, because our sinful state would make it automatically impossible to do anything which would count as good in his eyes. But once we have been justified in Christ that disability is removed, and we are free to live out the calling which God has appointed for us. This we do by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, in whom God has given us a share in his glory. This glory has not yet been revealed to the world, but it is already present and at work in us. Because of this, we have the strength to live according to God's purpose, and the promise that he will never let us down.

### **God for Us!**

The last eight verses of the chapter bring the explanation of our relationship to God to a climax, by revealing the love which lies at the heart of everything which he has done and will do for us. Paul sums up everything he has been saying in the simple rhetorical question – if God is on our side, who or what could possibly be against us? If God was prepared to go to the length of sacrificing his own Son, when he could so easily and justly have spared him, it must be obvious that he will go to any length to protect and defend us. Once God has chosen us, how can anyone call his decision into question? If God has justified us, who can possibly condemn us now? The absurdity of it rings through the rhetoric like a theme which could almost have come from a litany. The sharp contrast between the power of God and the impotence of any conceivable opponent is a note which is struck again and again. Finally, in the second part of verse 34, Paul unveils the secret of God's favour towards us.

Christ has died on our behalf, but even more than this, he has risen again from the dead, thereby setting the seal on his saving work. Now he is seated at the right hand of God, a colourful expression which means that he has taken up the authority and the rule of the kingdom which the Father has given him, and in that new and glorious role he is interceding

for us praying that the Father will forgive us on the basis of the blood which he shed for our justification. In one short verse, Paul recapitulates the drama of Christ's death and resurrection, tying it in to his ascension (which is implicit in the statement that he is now seated at the Father's right hand) and present work of pleading our cause in Heaven. This is the basis of our hope, the content of our faith and the benefit we receive from Christ's overwhelmingly great love for us.

The last five verses concentrate on this love, and show us just how wide and deep it is. In love we are bound to Christ, and what power on earth can now separate us from him? Paul goes through some of the possibilities. Significantly, he lists precisely those things which are most likely to make us turn away from God. Suffering, hardship, persecution, famine, destitution, danger, violence – the stuff of newspaper stories and television dramas which each of us secretly dreads. To most of us these are things which happen to other people; the thought that they might ever come home to us is just too painful to contemplate! Yet Paul never shrinks from the logical consequences of serving Christ. He goes back to Scripture to remind us that God's people are constantly being put to death, constantly being treated like sheep ready for the ritual sacrificial slaughter – and all for the sake of their commitment to him. These things are not the exception, not a tragic aberration in the life of the believer, but the norm which the Bible tells us to expect.

Yet Paul does not, and in faithfulness to the gospel, he cannot end on a note of despair. For the message of Christ's salvation is that although we are forced to endure these things, we can know the joy of victory in the power of Christ, who loved us and sacrificed himself for us. There is a note of the superlative in that victory too, because Paul knows that what we receive from Christ far surpasses anything that might be inflicted on us here on earth. But not only on earth. In the last two verses, he goes on to add that there are no heavenly powers either, which can overturn what Christ has accomplished for us. Life and death melt away in the presence of Christ. Angels and spiritual powers of different kinds fade into the background. No force in creation, high or low, can come between us and God. This is what the love of Jesus means. It is what the work of Jesus on the cross and in Heaven has brought about. And now it is what Christ's rule as Lord maintains and guarantees in us, as the assurance that we have eternal life with God in him.