

Romans 8:18-30

Introduction

As reflected in Acts 14:22, Israel expected that the coming kingdom of God and the redemption of Israel would come “through many distresses.” The word translated “distress” or “suffering” has a wide range of meanings. It has been true throughout history that God’s people are not immune to the distresses of life. This may include suffering from the actions of others, distress that results from their own self-chosen actions, and what might simply be called, “the way things play out. This section is an expansion of verse 17’s introduction of the topic of distress or suffering and serves as a climax of chapters 6-8, which runs through 8:30.

The themes of liberation, children of God, the Spirit, resurrection, future glory, and hope that have been seen throughout the letter are the focus of these verses. These themes are used to show that suffering is never to be understood as an indication of God’s disfavor. In fact, suffering is a part of God’s overall plan to redeem and transform His creation. Paul calls upon his readers to persevere in their suffering as they journey toward the glorious consummation of God’s purposes for all creation.

These verses also set up Paul’s discussion of chapters 9-15, which focuses on the faithfulness of God in His redeeming of both Jews and Gentiles with a desire to maintain relationships within the people of God in Rome. It is only with the rock-solid assurance of God’s ultimately redemptive love that his audience is prepared for what Paul asks of them in the following chapters.

The Redemption of All Things: 8:18-25

As Paul expands on the discussion of suffering, he states that he has a firm conviction (“I consider” or “I reckon”) that the present sufferings do not have in any way the same value as the glory that will be revealed when God’s purposes are brought to their final conclusion. The word glory or honor has been seen throughout the letter. In chapter one the Gentile world is spoken of as not honoring or giving glory to God. Paul draws the conclusion in 3:23 that all fall short of the glory of God. As a result of the fall humanity neither clearly sees nor reflects God’s glory as originally intended. In the Apocalypse of Moses (21:6) Eve reflects on her conversation with Adam after their sin. Adam said to Eve, “You have deprived me of the glory of God.” God crowned humanity with Glory in the creation (Psalm 8:4-6). In the fall humanity lost the glory God originally intended. But as a result of Messiah Jesus, there can be celebration in confident expectation that all of God’s original intention for humanity will be restored.

Humanity lives in an ongoing tension created by sin. Christ-followers still live in their weak flesh. Sin’s power over them has been destroyed but Sin has not yet been destroyed. All of humanity lives in a world of chaos and yet the Christ-follower has peace because of what Jesus has done. As a result of these and other tensions, suffering is normative for the believer. Spiritual realities regarding what God has already accomplished in Christ and will accomplish at the end of the age remain somewhat veiled but there is a coming time when God’s glorious purposes will be completed and everything will be seen clearly (“revealed”). In particular, it is the completed work of God in redeeming His children that is to be revealed.

The creation is personified in this text as another entity that experiences suffering and longing for redemption. This takes the reader back to Genesis 1-3. This world was created for humanity and humanity was given dominion over the creation (Psalm 8:6). The two are intimately connected. Not only was that connection seen in the glory of creation before the fall. This connection continued even after the fall. When Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden and lost continual access to the tree of life, they faced future physical death, pain in childbirth, difficulty providing needed resources from the creation, and a continuing struggle against the power of Sin. Just as Paul talked about humanity being enslaved, the creation is also in bondage to decay and has been subjected to futility by the will of God. This idea of futility may be a reflection of Ecclesiastes, which speaks of weariness, despair, vanity, and sorrow that are found in this decaying world. As a consequence of the sin of Adam and Eve, God cursed the ground (Gen. 3:17-18). With this curse, creation maintained its connection with humanity; only this time its connection to humanity is in its decay.

It seems strange to see at the end of verse 20 that God has hope that creation will be set free. It is God, who subjected the earth to futility and who has expectation (hope) that the creation will one day be set free. God is hopeful only in the sense that the completion of His redemptive purposes is yet to occur. In the act of putting creation in a state of futility God was pointing to a time of redemption. Take note of God's subjecting creation to futility in order to bring about its redemption. Something similar will be said in chapters 9 and 11 in regard to Israel.

It is not difficult then to understand why personified creation is seen as waiting eagerly for the revealing of the children of God. According to Dunn (pg. 469) the word translated "waits with eager longing" (NRSV) as found here in the noun form, is only found in Christian writings. Dunn goes on to say, "it expresses well the sense of eschatological tension - a straining forward for an eagerly (or anxiously) awaited event." Creation is pictured here as an audience seeing what God has begun in Christ and waiting with eager anticipation for the unveiling of God's completed work of reconciling, transforming, and freeing humanity from its slavery to Sin. When God has completed His work, humanity will be crowned with the glory intended from the beginning (Psalm 8:5) and reign over the earth as originally intended. The creation longingly waits for the revealing of the children of God because at that time creation will be set free from its bondage to decay as well. As creation was originally created to be a place fit for humanity and was then changed to mirror humanity's fallen state, it will be renewed to its pre-cursed state.

But for now, both creation and humanity are groaning like a woman in labor pains as they exist in a world still characterized and controlled by Sin and as they long for their liberation, their rebirth into a new existence. The picture here takes the reader back to Genesis 1:1-2. In that text, creation is described as in a state of chaos. In Genesis one, the Spirit, which will be brought into the picture in following verses, is seen as a mother bird hovering over chaotic earth. Then God began his work and transformed chaotic earth into a place that He could describe as "good." Creation is longing for this to occur again. This groaning includes hope. "Now" takes the reader back to 3:21. There is now a new reality in Christ that has brought about the groaning that comes from a longing anticipation of rebirth just as a woman groans in anticipation of the birth of her child.

When a farmer brings in the first of the harvest, there is anticipation and expectation of the rest of the harvest. For the Christ-follower, the presence of the Spirit is the first fruit that anticipates the completion of their liberation and resurrection. Acts 2 speaks of the pouring out of the Spirit during the celebration of Pentecost (Feast of Weeks), which was a celebration of the first fruits of the harvest. Here again is seen the tension of the already/not yet status of Christ-followers. This tension can be seen in that Paul speaks of adoption as already in 8:15-16 and speaks of it as in the future here in 8:23.

The idea of hope exists in the tension of the already/not yet. On one hand, hope that is based on the faithfulness of God gives the Christ-follower the ability to say he/she is saved in the present. On the other hand, hope is in something not yet fully realized. We have confident expectation that God's work (the redemption of all creation, including humanity) will be completed in the future. So, there is a celebration of already being children of God and at the same time there is a patient waiting for the completion of God's work.

The statement, "For in hope we were saved," goes back to 8:20c. It speaks of the already/not yet place we are in. We now have the Spirit, but this is only the first fruits (8:23). Or, as Paul says in Ephesians 1:13-14, the possession of the Spirit is a pledge or guarantee of things yet to come. But because we have confident expectation that God will complete His purposes, we wait with patience.

Activity of the Spirit: 8:26-27

The weakness of humanity was seen in 5:6 and in the description of "flesh" earlier in chapter 8. It is the Spirit who helps carry the burden or weight of the weakness. Misunderstandings come in this text and in others when the context is ignored. Not knowing what or how to pray is in the context of the conflict, suffering, groaning, and confusion that at times the Christ-follower faces when living in this fallen world. Because they still live in the flesh, believers still have difficulty seeing the full reality of what God has done in the "now" and difficulty seeing the reality of what the future holds for them. This results at times in an inability to even know how to respond to their circumstances.

The NIV's "groans" is a more consistent translation than the NRSV's "sighs" because it is the same word here as in 8:22, 23, showing that the Spirit's intercession is in concert with the groaning of the believer and of creation. Dunn (pg. 478) sees the groans in these verses as the opposite of intelligible words, which is normally seen as a distinction between humanity and nonhuman creation, showing not only the solidarity of humanity with creation, but also the utter dependence that both have on God. "The Spirit is here seen as typically active not so much in the heights of spiritual rapture as in the depths of human inability to cope." By interceding in the groans of believers, the Spirit gives evidence of being active in the life of the believer.

The God who is known for searching hearts (Heb. 9:13-14; Psalm 44:21) intimately knows the activity of the Spirit within the heart of the believer. This activity of the Spirit is consistent with the purpose and nature of God ("according to the will of God").

Faithful Purpose of God: 8:28-30

It is hard to overcome the proof-texting use of this text. Many believers use it as a mantra to give assurance and perseverance through any number of tough situations: “all things work out for good,” we say. But this is not Paul’s point. Paul was not inserting a memory verse to lighten the burden of distressed believers everywhere at all times.

Neither is it Paul’s point to hint at a doctrine of God’s predestining decree of the salvation of individuals. This idea, championed by John Calvin and others in his wake, fails to understand the language here of foreknowledge, predestination, and glorification in its context.

In context, Paul calls his God-fearing gentile audience of Christ-believers to expand their understanding of suffering in the world *and their role in the midst of it*. God has a purpose in subjecting creation to futility and in revealing who the children of God are. That purpose, as the following chapters will make clear, requires Paul’s audience to live and work within a mental framework that believes in God’s utter faithfulness to redeem Jews/Israelites as well as themselves. The working out of the Jews’ redemption will require Paul’s audience to willingly embrace suffering on behalf of the Jews who have yet to come to faith, just as Jesus did. Paul will indicate in chapter 11 that the Gentile Christ-believers play a crucial role in the ultimate redemption of Israel. Verses 28-30, then, briefly underscore God’s rock-solid historical commitments to Israel—a topic he will pursue at length in the following chapters.

Paul opens verse 28 with “We know.” Here, as in 6:3, Paul reminds his audience of an essential theological truth that needs to inform their mindset more fully. “As those who love God and are called according to his purpose,” he says, “we know that God is working all things together for good.” This “good” is the redemption of creation that Paul has just written about. However, he focuses on a specific case—Israel. The phrase “those whom he foreknew” refers to Israel and God’s abiding purposes for them. These purposes are outlined in, for instance, Exodus 19:5-6: “You will be my own possession among all the peoples, . . . You will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Paul summarizes God’s purposes this way: “he predestined [those whom he foreknew] to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that Jesus might be the firstborn among many brothers.”

In Jesus, Paul hints, we see God’s intentions for Israel fulfilled. Jesus is what God intended Israel to be. But God acted on his intentions. He “called” and “made them covenant partners” (i.e., ‘justified’) with himself in Abraham, and he “glorified” (or, better, ‘honored’) them with multiple blessings that Paul will review in 9:4-5.

Commentators often take this list of “foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified” to refer to the progression of individual salvation. This is hardly the point. The clue that this approach is a misreading comes from the ways writers try to explain why “glorified” is a past tense like all the other terms when, according to their view, glorification is yet to come. When one understands these terms as encompassing the scope of God’s historic outworking of his purposes for Israel, the problem disappears. But then so does a favorite proof-text of Calvinistic thought.

Conclusion

Suffering as a result of serving God in the midst of a world in rebellion against God is often a part of the life of God's people. Even though it is a common experience, suffering is not only difficult but also confusing because it is too easy for those who serve God to think any kind of suffering should be a part of their past. What is not often understood is that creation itself also suffers. Not only did life become more difficult for Adam and Eve after the fall, creation itself was cursed (put in bondage to decay). Now both God's people and creation groan in the midst of their suffering while they longing wait for the completion of God's work of redemption and freedom. Christ-followers are not alone in their groaning. In fact, the Spirit of God who knows hearts and knows the mind of the Spirit inspires their groans. This activity of the Spirit within the hearts of Christ-followers is consistent with the purpose and nature of God.

Suffering is not a reason for God's people to think God has abandoned them or to think something is wrong with them. In fact, suffering that results from following Christ is evidence of a relationship with God. God is faithfully at work in the midst of the experience of suffering to help His children see that His intended purpose will be completed. It was always intended by God that the resurrection of Jesus would only be the first of many more to come. God's children will be conformed into the image of Jesus, which includes dying to Sin, suffering as a partner with God in His redemptive plans, and the future experience of resurrection like Jesus.

Put within the context of Romans, it appears the suffering here is coming from a source closely connected to the Christian community. There is no historical evidence that the Christians in Rome were suffering persecution from the Roman government. There are two possibilities regarding the source of the suffering. It could be coming from Jews who were continuing to reject Jesus as Messiah, or it could be from Jews within the Christian community who want to hold on to the belief system of the Nationalistic Jewish teacher. The comments under the 8:28-30 section are based on the assumption that the suffering is coming from one of these two Jewish groups because this fits within the context of chapters 9-15. Paul was trying to get the Gentile Christians to accept that they are to persevere in this suffering because, as will be stated in 9-11, God is still working with Israel and is in fact using the Gentile's status of adopted children of God as a tool to bring Israel to faith so they can receive the promises that had been theirs since Abraham. This also fits within Paul's discussion of being transformed into the image of Christ. Christ, who Himself stated the priority of His ministry was to Israel (Matt. 10:5-6; 15:24), suffered to the point of death in order to fulfill God's promises to Israel. Gentile Christians are asked to do the same. In chapter 9-11, Paul will be addressing the pride that existed within the Gentile Christian community over their status with the God of the Jew. They were thinking they were the new chosen people and that God had rejected Israel in favor of them. Paul will show that is not the case, and that God is in fact using Gentile Christians as a tool to win back Israel.

Romans
8:18-30

1. How would you describe the suffering Paul is talking about in this text?
2. What are the different responses to suffering have you seen from Christians? How does Paul want Christians to view suffering?
3. Describe the connection between creation and humanity in this discussion of suffering and glory.
4. What are creation and humanity trying to communicate in their groans?
5. What role does the Spirit play in the suffering of Christ-followers?
6. Sum up what you think is Paul's response to the suffering of Christians?