

Prayer

We praise You, Jesus our Saviour, because generations of Your people have found their hope and joy in You. Do a new work in our midst, we pray. Renew Your people, empower them for the work of the Kingdom, and energise them for action. Let us face all things in this life with a hope and joy that comes from knowing Your presence and favour. We ask this in Your Name, AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

If God was a friend standing next to you, what would you say to Him right now? Tell Him what is on your mind

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who suffer disasters.** *Pray at this time for people in Niger who are experiencing the worst drought in years, and have no food or seed left.*
- *Give thanks for food and drink*
- *Pray about the vast use of paper today, including related ecological and moral issues*

Meditation

Lord God, give us courage to act according to our faith;

Let us show compassion because of Jesus' love for us,
Let us be brave because we trust in the Lord's protection,
Let us be peaceful because Jesus taught the way of peace,
Let us be victorious over evil because Jesus has won the battle
Let us be careful because God's Word tells us to be wise,
Let us be forthright because we believe the Gospel of Truth,
Let us be honest because Jesus respects all people.

Lord God, may we always be inspired by Him to whom we owe everything,
Our Saviour and our Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

Bible passage – Romans 8:18-25

¹⁸ In my opinion, what we suffer at the present time bears no comparison with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ Now, Creation eagerly awaits the revelation of the children of God; ²⁰ for Creation was placed under subjection to futility, not through its own will but through the will of the one who did this, in hope ²¹ that Creation itself would one day be set free from its bondage to mortality and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that all of Creation has been groaning with severe labour pains until now; ²³ and not only this, but we, ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we await adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For we were saved in hope. Now hope that is seen is not real hope; who hopes for what can be seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we are unable to see, then we await it with patient expectancy.

Bible Study

Review

In this remarkable passage, Paul is carried away by the Spirit to speak with authority about universal truths of the Gospel, and he uses words that are unlike anything found elsewhere in Scripture! With extraordinary

power, he describes the state of Creation 'at the present time' (8:18), held in suspense and waiting for the full power and effects of the Gospel to unfold. Just as the world had to wait for the coming of Christ, the whole of Creation now awaits liberation and recreation from its own mortality (8:21), and the new life of the Spirit amongst believers is our evidence that God will indeed complete His work of restoration and release Creation from its bondage!

Throughout this passage, Paul uses our experience of salvation to point towards the final destiny of all Creation, and no other New Testament passage describes the universal consequences of the Gospel for the whole of Creation like this, except the revelation of John. Paul's letter to the Colossians speaks of the cosmic significance of Christ, but the emphasis there is on the supreme significance of Christ, not the eternal future of Creation. So, if you are looking for Scriptures that serve to connect the beginning of the Bible with its end, then this passage is essential reading.

The future of the world and the future of humanity are integrally linked. However, this is not always clear in the Bible, which normally focuses on the story of people rather than creation as a whole. Scripture begins by describing the creation of the whole world, and then its fall from perfection to a state of mortality and death (Gen 1,2,3). Following this, most of the Bible is an account of how God works to restore His relationship with people, and its true climax is found in its description of the saving work of Jesus, which opens the door for people to find peace with God and new life in the Spirit (8:1-17).

Along the way, a few Old Testament writers, notably prophets, speak about wider issues such as the salvation of the whole world. Look at these words from Isaiah; 'the wilderness and the dry land will be glad, the desert will rejoice and bloom ...' (Is 35:1f. see also 11:9, 65:17). Writing in New Testament times, Paul now continues this theme by explaining that Christ's work will ultimately accomplish the restoration of all Creation. He describes it as 'groaning' at the present time under the weight of its 'bondage to mortality' (8:21), but it will eventually receive freedom, along with all God's people when He so wills!

Paul's words here are prophetic in the truest sense of the word, for they reach out in a visionary manner beyond human experience to tell us about God's plans for the future. Within this passage, there is an incredible tension between the present, in which all things are still subject to death and decay (8:20), and the future for which there is a bright hope of liberation (8:22,23). He prophesies that this will be released 'one day' (8:21), at a distinct and special time dictated by God, and that this is the hope of all Creation and all God's people. He describes this as a time when our very bodies will be redeemed (8:23), a phrase that hints at the idea of bodily resurrection, and he goes on to say more about the special quality of hope, that with patience, longs for what will happen.

This vision has a clear purpose, however. Now it is certainly important for us to know that God's plans are universal, but more than this, Paul's prophetic word about the future is given so that we might trust in God. The world in which we live is a place of suffering and strife (a theme that runs throughout this passage and through the whole Bible), but God intends to overcome all this. He does not promise us that we can escape from this world, but He gives us a sure hope of restoration, both with Himself and with the world He has made. This picture of hope is a great blessing of Scripture, and we can be confident that God will fulfil His promises (8:24,25).

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The suffering and the glory
- Creation and the 'adoption of the children of God' (8:19,23)
- The great hope

Going Deeper

Underlying this passage is Paul's desire to help Christians have a faith that is grounded both in the reality, including the suffering, of the life they experience; but also the sure promises of the Glory of God to which they are 'heirs'. We will look further at the distinctive features of the theme of suffering in this text, the meaning of 'adoption', which is not straightforward, and the details of the hope we may have in Christ even though we do not see it.

The suffering and the glory

Much of Paul's teaching was to help Christian people come to terms with their duties and responsibilities in this world, combining a clear exposition of the Gospel with a genuine understanding of the suffering people experienced in their daily lives, whether because they were Christians or just because their life in the Roman Empire was difficult. After declaring the wonder of the good news of 'peace with God', Paul had previously explained how this peace worked to overcome the effects of suffering and transform them into hope (5:1-5),

and it is no surprise therefore that he does the same here. He has just introduced the Holy Spirit as the active agent of God's work and presence with His people (8:1-17) and immediately explains how this helps us understand the reality of suffering in the world, ending, as before, by declaring the great and sure hope of eternal glory (8:24,25).

There is no doubt that after the initial optimism of the early church in which it grew substantially and quickly (see Acts 2:47, 4:4, 6:7, 9:42 etc), Christians met opposition and sometimes great danger. Even Paul had persecuted the church before he was saved (Acts 9:23-35), but then experienced considerable danger himself as he went about the business of declaring the truth of the Gospel (Acts 17:1f.). Some people clearly believed that the suffering of the church heralded the coming again of our Lord in fulfilment of what He said before he died. Jesus had spoken of all kinds of dangers coming upon his disciples, adding 'but those who endure to the end will be saved, and this good news of the Kingdom will be preached to all the world ... and then the end will come' (Matt 24:13,14). Paul however, learned from the Lord and taught that the 'temporary age' between Jesus' death and resurrection and His coming again in glory was in fact the on-going reality of life both for his own day and for ours.

Creation and the adoption of the children of God

It was the life of the Spirit within Paul that gave him such confidence in God, and as a scholar who had studied God's Word all His life (albeit as a Pharisee), he was able to see that God's great plan for the whole of Creation was far greater than anything anyone could experience in the present world (8:18). Through all this, he came to know that it was also inextricably linked with the Gospel and all that Jesus had done on the Cross. Such a leap of faith and knowledge came to Paul not simply because of his learning, for in his day, thousands of others knew the Scriptures as well as he did. What made the difference was the presence and inspiration of the Holy Spirit (8:1-17). The Holy Spirit used his gifts and abilities to the full in giving him this great picture of the whole world waiting for 'the revelation of the children of God' (8:19). Now that Jesus had died and the Gospel was being declared, the world was waiting for God's re-creating power and glory in just the same way that Christians were waiting for the Lord's return!

But why does the world have to wait? Surely, you might say, we are already children of God, and we openly testify to this. Why then does Paul say that Creation 'awaits the revelation of the children of God'? At this point we must come to terms with something that is not quite obvious within the text, for Paul is clearly talking about the end of time when God's children will come into their inheritance, but not the present. In addition, Paul is also talking about the end of time when he says in verse 23 that we 'groan inwardly while we await adoption, the redemption of our bodies' (8:23); however, what does this mean if we have already become children of God? In order to be clear about what this means these words need some explanation, because it is easy to misunderstand what Paul says, and it all hinges on the word 'adoption'.

Adoption does not have the same meaning for Paul as it does for us today. We use the word adoption to refer to the actions of parents who take formal responsibility for the life and upbringing of a child, so we might naturally think that 'adoption' is what God does for us now. Unfortunately, that is not the case. In Paul's day, the word 'adoption' referred to the formal acceptance of an inheritance from a father, which was something done later in life, as, for example, when Abraham finally accepted that his inheritance should go to Isaac, not Ishmael (Gen 22, especially verses 15-19), or when a man grew old and passed on the running of the family home to his nominated successor (as in Paul's day). Therefore, when Paul talks about Christians 'awaiting' adoption (v23), he is talking about awaiting the end times when those who are children of God will receive the full inheritance of the Kingdom of God at the coming of the Lord in glory. This is entirely consistent with the two other uses of the word 'adoption' in Paul's writings: they both refer to those who believe as 'children of God', but add that through redemption they will one day 'receive adoption' (Gal; 4:5); or, as in Ephesians, they are 'destined for adoption' (Eph 1:5).

Understanding this opens up the whole passage; for Paul describes the agonies of Creation whilst awaiting the end times as something like the agony we experience as we long for the fulfilment of God's promises to us. We long for a body that does not grow old or suffer, and we hope to have a truly close relationship with our Lord. We have been made children of God, but we have not yet received our full inheritance; and in the same way, the entire Creation longs to be free of decay and death, and be recreated in Glory now that the path to the defeat of evil and suffering has been opened up by Jesus. Both Creation, and we, will have to wait, but it is a sure hope.

The great hope.

Paul ends this passage by talking about hope, just as he did when describing the consequences of peace with God, and explaining how this works to overcome suffering (5:1-5). Clearly, Paul's vision has carried him far beyond what we can normally 'see', indeed, far beyond what many can comprehend, even spiritually! Perhaps he was aware of this when saying 'now hope that is seen is not real hope. Who hopes for what can be seen?' His point is clear enough, we do hope for things we cannot see, but by and large, we hope for things for which we have sufficient evidence that they will happen.

The Bible is full of examples of how God asks us to trust Him for what we cannot normally see. Abraham had to accept by faith that he would be the father of many nations, when he was having trouble fathering even one child (Gen 15:1-6)! In addition, God regularly brought His salvation to the world through the birth of children (Moses, Samuel, Jeremiah, Jesus) and in each of them, as Isaiah so poignantly described (Isaiah 7:12f.) once a child was conceived, then there was no doubt that something would happen and a child would be born. This indeed is the true picture of hope that the Bible gives, for God's word is like the conception of a child, it will definitely have consequences; 'so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty' (Isaiah 55:11).

God has declared that we will inherit His Kingdom, and by the prophecy which includes the great vision we have read in our passage, we know that the world will be re-created in Glory. The future for us who believe is therefore full of hope, and that hope will one day pass away when we experience in full, the Glory of God our Creator.

Application

This is a self contained passage, and the last two verses that describe the hope of Glory for which we patiently wait, read like the 'application' of Paul's great vision of Creation awaiting re-creation. One thing stands out, however, which is that if we are to receive the glory of the Kingdom of God as our inheritance, as promised by Jesus, then we should be able to recognise the new creation from our knowledge of the old. It seems clear from this passage that the new will be a perfect form of the old! It is reassuring to know this, because it is impossible for us to have any concept of eternal life unless we think of it as some kind of extension of this life. John says, '*in my Father's house there are many rooms ...*' (John 14:2), and this and many other Scriptures are given to us by God for reassurance that His intentions are not to confuse us or make something of the eternal future that is impossible for us to imagine.

You may have been in a number of situations in which people have debated what 'eternity' will be like; I have even heard some say they do not want God's eternal life because it sounds boring. In a world in which even human mathematicians can calculate the existence of parallel universes which are 'like' each other, then personally, I have no difficulty believing that the Lord wants to re-assure us that His Kingdom will be something that we can recognise. I tend to think of it as fundamentally 'like' the first Creation, but perfect and not subject to decay. I do not know how this will work, simply because part of our basic understanding of the world is tied up in its perishable nature. For example, most of the food we eat is vegetable and animal product that has died (although we do not like to think of it this way)! But just as scientists who do not know enough mathematics accept the claims of those who do, we should feel able to accept the prophecies of God given to others in which He has promised to give us this new Creation. Certainly, this passage is one of these prophecies, and we can depend on them because God's Word in Scripture has proved true to life in powerful and significant ways.

We do not know when the Lord will fulfil His promise to come again, but He will, and of that we may be certain! I am confident that we will be 'at home' in the new world that God will make when He comes.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do you have a sense of the glory of God that is to be revealed to you? In your group, discuss what picture this creates in your mind.
2. How do you envisage the new world made by God at the end of time. Read Revelation 21 and 22 if this will help!
3. How easy is it to have hope in God's promises in this life? How can we answer those who find it hard to believe that God will fulfil his promises?

Personal comments by author

I have always been thankful that I do not have a problem with thinking about the future beyond death. Certainly, I do not want to die, but I can almost look forward to what will happen. However, I know that many people have difficulty with this, for whatever reason. For this reason, when people ask me about such things, I try not to wax eloquent about my own feelings, and prefer to suggest that others look at the Scriptures for themselves to determine their own views and opinions about this. God alone can work in our hearts to convince us of His love and care beyond the grave.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *We are asked to hope in God not just for earthly things, but for heavenly. Much of our Christian discipleship is a matter of trying, by God's help, to get things right whilst living this life, in the midst of whatever problems and suffering come our way. Take time to consider your own feelings about eternity.*
 - *Read through some of the other passages of Scripture that have been mentioned in this passage, and see what they say, and how they help create a picture of eternal life.*
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Final Prayer

May the beauty of Your compassion, O Jesus, ever draw us towards the day when we finally stand before our Maker and call upon His name. And may the anticipation of the glory inspire us each and every day to live a life worthy of our highest call. AMEN
