

## **From Groans to Glory: Creation** **Romans 8:18-22**

**March 24, 2019**  
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Some years ago, we had a funeral and said goodbye to a pillar of the community. Bob Brown had taught at Crown Point schools for years and he was a football coach. Even after retirement, he rarely missed a Crown Point Bulldogs football game.

A lot of people showed up for the viewing and funeral. That was not unexpected, but what was a bit unusual, was that in the casket, per Bob's request, between his folded hands, was a fork. Bob was known for his object lessons. He requested the fork because if at the end of a meal the hostess says to you, *keep your fork*, it means dessert is on the way. The best is yet to come. Keep your fork. Bob's fork in his hands was a silent witness to his personal belief that for him, the best was yet to come. Not dessert, but glory.

Where would such a thought come from? All over the Bible, the prophecies, the words of Jesus, the New Testament. All of them urge Christians to keep their forks. Few passages say it like the one before us.

*"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 firstfruits 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." (Romans 8:18-24 ESV)*

This suffer/glory theme is applied to creation in verses 18-22 and then to Christians in 23-24. Creation groans now but will be freed someday. We groan now but anticipate glory and eternal life someday. From groans to glory.

This is all set up with verse 18, *"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."*

### **Our Future is Far More Wonderful Than Our Present**

Paul wanted to encourage these Roman Christians. In Rome, Christianity was already viewed very negatively. In a few years, Paul himself would be under arrest in Rome. Christianity wouldn't enjoy favorable status in the Roman empire for nearly three centuries. To be a Christian at that time and in that place was hard. It meant suffering. Paul is a pastor and he wants to encourage these Roman Christians, and us as well. It's suffering now but glory is coming. *"For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." (2 Corinthians 4:17)*

Do you hear the theme? Keep your fork. The afflictions described here are not just persecution, but any sufferings associated with life in this broken world. It's a comparison; the glory to come is so wonderful that all the suffering and affliction will be worth it.

Verses 18-22 focus on the redemption of the created world. This touches on a theme that God has used immensely in my life; the stunning beauty in the world around us. I've only written one book in my life and it is on the beauty of God as seen in the creation around us. As beautiful as this world is, it's not what it used to be and not what it will be again someday.

*"For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God."* (Romans 8:19) Does this mean the deer and squirrels are privately discussing God's plan for the future, like a *Far Side* cartoon? No. Paul does here what the Bible does elsewhere, especially the Psalms—personify creation; give creation human characteristics. The Psalms include trees clapping their hands and the mountains skipping like rams. Jesus said at his triumphal entry that the rocks might just sing out in joy. Trees don't have hands and the only music rocks like is of course rock music...which they play at the Hard Rock Café...which with bread is called Rock 'n' Roll. But I'm digressing into music theory.

In Romans 8, the cosmos, the world, is said to be *waiting* and *eagerly longing*. It's a wonderful Greek word; it means standing on tip-toe or craning the neck. Think of that moment right before the bride comes down the aisle. Everybody knows it's about to be the moment. People are looking backwards, straining to see, waiting for the revealing of the bride.

That is the sense of it here. All creation is straining their necks, up on their tip-toes, eagerly awaiting the doors to be opened and for the children of God to be revealed for who they really are. This harkens back to the previous passage which describes all true Christians as adopted sons and daughters of God. By adoption, God places us in his family and promises us an inheritance with Christ. The revealing of God's children is the future consummation, judgment of the world, and new heaven and new earth.

But why is creation eagerly longing? Paul explains:

### **The Big Story of Creation**

*"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."* (Romans 8:20)

This may seem obvious, but what creation is he talking about? Since this creation is waiting for our redemption, it is referring to all non-human creation. The material world. Everything created except Adam and Eve. This includes the inanimate world and the animal world. The inter-galactic and the atomic. All of this was "subjected to futility."

When was creation "subjected to futility"? The big moments in the Big story, which we call the Christian worldview, are:

<b>Creation</b>	God made everything, including us.
<b>Fall</b>	Adam and Eve sinned against God.
<b>Redemption</b>	Jesus' death and resurrection
<b>Consummation</b>	Jesus' return, judgment, new heaven and earth

This is the truth grid through which we understand all other truths and philosophies as well as history and future destiny. Our kids need to get this, so they understand math and

biology and world civilization as components of this story. Adult Christians need it as well to understand our own small life stories in this grand divine narrative.

But what about the cosmos and its place in this story? Here is where Paul applies the suffering/glory paradigm to the story of the created order.

### **Creation**

The Bible starts with, *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.* (Genesis 1:1) The universe was made by God and is owned by God. *"And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."* (Genesis 1:31)

How was it "very good"? God puts his stamp of approval on the created order in terms of its morality, quality craftsmanship, aesthetic beauty, and its divine purpose to reflect what God is like. The universe is God's divine self-portrait.

- *"For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made."* (Romans 1:20)
- *"The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork."* (Psalm 19:1)

God made the physical world as an expression of his spiritual character. God is spirit. The world is physical. God is creator and separate from creation. Nothing in his physical world is God. We believe in theistic creation, not pantheism like *Avatar* and many other movies portray. Yet the creation is complex and huge and beautiful because God is complex, huge, and beautiful. It reflects what God is like without being God.

Adam and Eve lived in this perfect paradise. The Garden of Eden. There was no death, not even in the animal world. Everything served its God-given purpose in harmony with everything else around it.

### **Fall – Cursed is the ground**

Adam was the representative head not only of humanity as the first Adam but also of creation. To him God gave the cultural mandate to work the garden. Adam and Eve were commanded to multiply and fill the earth. Adam showed his authority by naming the animals.

When Adam and Eve sinned against God, not only did humanity fall under the curse of God, all creation did as well. Here is the moment,

*"And to Adam he said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.'"*  
(Genesis 3:17-18)

Did you hear it? Cursed is the ground. Not just in farming, but in everything else. Death enters the story. Animals kill and eat each other. The weather becomes dangerous. It's still beautiful, but that beautiful ocean could now suddenly kill you with a tsunami. When God cursed the ground, he cursed all creation as well. *"For the creation was subjected to futility"*

and is in "bondage to corruption." It no longer is what it was. It's less safe. Less beautiful. Less fertile. Less flowering. Less lush. Now there is wilderness and wild animals and rather than stewarding the earth, humans are tempted to exploit it.

### **Redemption – Jesus takes the curse of God on the cross**

*"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'" (Galatians 3:13)*

We rightly focus on Jesus taking the curse for us as that is the emphasis of Scripture. However, Romans 8 tells us that Jesus' curse-taking included the curse God made on creation. The earth is cursed but not forever. Paul personifies this as creation waiting:

*"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."*  
(Romans 8:20-22)

Just like we wait for our full redemption someday, creation is waiting too. It "hopes." Hope isn't wishful thinking; it's confident assurance.

The Christian view of nature is so much better than evolution. There is no hope with evolution. Just nihilism. **We** must save the planet. Christianity says, Jesus saves the planet and will renew it someday. I'd love to spend more time on this, but one implication is that Christians should care as much as non-believers, if not more, about nature—but for very different reasons.

Naturalists elevate nature to deity. It's their mother nature. This world is all they have, so they venerate it. We care because God made it and we are stewards in it. We shouldn't let the evolutionists and atheists champion environmentalism. A Christian should love and care for the created world. We just don't worship it.

For now, creation "groans" like a woman giving birth. That's a vivid picture. Every woman who has given birth has some story of the struggle. My 5-year-old daughter has informed us she doesn't want to be a Mommy because someone told her it hurts. Based on the picture below, my 3-year-old does not share her concern.



Women groan in labor. I remember an amazing moment with Jennifer when the doctors were trying to decide if this was going to be a natural birth or a C-section and I just remember this moment where she truly gritted her teeth and groaned and just pushed that precious little baby out. Women understand this.

What are the groans of creation? Tsunamis, earthquakes, cancer, genocide, hurricanes, violence in the animal world, extinction, and many other things.

Creation is not at its best. It's not what it could be or what it will be. It is groaning like a woman in pain giving birth. It is waiting to be set free. For what? To "obtain the freedom of the glory of God."

### **Consummation – Creation renewed by God/new earth**

What does creation set free look like? It looks a lot like it did before Adam's sin. It's a paradise once again. Here are prophecies about what it will be like in the future:

- *"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing."* (Isaiah 35:1-2)
- *"The wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain," says the LORD.*" (Isaiah 65:25)
- *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more."* (Revelation 21:1)

Depending on your eschatology, you can try to place these in different spots. Everyone agrees this is our future destiny, our eternal home. So many misunderstand this. We don't spend eternity in heaven; we spend eternity on the new earth. It's great to want to go to heaven. But friend, you won't miss living in this earth once it is set free. It will be the cosmos renewed. Paradise restored. Someday God is going to recreate this cosmos. Either all new or the biggest fixer upper ever. Everything we love about this earth and nothing we don't like. C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* capture this truth in *The Last Battle*,

*"The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was like that. The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can't describe it any better than that: if ever you get there you will know what I mean. It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed, and then he cried: "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this."<sup>1</sup>*

I think of the one time I had the privilege of walking the Augusta National golf course. I remember thinking, *this is as close to the new earth as to be found on this earth*. It was absolutely breathtakingly beautiful. Immaculately landscaped. Seemingly every blade of grass was perfect. The course and the land were in harmony.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle*, p. 213.

You've likely had moments like this. Moments when you've been awestruck. Moments of wonder when suddenly a sunset or deer running awakens something in you deep and meaningful. An echo. An ancient memory hearkening back to a time when everything was right in the world.

Someday it will all be right again. The King will come. Creation will be renewed and restored. Let this settle in, no more winter. During spring break no one has anywhere to go; they are already where everybody wants to be.

The greatest beauty and wonder on the new earth is not that lions lay down with lambs or the weather or the food or no more death. The greatest wonder on the new earth will be Jesus. God makes his dwelling with us. God comes down. Redemption is accomplished, and renewal takes place throughout the galaxies.

Will you be there? Jesus takes the curse from the earth and he will take the curse from you, but there is a condition. You must repent of your sins and believe in him as your Savior. The new earth is only for people who love and treasure Christ. Are you one of them?

It's unfortunate that *Joy to the World* is a Christmas song. Fine. We will sing it. But it isn't about the first coming, it's about the second. Listen to the words in light of Romans 8.

*Joy to the World! The Lord is come:  
Let earth receive her King;  
Let ev'ry heart prepare Him room,  
And heav'n and nature sing,  
And heav'n and nature sing,  
And heav'n, and heav'n and nature sing.*

*Joy to the earth! The Savior reigns:  
Let men their songs employ;  
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains,  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.*

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make his blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as, far as the curse is found.<sup>2</sup>*

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Permanent Text Edition® (2016)*.  
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<sup>2</sup> Isaac Watts, "Joy to the World!" (1719)