

## God's Great News for Humanity's Great Problem *Paul's Letter to the Romans*

### The Suffering of the Christian and the Longing for Home *Romans 8:18 – 25*

#### Exegetical Outline

<sup>8:18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. <sup>23</sup> And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. <sup>24</sup> For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

#### Introduction: Pressure from Home, Longing for Home

In August of 1995, I moved into the Cooley Apartments in East Palo Alto. It was a semi-dilapidated apartment complex 98% filled with Mexican immigrants. I felt that if I were going to live in the Bay Area, that it was the logical choice to live among the poor and the aliens, just like Jesus did. Around Thanksgiving of that year, I invited my mom up to visit me. My relationship with her had been getting better for the past three years, and at first, things were going well. We cooked dinner together, and she taught me how to make Oyako Donburi, a classic Japanese dish. We went up to San Francisco and walked around, sharing stories. But after two days, she became very upset with me because she didn't like where I lived. Her racial prejudices came out and she said a lot of unpleasant things about Latinos. She called me from her home in LA to say that I had wasted my education, even though I was still working at Intel, that she was ashamed to talk to her friends about me, and that I should stick to my own kind. She left bitter messages on my answering machine and said that she would disown me absolutely if I didn't move out. I walked around in a daze, feeling very torn up about my mom, not knowing what to do or how to feel. The only thing I was sure of was that whether my mom disowned me or not, the home I grew up in was not my true Home. My true Home was yet to come, when Christ will come for me and for the world to renew all of it. It will be a Home free from suffering, and I longed for it.

#### Relevance

Nostalgia which leads to bitterness, and eventually unbelief. Or you could have hope in the promise of God, that the entire world will be renewed.

#### Context

We are studying Romans 8:18 – 25 and here we have the mysterious and gentle answer to the suffering of the Christian and implicitly, of humanity in general. This world is not our Home. Our Home is yet to come. Now last week we studied our identity as adopted sons and daughters of God, who publically stated His love and desire for us. We are so tightly identified with Jesus Christ that we share his status as heirs in God's royal family. But this tight identification with Christ also brings one slightly uncomfortable fact: suffering. The question we might have is, 'When will this suffering end?' It will end when we reach our final Home, and that is what we long for.

#### Perspective During Our Painful Interim: v. 18

Paul says confidently in verse 18, 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us.' What Paul does right away is to set up a comparison for us, and this does wonders for our perspective. He pulls out a balance with two dishes, like the kind held by the blindfolded Lady Justice. And Paul looks on the one hand at 'the sufferings of this present time.' And he lets the scale sink downward under its terrible weight.

Like what? Jesus promised us suffering when he said in Matthew 5:11, 'Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of me.' What did he see? A friend of mine accepted Christ her freshman year of college and her parents hated it. Most parents say, 'Well, so long as it

doesn't get in the way of school,' but her parents were more forceful and wanted her to stop believing on the spot. Her mom was a psychologist and said some very painful, manipulative things. For two summers she was home, her parents disallowed her from going to worship on Sundays and any kind of meeting. She met with me and another friend in the park every Saturday morning to study Ephesians; it was under the guise of going roller blading. But when she was at home, all she had was her Bible and the Spirit of God in her who reminded her that a better home was waiting for her. Maybe some of you are in the same situation.

Or maybe your suffering is slightly different. Jesus loved people who were 'on the fringe' like the Samaritans, the lepers, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, and this really offended a lot of people's prejudices. So when you help disadvantaged people, other people are offended by you. Maybe your suffering comes from being so misunderstood. You tell people that sin is a big problem, a big problem for which Jesus is the remedy, but you get laughed at for this, just like Jesus did. Or maybe your suffering comes from the level of sacrifice in your life, where you're the one giving, caring, loving, and not many others do. This is also what Jesus faced. (Some Christians' suffering is more violent. Jesus was beaten and put to death, and we may get a slap in the face or something more serious. During the twentieth century in China and Vietnam, or Eastern Europe, or Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Christians are killed for their faith. Historians estimate that more Christians have been killed for their faith in this century than ever before.) So when Paul looks at the 'sufferings of this present time,' he sees Jesus. Suffering is an inescapable reality for the Christian because it was so with Jesus. We are so tightly identified with Christ in all things, that even his sufferings will be our sufferings.

Now if you're like me, you're thinking, 'But I'm so young! Why all this talk about pain?' No, pain isn't a nice thing to talk about. But this is our reality if we walk with Christ. We will walk in his sufferings, too. And those sufferings are not trivial. Have no illusions about this because I want you to be prepared for suffering and sacrifice. But I also want you to know that there is something on the other side of the scale, which will cause these scales to tip in the other direction. Our future Home.

That is what Paul turns to consider when he says, 'the glory that is to be revealed in us.' What exactly does that phrase mean? Let's consider the word glory. The word 'glory' is used to describe the shining pillar of light that led Israel through the wilderness. It's the dazzling and awesome Shekinah Glory of Exodus 40:34 – 38 that filled the Tabernacle. That is the glory that will be revealed. And where will it be revealed? Paul says 'in us.' The glory that will be revealed is God in us. In 2 Cor.4-5, Paul refers to our bodies being like tents and cracked earthenware pots, holding a priceless treasure. But in our future Home, we will be like a crystal chandelier, letting God's resurrection life stream clearly and perfectly through us. That is glory indeed.

Now why are we waiting for that day? Because Christ isn't yet fully revealed, so we are not yet fully revealed. That day will come in the future. Now another way to understand this is to think back on our study of adoption last week. Remember when we studied the how Roman fathers would often adopt an adult son to be his heir, we found that it was a three step process. The first step was *mancipatio*, when the adopting father goes to ask the natural father for the son's release from that household. The second step was *vindicatio*, when the adopting father went before the Roman magistrate to plead his case publicly on why he wanted to adopt this son. The third step was the party, where in the midst of great celebration, the adult son would be revealed as a beloved heir of the adopting father. Where are we in this process? We are between the second and the third steps in the adoption process. We have been legally adopted, but there hasn't been a party yet! That is why we wait. We are headed for a great Homecoming party!!

Now the Roman Christians receiving this letter would have nodded in understanding when they read this. In the Royal Family in Rome, there was a very important adoption. Seven years before Paul wrote Romans, in the year 50 AD, the Emperor Claudius adopted Nero into his household. For four long years, Nero waited eagerly for the celebration when he would be revealed as the Caesar. Perhaps he even paced restlessly outside the throne room in the waiting hall. In 54 AD, Claudius died and Nero ascended the highest throne the western world has ever known. That was when his adoption was fully realized. Now just three years later, Paul says that this is what our waiting is like. We are legally adopted, but we are waiting eagerly for the celebration where we are fully revealed as God's heirs.

That is the basic comparison Paul makes in v.18. In one side of the balance is 'the sufferings of this present world.' And sometimes those sufferings are very heavy, so the balance sometimes tilts that way. But in the other side of the

scale is 'the glory that is to be revealed in us' in our future Home. If we compare and weigh these two things, our present time versus our Eternal Home, the scales come crashing down on the side of Eternity because there is just no comparison. There will be no more sin, no more suffering, no more darkness, and no more pain. Our Home will be beautiful.

Now to help us understand our time of waiting, Paul makes a parallel. He says that Creation is also suffering, and waiting in hope. Creation, like us, is also waiting for our great Homecoming. In v.19, Creation is the eager attendee waiting for the party thrown in our honor. In v.20-21, Creation is the slave waiting for his freedom. In v.22, Creation is the birthing mother waiting to deliver her baby. And we are in all these analogies waiting, waiting for our Home.

### **Creation as the Eager Attendee Waiting For the Party: v.19**

In v.19, Paul begins, 'For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.' It matches v.23, 'We ourselves [are] waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons.'

This is the analogy of the eager attendee waiting for the party. Creation isn't just waiting around apathetically, it is in anxious longing for a particular event. Notice the quick repetition of the words: anxious longing, eager waiting. The word for 'anxious longing' in Greek, 'apokaradokia,' is a conjunction of two words. The first is 'kara' which means 'head.' The second part means 'strained expectancy.' It's like the Creation has got its head strained, waiting, watching for something on the horizon.

What is Creation looking for? Only the social event of history, the all-out party God will throw for our Homecoming!! Paul says in v.19, 'The revealing of the sons of God,' which is the completion of our three step adoption process where the curtains go up and we step forward as heirs at this grand celebration. Creation is pictured here as the anxious guest, waiting to receive a final invitation and scanning the horizon for the mailman to come deliver his invite.

### **The Slave Waiting For His Freedom: v.20 – 21**

But why does Creation long for this day? What is Creation going through right now? Verse 20-21 explain this with the second analogy, the picture of the slave waiting for his freedom. 'For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.'

This is an amazing explanation. Paul is drawing on the Jewish Messianic tradition which also believed that when the Messiah fully appeared, then the wilderness will bloom, then rivers will appear in the wasteland. This is right out of the Hebrew Scriptures and something Paul himself may have studied in the old scrolls of Isaiah and Ezekiel. But Paul goes beyond that when he says that ALL Creation will be renewed in one historic moment and be set free.

Paul is drawing on Genesis 3:17 – 19. Creation 'was subjected' to thorns and weeds: senseless, disorderly, and destructive forces. Another way to understand futility and corruption is the simple word 'decay.' Sin and death entered the world with Adam and Eve, and decay set in like the plague. Many Bibles say that GOD did this to the creation. But I think the best translation of 'because of him' in 8:20 is to refer to Adam. Adam plunged the creation into futility, because he aborted the life-giving mission God gave him and Eve and their descendants. They were supposed to spread the garden down the four riverways that flowed out from Eden (Gen.2:7). God was making it easy to follow the riverways. And for ancient peoples who lived by great rivers (the Nile, the Euphrates and Tigris, the Indus, the Yang-tze, etc.), if you read the Garden of Eden story, you'd think, 'Wow, that's what the world could have been? God sure was making it easy!'

Imagine yourself as a gardener enslaved to an iron ball chained to your leg. You're supposed to produce beautiful life. Wherever you go, you try to plant small flowers, but as soon as you move along, the iron ball rolls along and crushes what you plant. That is the frustration of Creation. It is a slavery to decay. What it wants is FREEDOM. This reminds me of Jim the black slave in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, in the process of struggling, heading up the Mississippi, but knowing that freedom awaits him.

Now, we might expect Creation to be reminiscing – looking back to the time before man's sin – saying, 'Boy, weren't those the days in the Garden of Eden?! What a life I had before Adam and Eve blew it!!' We tend to look

backwards and get nostalgic. When life gets hard, we say, 'I wish I were a kid again!' or when we feel lonely, we say, 'I wish I were dating him or her again!' We get nostalgic. But Paul says that Creation doesn't do that. It looks forward.

### **The Birthing Mother Waiting to Give Birth: v.22**

Paul demonstrates this forward looking focus clearly by picturing Creation as a birthing mother waiting to give birth. 'For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.'

Now I like this analogy the best because the birthing mother is a person characterized by painful waiting, looking forward assuredly to the birth of her child. She is in so much pain that she is groaning in her suffering.

Illus: This groaning in suffering reminds me of Ming in labor with our first child, John.

Christian hope looks forward to the day a good God will restore all things. When you face the reality of suffering and evil in this world, you can conclude only a few different basic things. Some people, like Hindus and Buddhists, conclude that good and evil will always be around because they are aspects of one god or one reality. So the story of the world and humanity goes around in circles, eternally, because good cannot win over evil. They're the same. Westerners think that

This is practical. For you, maybe your suffering is not as brutal, but it's emotionally intense when your parents scream at you for doing something not 'Asian.' Or maybe when your sacrifices get heavy, your suffering is intense, and you want to give up. Don't give up during those times. This present age is a long labor period, but it will be over one day. Don't make your home here and expect to be comfortable. Our Home is not here. It is yet to come.

### **The Christian Waiting for Home: v. 23**

Paul finishes his poetic portraits about Creation and turns soberly to focus on us. Look at verse 23 and read how poetic this is: 'And not only this, but we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.' Now in this one verse, Paul extends all of his analogies to us. Let's take them one at a time.

First, fruit parallels Creation. Creation bears fruit, but all its fruit dies, which is why Creation is frustrated and waiting. The Spirit bears fruit of a different kind, a kind that will not die. The fruit of the Spirit is Christ in us, where Jesus comes into us to pour his life and love out through us. That's what makes this fruit eternally sweet all year round. But only the first fruits are blooming, because this time is only spring. The full blooming of the Spirit in us will be in summer, an Eternal Summer, that is still to come.

Second, groaning speaks of the birthing mother. 'We groan within ourselves.' That may sound strange to us, especially if you're a guy, but it accurately describes us as Christians. Look at the depth and complexity of this groaning. It is almost as if our true selves are within ourselves, waiting to be born. We groan because we are still struggling with our old sins, because we live in a world that is becoming more evil and deluded, where suffering is just increasing. So we are waiting in a painful time, for the day when we will be fully revealed.

Third, we are 'waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons.' We are waiting in the interim period between our legal adoption, and the full blown celebration when God honors us as His sons and daughters before heaven and earth just like a Roman father would honor his adopted son before his friends.

And fourth, we are also waiting for the 'redemption of our body.' Redemption is a reference to the slave trade, where a slave is bought and redeemed in the marketplace. The redemption of our core identity took place at the Cross, but the redemption of the rest of us, our bodies, will take place at the Second Coming. Then we will have no more struggles with the flesh because those bodies will be designed to shine forth the life of Christ. So at this great celebration, we will be metamorphosed from a lowly caterpillar to a butterfly and presented in our resurrection bodies.

### **Waiting In Hope: v.24-25**

So while we wait, are we left empty-handed? NO! It is waiting with great HOPE. This HOPE is exactly what Paul discusses in v.24-25. 'For in hope we have been saved.' Hope is one of the defining marks of a Christian.

Nowadays, we use the word 'hope' to express uncertainty. Every time I go to the DMV, I say to myself, 'I hope I get out of here in an hour.' Considering how slow DMV is, that wish is anything but certain! But 'hope' in the Bible reflects certainty. Biblical hope is a sure, certain expectation that God will make good on His promises in the future. Therefore when Paul says that in hope we have been saved, he doesn't mean to say we're left to our own wishful thinking about something that may not happen. He means that we can bet the weight of our lives on this hope.

As surely as spring becomes summer, as surely as a woman in labor will give birth, as surely as the adoption celebration will start, as surely as the slave will be set free, so we will make it Home. That is our HOPE that sustains us through these difficult times.

Because our Home is not here, the biggest mistake we can make is to have our perspective rooted in this world and expect to feel at home here. That's why Paul lifts our eyes to see beyond our present reality into our future reality. Look at the way he uses the verb 'to see.' 'But hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees?' By definition, hope is oriented towards the future, a future that is yet unseen. What we see is the suffering we go through as Christians in different forms. This is what we see now, but our Eternal Home is yet unseen.

This hope underscores the fact that we are caught between two worlds: the world in which we suffer now, and the world yet to come. This is our tension between the 'now' and the 'not yet' that is played out on the balance scales. We continue to serve in this world, and while we do experience joy and great victory, there is undeniably hardship associated with being a Christian. So at the same time, we look forward to something we do not yet see. This is very honoring, because it means that you were made for something better than this world.

This leads us to the very practical statement contained in v.25: 'But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.' The term for 'perseverance' is the instruction to us. If we tie this perseverance with the perseverance of Romans 5:3-4, then we continually persist in allowing Christ to live out his life through us no matter what the cost to us.

Perseverance with hope is the hallmark of the Christian life. Life as a Christian is not easy. Suffering comes in all shapes and sizes, and the closer you walk with Jesus Christ, the more you can be sure that you will suffer. (The legalists like the Pharisees will hate you because you're unpredictable. The patriots and ethnic supremists like the Zealots will despise you because you care about people beyond your own group. The rich will hate you because you care about the poor. The poor might hate you because you care about the rich. There will be people like Judas who will try to use you for their own selfish ends. You'll have some friends not be able to understand you when you're in your hour of deepest pain.) Perseverance through suffering is our mandate for now, but one day it will all be over. We will go home.

So how do we wait? Paul answers that when he adds, 'we wait eagerly for it.' That phrase 'wait eagerly' is the same Greek word used to describe Creation's eager wait and head craning expectancy. It's a wait that is strong and confident.

Illus: This waiting eagerly makes me think of how my mentor, a man named Dorman, taught me something about raising kids. Dorman has a tradition in his family, that when each of his children turn 5, they get on a plane early in the morning to Orange County airport and get to Disneyland at 10am just as the doors open. Then Dorman and his special son or daughter for that day ride like wild people on all the rides they can in one day, they hop back onto a shuttle, and they fly home late that night. It's a magical day that each of his kids love talking about. Now a few years ago, Dorm's two oldest daughters had already had this celebration, while young Jordan was about a year and four months away from that big day. Dorm reminded Jordan about all the things she would see and how magical that day would be for her. Her blue eyes glittered with eager waiting at the yet unseen day that she was certain would come because her father had promised it to her. She savored the thought of spending a whole day with her Daddy in the Magic Kingdom.

But for us, that Kingdom will not be a day trip. It will be our Eternal Home. And when we step foot in the threshold, led by our escort Jesus Christ, then these painful times will be but a memory, for our eyes will have seen the glory.

To close, I want to read a part of a story that has meant a great deal to me in my times of suffering. It's from Margery Williams' book *The Velveteen Rabbit*, in which a stuffed rabbit doll wonders what it means to have life and become real.

'What is REAL?' asked the Rabbit one day when he and his close friend the Skin Horse were lying side by side near the nursery fender. 'Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?'

'Real isn't how you are made,' said the Skin Horse. 'It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become real...'

'Does it happen all at once, like being wound up...or bit by bit?'

'It doesn't happen all at once,' said the Skin Horse. 'You become. It takes a long time... Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.'

Maybe this will be what it will be like to come HOME to Jesus. And though your fur is shabby and your joints are loose, rejoice! You're loved by your Creator, who won't let you sit on the shelf. And when this time is over, He'll give you a new body: not an old velveteen one, but one that's REAL. And we'll be free to roam outside the nursery with Him, in our new HOME.