

XVII. Hope through the Spirit

May 10/11/12, 2016

Romans 8:14-27

Aim: To look forward with patience to the hope of glory which will be revealed in us and is guaranteed through the Holy Spirit.

A. The Spirit of Adoption (Romans 8:14-17)

If 'life' is the ruling idea in vv. 1-13, being 'sons' or 'children' of God's dominates vv. 14-17. The way these verses focus on this concept justifies their being treated as a separate unit of thought. Nevertheless, the connections between this paragraph and what precedes and follows are particularly close. On the one hand, being sons of God explains further why those who are placed under the dominion of the Spirit experience eschatological life (v. 14, in relation to v. 13). On the other hand, being children of God also places believers squarely in the 'already-not yet' tension created by their belonging to the new realm of righteousness at the same time as they continue to live in the midst of the old realm of sin and death. In a word, being a 'child' of God means to be an 'heir' also, and thereby one who must look to the future for the full enjoyment of 'sonship' (v. 17, in relation to vv. 18-30). This paragraph, then, carries forward Paul's theme of assurance in three ways: 1) it gives further reason for the triumphant proclamation that believers who have God's Spirit will 'live'; 2) it adds to the growing list another important description – 'sons of God' – of believers as God's people, the heirs of God's promises; and 3) it provides yet further justification for Paul's categorical assertion that 'there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (v. 1).

The movement of thought in this paragraph is very similar to that of Gal. 4:1-7. In both texts, Paul affirms that believers are transformed from slaves to sons of God through the redeeming sacrifice of Christ, 'sent' as one like us. In both, this new status is called 'adoption' and is tied to the indwelling Spirit, the Spirit who makes us deeply aware that we now belong to God as His dearly loved children (cp. 'Abba'). And in both, being God's children leads to our being His heirs. Before the cross, the people of Israel, 'under the law,' lived as 'minors,' little better than slaves; in a similar way, Gentiles were enslaved under the 'elementary principles of the world' (Gal. 4:9), subject to the 'spirit of bondage' (8:15). Those who accept Christ, however, whether Jew or Gentile, receive the Holy Spirit and become both 'sons' and 'heirs' of God.

The identity the Spirit gives us is that of being sons and daughters of God. Using the figure of adoption, Paul explains the believer's intimate and permanent relationship to God as a beloved child.

1. Sons of God (8:14)

¹⁴*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.*

The first inner confirmation of adoption is the believer's 'being led by the Spirit of God.' A person who is truly experiencing the leading hand of God in his life can be certain he is God's child.

To be 'led by the Spirit' probably means not to be *guided* by the Holy Spirit but, as in Gal. 5:18, to have the direction of one's life as a whole determined by the Spirit. The phrase is thus a way of summarizing the various descriptions of the life of the Spirit that Paul has used in vv. 4-9.

Romans – Lesson 17

If we want to know if we are in a state of grace, if we want to know if we are children of God, we can look here for the answer. The first test we have as to whether we are children of God is whether we are led by the Spirit. If any biblical concept has been thoroughly muddled in our day, it is this concept of what it means to be led by the Spirit. There is nothing wrong with the idea that God leads His people where He wants them to go and into experiences that He wants them to experience, but that is not the primary biblical meaning of being led by the Spirit. When the Bible speaks of the will of God for our lives, it does so very differently from what we hear in Christian jargon: 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification' (1 Th. 4:3). Where the Spirit guides His people is on the path of righteousness to holiness. Paul has in mind those whose lives are being directed toward the righteousness of God. If our lives are being directed by the Spirit, it is a sure and certain sign that we are children of God, because that is what the indwelling Spirit does. He inclines our hearts. He gives us a hunger and thirst for obedience to Christ (cp. Jn. 14:15).

'Are being led' translates the present passive indicative of *agō*, indicating that which already exists. The phrase 'are being led' does not, however, indicate uninterrupted leading by the Spirit. Otherwise the many New Testament admonitions and warnings to Christians would be meaningless. But the genuine believer's life is basically characterized by the Spirit's leading, just as it is basically characterized by Christ's righteousness. God's Spirit sovereignly leads His children in many ways, sometimes in ways that are direct and unique. But the primary ways by which He promises to lead us are those of illumination and sanctification.

Who are the sons and daughters of God? They are all those who are led by the Spirit of God, all those who 'walk' according to the Spirit (v. 4). The call is always the same. We are to abide in Christ, as the branches abide in the vine. There is to be fruit in the Christian life. If there is no fruit, if there is no evidence that we are abiding in the vine then perhaps there is no reality to our profession of faith.

The result of this Spirit-dominated existence is being 'sons of God'; the one necessarily includes the other. The phrase 'son of God' is used in the OT and Judaism to denote Israel as the people whom God has called to be 'His own'; correspondingly, Yahweh is pictured as Israel's 'father.' The plural 'sons of God' is less often applied to the people of Israel, but it occurs often enough to make it likely that this is the source of Paul's use of the phrase (e.g., Dt. 14:1; Is. 43:6; Hos. 2:1). If this is so, then the connection between vv. 13 and 14 becomes even clearer; the 'sonship' attested to by God's Spirit brings life because 'life' is inherent in belong to God's people, the people of promise.

Sonship is defined biblically in terms of those whose lead we follow. It is not a question of biology but of obedience. We are children of the one whom we obey, and if we obey the lusts of the flesh, if we obey the inclinations of Satan, then we are children of the Devil, not of Abraham or of God. That is why Paul says those whose lives are directed by the Spirit of God are sons of God; they follow and obey the one leading them in the way of God.

2. Adopted by God (8:15)

a) *The Spirit of Slavery (8:15a)*

¹⁵*For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear...*

A second way in which the Holy Spirit confirms our adoption as God's children is by freeing us from the 'spirit of slavery' that inevitably leads us 'to fear again.'

Romans – Lesson 17

Before moving on to the last element in the sequence that forms the backbone of this paragraph – Spirit-sonship-heir – Paul pauses to explain a bit more the relationship between the first two in the chain. Paul’s description of the Spirit’s work in conferring sonship forms one of the most beautiful pictures of the believer’s joy and security anywhere in Scripture. The heart of v. 15 is an antithesis between two ‘spirits’: the ‘spirit of slavery,’ which believers have *not* received, and the ‘spirit of adoption,’ which we *have*. It is unlikely that ‘spirit of slavery’ refers directly to the Holy Spirit. Paul may then, refer to the human spirit, enslaved to sin; but more likely he uses the word rhetorically, as a hypothetical antithesis to the ‘Spirit of adoption’: ‘the Spirit that you have received is *not* a “spirit of bondage” but a Spirit of adoption.’

There is a contrast here between two kinds of spirits. One is the spirit of bondage, which is produced by the flesh. It is the spirit of the unregenerate person. Such people remain in prison. They are incarcerated by their old nature. They are slaves to the sinful impulses of their recalcitrant hearts. However, if we have the Spirit within us, we no longer have the spirit of bondage. We are no longer shaking and quaking in servile fear before the Lord God. We now have the spirit of adoption.

With this interpretation, ‘again’ will modify ‘unto fear’: the Spirit that believers have received does not bring about ‘again’ that anxiety and fear of judgment that they suffered in their pre-Christian state. Since Paul has pictured the law as bringing awareness of sin and the corresponding penalty of condemnation (see 3:20; 7:7-13), he probably alludes to the ministry of the law. Contrasted with this inner sense of dread before God, the righteous judge, is the sense of peace and security before God, our heavenly Father, that is produced by God’s Spirit in the heart of Christians.

b) The Spirit of Adoption (8:15b)

(1) Adoption

...but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons...

It is interesting that the concept of adoption is generally not found among Jewish theologians from antiquity. Adoption is a Roman idea, and Paul uses the metaphor to describe believers’ relationship to God.

The term ‘adoption’ is filled with the ideas of love, grace, compassion, and intimate relationship. It is the action by which a husband and wife decide to take a boy or girl who is not their physical offspring into their family as their own child. When that action is taken by the proper legal means, the adopted child attains all the rights and privileges of a member of the family.

The term ‘adoption’ may smack somewhat of artificiality in our ears; but in the first century AD an adopted son was a son deliberately chosen by his adoptive father to perpetuate his name and inherit his estate; he was no whit inferior in status to a son born in the ordinary course of nature and might well enjoy the father’s affection more fully and reproduce the father’s character more worthily.

In the Roman culture of Paul’s day, an adopted child, especially an adopted son, sometimes had greater prestige and privilege than the natural children. According to Roman law, a father’s rule over his children was absolute. If he was disappointed in his natural sons’ skill, character, or any other attribute, he would search diligently for a boy available for adoption who demonstrated the qualities he desired. If the boy proved himself worthy, the father would take the necessary legal

Romans – Lesson 17

steps for adoption. At the death of the father, a favored adopted son would sometimes inherit the father's title, the major part of the estate, and would be the primary progenitor of the family name. Because of its obvious great importance, the process of Roman adoption involved several carefully prescribed legal procedures. The first step totally severed the boy's legal and social relationship to his natural family, and the second step placed him permanently into his new family.

Paul could hardly have chosen a better term than 'adoption' to characterize this peace and security. The word denoted the Greek, and particularly Roman, legal institution whereby one can 'adopt' a child and confer on that child all the legal rights and privileges that would ordinarily accrue to a natural child. However, while the institution is a Greco-Roman one, the underlying concept is rooted in the OT and Judaism. 'Adoption' is one of the privileges of Israel (9:4), and Israel is regularly characterized as God's 'son' or 'sons' in the OT and Judaism. Once again, then, Paul has taken a term that depicts Israel's unique status as God's people and 'transferred' it to Christians.

At this point in Romans, Paul is not so much emphasizing the transaction of adoption as the believer's assurance of it. Through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, we not only are truly and permanently adopted as children of God but are given 'a spirit of adoption.' That is, God makes certain His children *know* they are His children. Because of His Spirit dwelling in our hearts, our spirit recognizes that we are always privileged to come before God as our beloved father.

As the spirit that we have *not* received, the 'spirit of slavery,' would produce a sense of 'fear' before God, so the Spirit of adoption that we *have* received causes to well up within us a comforting conviction that we are God's own children. The Spirit not only bestows 'adoption' on us; He also makes us aware of this new relationship: we have not only the status, but the heart of sons.

(2) Abba

...by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'

Paul assures believers of the wondrous truth that they are indeed God's adopted children, and that because of that immeasurably gracious relationship they have the full right and privilege to cry out 'Abba!' to God as their heavenly Father, just as every child does to his earthly father. The fact that believers have that compelling desire to cry out in intimate petition and praise to their loving Father, along with their longing for fellowship and communion with God, is evidence of the indwelling Holy Spirit, which indwelling proves one's salvation and gives assurance of eternal life. 'Abba' is an informal Aramaic term for 'Father,' connoting intimacy, tenderness, dependence, and complete lack of fear or anxiety. Modern English equivalents would be Daddy, or Papa.

The word 'Father' in this verse is the Greek word for father, while 'Abba' is the Aramaic word for father. There is a very precious and a very important distinction between the two words. The Greek word 'father' can be used like our English word 'father.' It can have either a harsh or a gentle meaning. But the word 'Abba' in the Aramaic is rather parallel to our word 'Daddy.' It is a gentle term. Paul wants us to understand the wonder and glory of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit. He wants us to do some heart searching as to whether or not we are living up to this highest of callings, this greatest of challenges. And yet at the same time, He wants to give us the

Romans – Lesson 17

greatest possible comfort. For the transcendent God of the universe is the one who in the stillness of the night, or when I have fallen in the mud, takes me by the hand and invites me to call Him Daddy.

We sense that we really are God's sons! So intense is the reality of our adoption that we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Aramaic word 'Abba,' which means 'Dear Father' in the sense that we might say 'Dad' or 'Daddy,' was never used by the Jews to address God, nor do they use it today. Jesus alone used it, and this was no doubt considered scandalous by His enemies. He used it in Gethsemane (Mk. 14:36; cp. Gal. 4:6). Jesus, through the Spirit, has given us His own special name for God, and it has become our natural cry to a loving Father.

In crying out 'Abba, Father,' the believer not only gives voice to his or her consciousness of belonging to God as His child but also to having a status comparable to that of Jesus Himself. The Aramaic *abba* was the term Jesus Himself used in addressing His Father, and its preservation in the Greek Gospel of Mark (14:36) and in the Greek-speaking Pauline churches attests to the fact that it was remembered and treasured as distinctive and meaningful. In ascribing to Christians indwelt by the Spirit the use of this same term in addressing God, Paul shows that Christians have a relationship to God that is like (though, of course, not exactly like) Christ's own relationship to the Father. In 'adopting' us, God has taken no half measures; we have been made full members of the family and partakers of all the privileges belonging to members of that family.

One of the great consequences of justification is that all who are justified are immediately adopted into the family of God and now have the unspeakable privilege of addressing God as Father. It is by the Holy Spirit shed abroad in our hearts that we have the authority to cry, 'Abba, Father!' The fact that we can address God now as 'Father' and say 'Abba' to Him does not give us the right to enter into His presence presumptuously or arrogantly. One of the most radical things we find in Jesus is the claim He makes over and over again during His earthly ministry of the special intimacy that He had with the Father (e.g., Jn. 5:19; 8:28; 6:37). Again and again Jesus referred to God as His father, which enraged the Pharisees. It is so common to us that we read over it and miss its significance. We miss how radical it was in Jesus' day that any Jewish person would pray and address God as 'Father,' but Jesus did it almost every time He prayed. Jesus gave to us the unique privilege He alone held to address the God of heaven and earth as 'Father' (cp. Mt. 6:8-9a). When we pray, we can call God 'Father' because He is now our Father. We have been adopted into His family. It is an unbelievable privilege that we should never take for granted. Jesus never took it for granted.

3. Children of God (8:16)

¹⁶*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God...*

As Christians we can have at least three assurances that we are truly God's children. The first assurance is the absolute one, built upon the promise of God in Scripture (e.g., Jn. 3:36). Our second assurance that we are children of God is the fruit that we should see in our lives. We should see fruit, and we should see some motion of the Spirit in our lives. The third assurance is the one we read of in verse 16, an assurance as deep as the deepest running stream from the heart of the earth, deep and wonderful: 'The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.'

Romans – Lesson 17

Finally we come to the deepest and highest level of assurance of salvation that we can achieve in this world: ‘The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit.’ Here again we see that word *spirit* used to refer to both the Holy Spirit and our spirit. There is a spiritual conversation here, a spiritual communication that comes from the Holy Spirit to the human spirit, which indicates ‘that we are children of God.’ In the final analysis, our assurance of salvation is not a logical deduction springing from our theology. Our assurance is certainly not based on a careful analysis of our behavior. Our final assurance comes by the testimony of God the Holy Spirit who bears witness with and through our spirits that we are children of God.

To give us even further assurance of our eternal relationship to Him, the Lord’s Holy ‘Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.’ In Hebrew culture the testimony of two witnesses was required to establish a truth, and we have two witnesses: that of our innermost being and that of the Holy Spirit. The indwelling Holy Spirit is constantly present to provide inner testimony to our divine adoption. He certainly does that through the inner work of illumination and sanctification, as well as through the longing for communion with God. But here Paul does not have in mind just some mystical small voice saying we are saved. Rather, he may be referring to the fruit of the Spirit (Ga. 5:22-23), which, when the Spirit produces it, gives the believer assurance. Or he may be thinking of the power for service (Acts 1:8), which when experienced is evidence of the Spirit’s presence, thus assuring one of salvation. When believers are compelled by love for God, feel deep hatred for sin, reject the world, long for Christ’s return, love other Christians, experience answered prayer, discern between truth and error, long for and move toward Christlikeness, the work of the Holy Spirit is evidence and those believers have witness that they truly ‘are children of God.’

The function of this verse is to explain how it is that ‘receiving the Spirit of adoption’ enables *us* to cry out, ‘Abba, Father!’ The Holy Spirit is not only instrumental in *making* us God’s children; He also makes us *aware* that we are God’s children. While the first occurrence of *pneuma* denotes the Holy Spirit, the second, modified as it is by ‘our,’ refers to the human ‘spirit.’ This is, then the only occurrence of *pneuma* in Romans 8 that does not refer to the Holy Spirit. Paul refers to the human spirit here because he wants to stress that the witness of ‘the Spirit Himself’ about our adoption as sons affects the deepest and innermost part of our beings. It is because of this that we cry so sincerely and spontaneously ‘Abba, Father!’

How does the Spirit bear witness? The Spirit does not come and whisper into our ear when we are driving down the highway, ‘Relax, you are one of mine.’ We need to understand that when the Spirit communicates to God’s people, He communicates to them by the Word, with the Word, through the Word, and never against the Word. The testimony we receive from the Holy Spirit comes in and through the Word. If we lack assurance and want our hearts to be at peace, we must go to the Word. The Spirit confirms His truth to us in and through the Word. If we want to be led by the Spirit of God, we must immerse ourselves in the Spirit-inspired Word.

4. Heirs of God (8:17)

This verse is transitional, connecting Paul’s description of the adoption as children that believers enjoy at the present time (vv. 14-16) with his moving portrait of the culmination and full benefits of that adoption that await the believer in the future (vv. 18-30).

a) Fellow Heirs (8:17a)

...¹⁷and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ...

Romans – Lesson 17

The ‘if’ in verse 17 does not carry the idea of possibility of doubt but of reality and causality, and might be better translated ‘because.’ In other words, because *all* believers have the leading of the Holy Spirit (v. 14), and His witness (v. 16) that they are indeed children of God, they are thereby ‘heirs also.’ The source of believers’ incomparable glory is God, their heavenly Father, who has adopted them as His own children and ‘heirs.’ The value of an inheritance is determined by the worth of the one who bequeaths it, and the inheritance of Christians is from the Creator, Sustainer, and Owner of the world. God not only is the source of our inheritance but also is Himself our inheritance. Just as God’s resources are limitless, so our spiritual inheritance is limitless, because, as His ‘fellow heirs,’ we share in everything that the true Son of God, Jesus Christ, inherits. In the arithmetic of earth, if each heir receives an equal share of an inheritance, each gets only a certain fraction of the whole amount. But heaven is not under such limits, and *every* adopted child of God will receive the *full* inheritance with the Son. Everything that Christ receives by divine right, we will receive by divine grace. It is not that believers will become gods, as some cults teach, but that we will receive, by our joint inheritance with Christ, all the blessings and grandeur that God has.

Paul uses the concept ‘inheritance’ to introduce his qualification of our adoption in terms of its future aspects. In many ways this concept is a natural one; a child who has been adopted into a family, while truly a part of that family, does not (usually) receive all the benefits of that adoption until a later time. In both Gal. 4:1-7 and in this text, Paul uses this idea to emphasize the necessarily incomplete nature of those privileges inherent in the believer’s adoption into God’s family.

But there is a deeper, theological, purpose behind Paul’s use of the ‘inheritance’ idea. In the OT, the ‘inheritance’ is particularly the land, promised to Abraham and his ‘seed,’ a promise that is renewed after the disaster of the Exile. In later Judaism, however, the ‘inheritance’ did not always maintain a distinctive spatial focus and came to be used to describe eschatological life. Christians are God’s people of the new age, ‘children of God,’ and, as such, also the recipients of what God has promised to His people. Christians are, then, ‘heirs of God’ – meaning probably not that Christians inherit God Himself, but that they inherit what God has promised. In immediately adding ‘fellow heirs with Christ,’ Paul is not correcting the first description but filling it out by reminding us that Christians inherit the blessings of God’s kingdom only through, and in, Christ.

Here again we see the Trinity: God the Father is our Father; we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (v. 16); and we are joint-heirs with Jesus Christ. The entire Trinity assures us of our salvation. The whole Trinity assures us that we ‘are joint-heirs with Christ’ of eternal life.

b) Fellow Sufferers (8:17b)

...provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

But, in a typical NT preservation of the ‘eschatological reservation,’ Paul adds that this glorious inheritance is attained only through suffering. Because we are one with Christ, we are his fellow heirs, assured of being ‘glorified with Him.’ But, at the same time, this oneness means that we must follow Christ’s own road to glory, ‘suffering with Him’ (cp. also Phil. 1:29; 3:10; 2 Cor. 1:5). The suffering Paul speaks of here refers to the daily anxieties, tensions, and persecutions that are the lot of those who follow the one who was ‘reckoned with the transgressors’ (Lk. 22:37). Paul makes clear that this suffering is the condition for the inheritance; we will be ‘glorified with’ Christ (only) *if* we ‘suffer with Him.’ Participation in Christ’s glory can come

Romans – Lesson 17

only through participation in His suffering. What Paul is doing is setting forth an unbreakable ‘law of the kingdom’ according to which glory can come only by way of suffering. For the glory of the kingdom of God is attained only through participation in Christ, and belonging to Christ cannot but bring our participation in the sufferings of Christ.

Paul is declaring that, strange as it seems to the earthly mind, the present proof of the believer’s ultimate glory comes through suffering on his Lord’s behalf. Because ‘we suffer with Him,’ we know that we will ‘also be glorified with Him.’ When we suffer mockery, scorn, ridicule, or any other form of persecution because of our relationship to Jesus Christ, we can take that affliction as divine proof we truly belong to Christ and that our hope of heavenly glory is not in vain, that ultimately we will ‘also be glorified with Him.’

In Romans 1:16-17 the ‘salvation’ Paul speaks of there is not just justification: it is justification (1:18-4:25); it is sanctification (5:1-8:17); and now we are going to learn about the future aspect of salvation, which is glorification (8:18-39). Is there suffering in connection with salvation? Yes, there is suffering. Are there tears? Yes, there are tears. Is there a cost? Yes, there is a cost. ‘Joint-heirs with Jesus Christ’ includes identification with Him in His suffering. But the sufferings of this present time (v. 18) are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will follow. ‘Not worthy to be compared!’ It’s like a song, like a shout of victory, a triumphant blowing of the trumpets. When will this glory be revealed in us? At Christ’s second Coming (cp. 2 Th. 1:4).

B. The Spirit of Glory (Romans 8:18-27)

This passage develops the reference to suffering and glory in v. 17b, continues the overall theme of assurance that dominates chapter 8, and brings us back full circle to the opening paragraph (5:1-11) of this major section of the letter. Although ‘glory’ is mentioned only three times in vv. 18-30, it is the overarching theme of this passage. Occurring at both the beginning (v. 18) and at the end (v. 30), this concept frames these verses, furnishing us with an important indicator of Paul’s central concern. This ‘inclusio,’ the noticeable shift at v. 17b from the Christian’s present status to his future inheritance, and the parallels between vv. 17-30 and 5:1-11 show that vv. 18-30 comprise a coherent unit of thought, whose focus is eschatological glory. The last phrase of v. 18 – ‘the glory that shall be revealed in us’ – states the theme of the section as a whole.

In vv. 1-17, Paul has focused on the Spirit as the agent through whom believers are granted life and sonship. ‘No condemnation’ can be proclaimed over the Christian (v. 1) because he or she has been transferred from death to life and made God’s own child. But the problem that Paul has already broached in vv. 10-11 is insistently raised by v. 17b: How can the Christian maintain hope for eternal life in the face of sufferings and death? How can those who have been set free ‘from the law of sin and death’ die? How can God’s very own, dearly loved children suffer? The exposition of the future glory to be enjoyed by the believer is necessary to answer these questions. In a sense, what Paul is saying in vv. 18-30 is that the Christian must go the way of his Lord. As for Jesus glory only followed suffering, so for the Christian (cp. v. 17c).

1. Glory to Be Revealed (8:18)

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.*

Romans – Lesson 17

The ‘for’ introduces this verse and, indeed, the entire paragraph that follows, as an elaboration of the sequence of suffering and glory attributed to believers in v. 17b. A Christian views the suffering of this life in a larger, world-transcending context that, while not alleviating its present intensity, transcends it with the confident expectation that suffering is not the final word. We must, Paul suggests, weigh suffering in the balance with the glory that is the final state of every believer; and so ‘weighty,’ so transcendently wonderful, is this glory that suffering flies in the air as if it had no weight at all.

Paul begins verse 18 by saying, ‘I consider,’ meaning ‘I have thought it over carefully—I have weighed the evidence and thus reckon it to be so.’ He says essentially the same thing in 2 Corinthians 4:17. No matter what we have gone through, are presently going through, or will go through, the sum total is not worth comparing with the glory that awaits us. We can compare a thimble of water with the sea, but we cannot compare our sufferings with the coming glory.

Logizomai (‘to consider’) refers literally to numerical calculation. Figuratively, as it is used here, it refers to reaching a settled conclusion by careful study and reasoning. Paul does not merely suggest, but strongly affirms, that any suffering for Christ’s sake is a small price to pay for the gracious benefits received because of that suffering. In the New Testament, *pathēma* (‘sufferings’) is used both of Christ’s sufferings and of believers’ sufferings for His sake.

The difference between the present degree of pain we experience and the blessedness to which God has appointed His people is so immensely different that there is no way to compare them. Any comparison we come up with falls short. Notice that Paul considers the sufferings of this *present* time; in other words, suffering is real, not just an illusion. Paul was not a practitioner of Christian Science. He understood in a visceral way, in a way few of us have experienced, the stark reality of human suffering.

These ‘sufferings of the present time’ are not only those ‘trials’ that are endured directly because of confession of Christ – for instance, persecution – but encompass the whole gamut of suffering including things such as illness, bereavement, financial reverses, and death itself. The word Paul uses here refers to ‘sufferings’ in any form. And the qualification ‘of the present time’ links these sufferings with the old age of salvation history, conquered in Christ but remaining as the arena in which the Christian must live out his or her new life. ‘Glory,’ like salvation in 1 Peter 1:4-5, can be conceived as a state that is ‘reserved for us,’ a state that Christ, our forerunner, has already entered. This is not, then, to say that the Christian already possesses this glory, but that the last day, by bringing the believer into the scope of the glory of God, will manifest the decision that has already been made on our behalf.

2. Groaning Until the Revealing (8:19-27)

Paul focuses our attention on the anticipation of our future glory—the incomparable groans—of creation (vv. 19-22), of believers, (vv. 23-25), and of the Holy Spirit Himself (vv. 26-27). A groan is an audible expression of anguish due to physical, emotional, or spiritual pain. These groanings bewail a condition that is painful, unsatisfying, and sorrowful—a cry for deliverance from a torturing experience.

Verses 19-25 focus on the longing anticipation of future transformation shared by both the creation and Christians. In these verses Paul supports and develops ‘to be revealed’ in v. 18 by showing that both creation and Christians: 1) suffer at present from a sense of incompleteness and even frustration; and 2) eagerly yearn for a culminating transformation.

Romans – Lesson 17

a) *Groaning of Creation (8:19-22)*

(1) The Creation Waits with Longing (8:19)

¹⁹*For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.*

The first groan is the personified lament coming from the created universe, as it now exists in the corrupted condition caused by the Fall. We find here a personification. Even the impersonal forces of nature are brought into the arena of celebrating God's redemption (cp. Ps. 98:8b-9; Is. 55:12). All creation rejoices in the expectation of what lies in the future.

What does Paul include in the word 'creation'? Paul's insistence in v. 20 that the 'vanity' to which this creation was subjected was not of its own choice appears to exclude all people, not just believers. The majority of modern commentators think that creation here denotes the 'subhuman' creation. Like the psalmists and prophets who pictured hills, meadows, and valleys 'shouting and singing together for joy' (Ps. 65:12-13), and the earth 'mourning' (Is. 24:4; Jer. 4:28; 12:4), Paul personifies the subhuman creation in order to convey to his readers a sense of the cosmic significance of both humanity's fall into sin and believers' restoration to glory.

'Creation' does not here include the heavenly angels, who, although created beings, are not subject to corruption. The term obviously does not include Satan and his host of fallen angels, the demons. They have no desire for a godly, sinless state and know they are divinely sentenced to eternal torment. Believers are not included in that term either, because they are mentioned separately in verses 23-25. Nor is Paul referring to unbelievers. The only remaining part of creation is the non-rational part, including animals and plants and all inanimate things such as the mountains, rivers, plains, seas, and heavenly bodies. Jews were familiar with God's promise of a redeemed world, a renewed creation (cp. Is. 65:17). Jews anticipated a glorious time when all pain, oppression, slavery, anxiety, sorrow, and persecution would end and the Lord would establish His own perfect kingdom of peace and righteousness.

The word 'eager expectation' suggests the picture of a person craning his or her neck to see what is coming.

Apokaradokia ('anxious longing') is an especially vivid word that literally refers to watching with outstretched head, and suggests standing on tiptoes with the eyes looking ahead with intent expectancy. The prefix *apo* adds the idea of fixed absorption and concentration on that which is anticipated. The creation is standing on tiptoes, as it were, as it 'waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.' 'Waits eager' translates a form of the verb *apekdechomai*, which refers to waiting in great anticipation but with patience.

In a marvelous blend of poetic and prophetic impulse, Paul pictures animate and inanimate creation as an audience eagerly waiting for the sons of God to come into their true glory. The phrase 'waits with eager longing' comes from a group of words that carry the idea of craning the neck or stretching forward. Phillips translates this, 'The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own.' Creation longs for the day of liberation.

The 'revelation of the sons of God' that creation keenly anticipates is the 'unveiling' of the true nature of Christians. Paul has already made clear that Christians are already 'sons' of God' (vv. 14-17). But, experiencing suffering (v. 18) and weakness (v. 26) like all other people, Christians do not in this life 'appear' much like sons of God. The last day will publicly manifest our real

Romans – Lesson 17

status. The ‘revelation’ of which Paul speaks is not *only* a disclosure of what we have always been but also a dynamic process by which the status we now have in preliminary form and in hiddenness will be brought to its final stage and made publicly evident.

‘Revealing’ translates *apokalupsis*, which refers to an uncovering, unveiling, or revelation. At the ‘revealing of the sons of God,’ ‘when Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then [believers] also will be revealed with Him in glory’ (Col. 3:4). At that time, all believers will be eternally separated from sin and their unredeemed humanness, to be glorified with Christ’s holiness and splendor.

What is this ‘manifestation of the sons of God’ that all creation looks forward to? It is the physical resurrection of the believer’s body, as Paul will state specifically in verse 23. Of course, we all long for the day when we will receive our resurrected bodies. This should be our constant hope and expectation, but Paul says that the whole creation longs for our resurrection.

(2) The Creation Was Subjected to Futility (8:20)

²⁰*For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope...*

In this verse and in v. 21 (which make up one sentence in Greek) Paul explains what many of his readers would naturally be wondering: Why must the creation be eagerly anticipating the revelation of the sons of God? The reason, Paul says, is that the subhuman creation itself is not what it should be, or what God intended it to be. It has ‘been subjected to “frustration.”’ In light of Paul’s obvious reference to the Genesis 3 narrative – Murray labels these verses ‘Paul’s commentary on Genesis 3:17-18’ – the word probably denotes the ‘frustration’ occasioned by creation’s being unable to attain the end for which it was made.

Mataiotēs (‘futility’) carries the idea of being without success, of being unable to achieve a goal or purpose. Because of man’s sin, no part of nature now exists as God intended it to be and as it originally was. The verb ‘was subjected’ indicates by its form that nature did not curse itself but was cursed by something or someone else. Paul goes on to reveal that the curse on nature was executed by its Creator. God Himself ‘subjected it’ to futility.

The word *futility* is one of the ugliest words in the English language. Nothing can drive the human being to despair more quickly or deeply than the idea that our pain and labor are mere exercises in futility and utterly meaningless. For the present time the whole creation has been subjected to the appearance of futility, something which did not occur by vote. It was set by divine decree. This world is filled with pain and suffering, not because God is not good, but because He is good and will not tolerate evil. God has subjected the entire creation to pain and affliction because of our sin.

Paul is referring, of course, to the curse that came upon creation when mankind sinned. Creation became a sufferer and was imbued with futility, decay, and death. So now at times the forces of nature seem to work against themselves as well as against man. The animal world was invaded by fear and violence. The loveliest scenes in nature, while remaining beautiful, are also witness to bloody horrors. Floods, hurricanes, droughts, tornadoes, blights, avalanches, and earthquakes stalk the earth.

But creation’s frustration, Paul reminds us, came ‘not of its own will, but because of the one who subjected it.’ The ‘one who subjected it’ has been identified with: 1) Adam, whose sin brought

Romans – Lesson 17

death and decay into the world (cp. 5:12); 2) Satan, whose temptation led to the Fall; and 3) God, who decreed the curse as a judgment on sin (Gen. 3:17). Paul must be referring to God, who alone had the right and the power to condemn all of creation to frustration because of human sin. But this decree of God was not without its positive side, for it was issued ‘in hope.’ Paul probably has in mind the *protoevangelium* (cp. Rom. 16:20). The creation then though subjected to frustration as a result of human sin, has never been without hope; for the very decree of subjection was given in the context of hope.

(3) The Creation Will Be Set Free (8:21)

...²¹*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.*

In this verse, Paul specifies the content of the hope that he mentioned at the end of v. 20. Creation, helplessly enslaved to the decay that rules this world after the Fall, exists in the hope that it will be set free to participate in the eschatological glory to be enjoyed by God’s children. Paul describes this glory in terms of freedom. As in v. 19, then, the hope of the creation is related to, and even contingent upon, the glory to be given to Christians. We might also note that the idea of creation ‘being set free’ strongly suggests that the ultimate destiny of creation is not annihilation but transformation.

Nature’s destiny is inseparably linked to man’s. Because man sinned, the rest of creation was corrupted with him. Likewise, when man’s glory is divinely restored, the natural world will be restored as well. Therefore, Paul says there is hope even for the natural creation itself (v. 20). Just as man’s sin brought corruption to the universe, so man’s restoration to righteousness will be accompanied by the restoration of the earth and its universe to their divinely intended perfection and glory.

By nature we are people in bondage, but Paul has just explained that through the power of the Holy Spirit, we have been set free. We are no longer under those bonds of sin. We have been released from that incarceration. We have been set free, and that release from bondage does not end with us. The goal of the finished work of Christ is to rescue the entire creation so that even the land will stop mourning and the animals will no longer be afraid. Paul says that the creation itself will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into glorious liberty. Just as the created world has suffered because of our sin, the whole creation will participate in the liberation from the consequences of sin at the time of the manifestation of the children of God.

In physics, the law of entropy refers to the constant and irreversible degradation of matter and energy in the universe to increasing disorder. That scientific law clearly contradicts the theory of evolution, which is based on the premise that the natural world is inclined to continual self-improvement. But it is evident even in a simple garden plot that, when it is untended, it deteriorates. Weeds and other undesirable plants will choke out the good ones. The natural bent of the universe—whether humans, animals, plants, or the inanimate elements of the earth and heavens—is obviously and demonstrably, not upward. It could not be otherwise while the world remains in ‘slavery to the corruption’ of sin. Yet despite their continual corruption and degeneration, neither man nor the universe itself will bring about their ultimate destruction. That is in the province of God alone, and there is no need to fear an independently initiated human holocaust. Men need fear only the God whom they rebelliously spurn and oppose. The destiny of earthy is entirely in the hands of its Creator, and that destiny includes God’s total destruction of the sin-cursed universe and its restoration (cp. Rev. 21:1, 4-5).

Romans – Lesson 17

It is for that promised time of redemption and restoration that all nature groans in hope and expectation. As with ‘was subjected’ in the previous verse, the verb ‘will be set free’ is passive, indicating that nature will not restore itself but will be restored by God, who Himself long ago subjected it to corruption and futility. ‘The freedom of the glory of the children of God’ refers to the time when all believers will be liberated from sin, liberated from the flesh, and liberated from their humanness. At that time we will begin to share eternally in God’s own glory, with which God will clothe all His precious children.

(4) The Creation Has Been Groaning (8:22)

²²*For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.*

This verse, concluding the subparagraph on the hope of the creation, comes back to the theme with which the paragraph began (v. 19); the ‘longing of creation for deliverance.’ Paul uses the simple verb ‘groan’ in 8:23 and in 2 Cor. 5:2 and 4, to depict the ‘groans of eschatological anticipation.’ And, while neither the verb ‘suffer birth pangs together’ nor the simple ‘suffer birth pangs’ is used elsewhere in the NT in this sense, the noun form of this verb is used in Mark 13:18 (= Mt. 24:8) to depict the times of distress preceding the end. Indeed, the image is a natural one, for the difficulties and trials of this age are, for Christians and the creation, fraught with the knowledge that they will ultimately issue in victory and joy.

We acknowledge with the apostle that nature also awaits with hope for our redemption, a redemption it will share with us in its own way. But until that wonderful day and in anticipation of it, ‘the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.’ *Stenazō* (‘groans’) refers to the utterances of a person who is caught in a dreadful situation and has no immediate prospect of deliverance. The groaning and suffering of the creation will one day cease, because God will deliver it from its corruption and futility. In the meanwhile, it endures ‘the pains of childbirth.’ Like Eve, whose sin brought the curse of painful human childbirth (Gen. 3:16), nature endures its own kind of labor pains. But also like Eve and her descendants, nature’s pains of childbirth presage new life.

Here we see the metaphor of a woman in labor, at that threshold of pain prior to the delivery. It is excruciating. She cries; she groans. Paul says the whole creation is like that, crying and groaning in birth pangs, but the pain of that labor is not worthy to be compared with the joy that follows when the child is born.

Many of us have pictures of our wives after they have delivered a child, and typically the baby is in their arms and the mothers are radiant. None of us have a picture of our wives in labor. We do not reach into our wallets saying, ‘Let me show you a picture of Margaret groaning in labor. Isn’t agony terrific?’ Creation will one day be delivered—and the difference between then and now is the difference between agony and ecstasy!

Paul makes no mention of how or when the world will be made new. However, many other passages of Scripture shed light on the details of the curse being lifted (see Is. 30:23-24; 35:1-7; etc.) and the ultimate creation of a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pe. 3:13; Rev. 21:1), but Paul’s purpose here is to assure his readers in general terms that God’s master plan of redemption encompasses the entire universe.

To understand how our complete redemption will be the guarantee for the complete redemption of all creation, we must go all the way back to Genesis 3 with the story of the curse. Adam has

Romans – Lesson 17

committed the sin and he will suffer as a result, but the ground will also suffer (Gen. 3:17). Adam and Eve's first sin brought abnormality to themselves and to the entire external creation as well. The suffering wasn't just in the minds of Adam and Eve. The whole creation would suffer right along with them. The fields where Adam planted his crops would now bring forth 'thorns and thistles' (Gen. 3:18). The first sin brought abnormality to the physical human body, as signified by the woman's pain in childbearing. It brought abnormality to all nature as well, signified by the ground's producing thorns. Then in Genesis 3:19 we read of a third abnormality resulting from sin – physical death. Looking back at Romans 8, we find a wonderful reversal of this process. It's true, says Paul, that 'creature was made subject to futility' (v. 20). But he immediately goes on to say that 'creature itself shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption' (v. 21). And when shall this happen? It will happen when the third part of the curse has been overcome, when redeemed humanity, as the 'firstfruits,' has experienced the reversal of the curse of death in the 'redemption of our bodies' (v. 23). When this third external abnormality has been overcome, then will come the cry, as Paul expresses elsewhere, 'O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?' (1 Cor. 15:55). The firstfruits of our physical resurrection will set in motion the redemption of the whole creation.

b) Groaning of Christians (8:23-25)

In vv. 19-22, Paul has described the yearning anticipation of creation for deliverance and tied that deliverance to the 'glory to be revealed' to believers. Now he shows how believers share this same eager hope.

(1) Eager Waiting (8:23)

(a) *Firstfruits of the Spirit (8:23a)*

²³*And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit...*

Not only does the natural creation groan for deliverance from the destructive consequences of sin into the promised new universe, 'but also we ourselves,' that is, believers. It is the redemption of believers that is central to God's ultimate cosmic regeneration, because believers are the heirs of His glorious, eternal, and righteous kingdom. Every true believer agonizes at times over the appalling manifestations and consequences of sin – in his own life, in the lives of others, and even in the natural world. Because we have 'the first fruits of the Spirit,' we are spiritually sensitized to the corruption of sin in and around us.

Because the Holy Spirit now indwells us, His work in us and through us is a type of spiritual 'first fruits.' They are a foretaste of the glory that awaits us in heaven, when our corrupted and mortal bodies are exchanged for ones that are incorruptible and immortal. Although we will not be totally free of sin's power as long as we are in our present bodies, the Lord has given us complete victory over the dominion and bondage of sin.

Paul defines those who experience this frustrated longing for final deliverance as those 'who have the first fruits of the Spirit.' The word alludes to both the *beginning* of a process and the unbreakable *connection* between its beginning and the end. As applied to the Spirit, then, the word connotes both that God's eschatological redemptive work has begun and that this redemptive work will surely be brought to its intended culmination. The Spirit, in this sense, is both the 'first installment' of salvation and the 'down payment' or 'pledge' that guarantees the remaining stages of that salvation.

Romans – Lesson 17

When you and I are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, this is an earnest of the fact that the whole has been purchased by the blood of the Lamb. The earnest is already ours. He dwells within us in the person of the Holy Spirit. He is the proof that the whole has been purchased. And what is the whole? The whole is the redemption of our bodies. Because the Spirit indwells us, we can be sure that the Lord has purchased our whole being, and that He will one day claim it by raising it from the dead. Meanwhile, we wait, and all creation waits.

(b) *Inward Groaning (8:23b)*

...groan inwardly...

The transition from creation to Christian is made via the idea of ‘groaning.’ By saying that Christians ‘groan in themselves,’ Paul suggests that these groans are not verbal utterances but inward, nonverbal ‘sighs,’ indicative of a certain attitude. This attitude does not involve anxiety about whether we will finally experience the deliverance God has promised, but frustration at the remaining moral and physical infirmities that are inevitably a part of this period between justification and glorification (see 2 Cor. 5:2, 4) and longing for the end of this state of ‘weakness.’

Because of our divinely bestowed sensitivity to sin, ‘we ourselves groan within ourselves’ over the dreadful curse of sin that is still manifested by our remaining humanness.

The thing we groan for is our adoption as sons, which will be completed by the redemption of the body. We are already God’s sons and daughters, but we will not be complete for eternity until we get our new bodies (cp. 2 Cor. 5:2). We also groan because of the misery of living in our fallen bodies in this fallen world. We also groan for a positive reason—we have ‘the firstfruits of the Spirit.’ We have the first installment (or down payment) of the inconceivably fabulous heritage God has prepared for us. That indescribable peace we knew when we first experienced the forgiveness of our sins, the power of God that calms our heart despite circumstances, the joy that floods our souls—these are mere foretastes of what is yet to come!

But does Paul want to say that Christians groan *because* we possess the Spirit as ‘first fruits’ or that we groan *even though* we have the Spirit as ‘first fruits’? A causal interpretation of the participle is to be preferred: it is *because* we possess the Spirit as the first installment and pledge of our complete salvation that we groan, yearning for the fulfillment of that salvation to take place. The Spirit, then, functions to join inseparably together the two sides of the ‘already-not yet’ eschatological tension in which we are caught. ‘Already,’ through the indwelling presence of God’s Spirit, we have been transferred into the new age of blessing and salvation; but the very fact that the Spirit is only the ‘first fruits’ makes us sadly conscious that we have ‘not yet’ severed all ties to the old age of sin and death. A healthy balance is necessary in the Christian life, in which our joy at the many blessings we already possess should be set beside our frustration at our failures and our intense yearning for that day when we will fail no more – when ‘we shall be like Him.’

(c) *Bodily Redemption (8:23c)*

... as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

As believers, we therefore find ourselves ‘waiting eagerly’ in anticipation of ‘our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.’ This same strong word, ‘waiting eagerly,’ is used of creation’s waiting. We are on tiptoe waiting for our deliverance. The New Testament speaks of

Romans – Lesson 17

believers as those who are already the adopted children of God, but whose adoption awaits ultimate perfection.

Christians, at the moment of justification, are adopted into God's family; but this adoption is incomplete and partial until we are finally made like *the* Son of God Himself (v. 29). This final element in our adoption is 'the redemption of our bodies.' 'Redemption' shares with 'adoption' and many other terms in Paul the 'already-not yet' tension that pervades his theology, for the redemption can be pictured both as past and as future. As Paul has hinted in v. 10, it is not until the body has been transformed that redemption can be said to be complete; in this life, our bodies share in that 'frustration' which characterizes this world as a whole (cp. v. 20).

Believers should be concerned about sin in their lives, but not because they might sin themselves out of God's grace. Because of God's promise and power, that is impossible. Until we are glorified and fully liberated from sin through 'the redemption of our body,' we still have unredeemed bodies that make it very much possible for sin to harm us and to grieve our Lord. As the term is often used in the New Testament, 'body' is not limited to a person's physical being, but relates to the whole of his unredeemed humanness, in particular to the remaining susceptibility to sin. It is only the body, the mortal humanness of a believer that is yet to be redeemed. The inner person is already a completely new creation, a partaker of God's nature and indwelt by God's Spirit.

(2) Unseen Hope (8:24)

²⁴For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?

Paul's purpose in the last two verses of this subsection (vv. 19-25) is to make it clear that this need for expectant waiting is not surprising. For, as creation was subjected to frustration 'in hope' (v. 20), so Christians, though saved, are nevertheless also saved 'with hope' – and hope, but its very nature, means that expectant and patient waiting is going to be necessary. Hope, Paul is saying, has been associated with our experience of salvation from the beginning. Always our salvation, while definitively secured for us at conversion, has had an element of incompleteness, in which the forward look is necessary.

We use the term *hope* to express our desire for some future result that is at present uncertain, but the concept of hope in the New Testament indicates a situation in which the future is absolutely certain. It is faith looking forward. It is faith being certain and receiving the assurance of what God promises for tomorrow. Our hope is the anchor for our souls. It is what gives stability to our faith.

'Hope' is inseparable from salvation. Our salvation was planned by God in ages past, bestowed in the present, and is now characterized by hope for its future completion. The believer's hope is not based on wishful thinking or probability, but on the integrity of the clear promises of the Lord. Our hope is not that we might not lose our salvation but that, but our Lord's own guarantee, we *cannot* and *will not* lose it.

The last part of the verse is a rather obvious explanation of the very nature of 'hope' – it involves looking in confidence for that which one cannot see. Paul uses the word 'hope' in both an objective sense – that for which we hope – and a subjective sense – our attitude of hope. That 'glory to be revealed,' which is the focus of our hope, is not visible; and the frustrations and

Romans – Lesson 17

difficulties of life can sometimes all but erase the image of that glory for us. But hope would not be what it is if we could see it, for ‘who hopes for what one sees?’

It is true that the completion of our salvation is presently a hope and not yet a reality. Explaining the obvious, Paul states the axiomatic truth that ‘hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees?’ In other words, in this life we cannot expect to experience the reality of our glorification but only the hope of it. But since the believer’s hope is based on God’s promise, the completion of his salvation is more certain by far than anything he sees with his eyes.

(3) Patient Endurance (8:25)

²⁵*But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

Therefore, Paul continues, ‘if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it (cp. Phil. 1:6). Because salvation is completely God’s work and because He cannot lie, it is absolutely impossible for us to lose what He has given us and promises never to take away.

Paul rounds off this subsection with a return to its central theme: the need, in this age of salvation history, for ‘earnest waiting.’ In the ‘if’ clause, Paul resumes the point he made in v. 24b and draws a conclusion from it: hoping for what one does not see means that we must wait for it with ‘patient fortitude.’ While this emphasis on what is not seen may be nothing more than a reiteration of what hope, by its nature, is, the logic of this verse may imply that Paul is thinking more distinctly theologically about the matter (cp. Heb. 11). We Christians can wait expectantly and with fortitude for the ‘hope’ to manifest itself precisely because that for which we hope is ‘unseen’ and thereby part of the eternal and sure purposes of God. The attitude of ‘patient endurance’ is one that is frequently required of Christians undergoing trials and as they await the climax of God’s salvation for them.

c) *Groaning of the Spirit (8:26-27)*

While there is an obvious literary parallelism between the ‘groaning’ of creation (vv. 22), the Christian, and the Spirit, the groaning of the Spirit is very different in its nature and purpose from the other two ‘groanings.’

(1) The Nature of the Spirit’s Intercession (8:26)

(a) *Our Weakness (8:26a)*

²⁶*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness.*

In vv. 24-25, Paul has argued that the nature and solidity of our Christian hope enable us to wait for its culmination with fortitude. Now he says, ‘in the same way [as this hope sustains us], the Spirit also comes to our aid.’ The word translated ‘come to the aid of’ connotes ‘joining *with* to help,’ ‘bearing a burden along with.’ The Spirit joins with us in bearing the burdens imposed by our ‘weakness.’ This weakness may be specific – inability in prayer or external sufferings (v. 18) – but is probably general: the totality of the human condition, the ‘creatureliness’ that characterizes even the child of God in this period of overlap between the old age and the new.

‘In the same way’ refers back to the groans of the creation and of believers for redemption from the corruption and defilement of sin. Here Paul reveals the immeasurably comforting truth that the Holy Spirit comes along side us and all creation in groaning for God’s ultimate day of

Romans – Lesson 17

restoration and His eternal reign of righteousness. Because of our remaining humanness and susceptibility to sin and doubt, the Holy Spirit also helps us in our weakness. In this context, ‘weakness’ doubtless refers to our human condition in general, not to specific weakness. The point is that, even after salvation, we are characterized by spiritual weakness. Acting morally, speaking the truth, witnessing for the Lord, or doing any other good thing happens only by the power of the Spirit working in and through us despite our human limitations.

(b) *Our Ignorance (8:26b)*

For we do not know what to pray for as we ought...

To make clear how the Spirit works, Paul turns to the subject of prayer. Although we are redeemed and absolutely secure in our adoption as God’s children, nevertheless ‘we do not know how to pray as we should.’ Paul does not elaborate on our inability to pray as we ought, but his statement is all-encompassing. Because of our imperfect perspectives, finite minds, human frailties, and spiritual limitations, we are not able to pray in absolute consistency with God’s will.

This condition means that we believers do not know ‘what we are to pray as is necessary.’ The wording of the clause indicates that it is not the manner, or style, of prayer that Paul has in view but the content, or object, of prayer – what we are to pray *for*. What Paul apparently has in mind is that inability to discern clearly God’s will in the many things for which we pray. *All* our praying is conditioned by our continuing ‘weakness’ and means that – except perhaps on rare occasions – our petitions must be qualified by ‘if it is in accordance with Your will.’

This inability to know what to pray for cannot be overcome in this life, for it is part of ‘our weakness,’ the inescapable condition imposed on us by our place in salvation history. Therefore, Paul does not command us to eradicate this ignorance by diligent searching for God’s will or by special revelation. Instead, Paul points us to the Spirit of God, who overcomes this weakness by His own intercession.

(c) *The Spirit’s Intercession (8:26c)*

...but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

Even when we do not know what God wants, the indwelling ‘Spirit Himself intercedes for us,’ bringing our needs before God even when we do not know what they are or when we pray about them unwisely. Paul emphasizes that our help is from ‘the Spirit Himself.’ His divine help not only is personal but direct. The Spirit does not simply provide our security but is Himself our security. The Spirit intercedes on our behalf in a way, Paul says, that is totally beyond human comprehension, ‘with groanings too deep for words.’ The Holy Spirit unites with us in our desire to be freed from our corrupted earthly bodies and to be with God forever in our glorified heavenly bodies.

What does the Holy Spirit do for us? He ‘makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.’ The whole creation ‘groans’ under the terrible weight of the consequences of our sin (v. 22). ‘Even we ourselves groan’ (v. 23) as we live in this fallen world. But amid all this suffering and amid all our longings there is someone else who groans. It is ‘the Spirit Himself,’ making ‘intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.’ You won’t be lost again. If you have accepted Jesus as your Savior, you’ll be there on resurrection day. Weak and infirm though you may feel, faltering though your love may often be, you’ll be there. For it does not rest upon you, it rests upon the work of the whole Trinity. The Holy Spirit would have to fail for

Romans – Lesson 17

you to be lost again. His intercession for you would have to be of no avail. The Holy Spirit is interceding before God's throne on your behalf, and He will not fail in His work of intercession.

What, however, is the nature of this intercession? Specifically, it is an intercession that comes about through our praying, aided by the Spirit? Or is it an intercession that is accomplished solely by the Holy Spirit on our behalf? One clue to the meaning may be found in the term translated 'that words cannot express' (*alalētois*). This word, found only here in biblical Greek, means, as its etymology implies, 'unspoken, 'wordless.' But does it mean here specifically 'ineffable,' incapable of being expressed in human language, in which case the 'groans' may well be audible though inarticulate? Or does it mean simply 'unspoken,' never rising to the audible level at all? It is preferable to understand these 'groans' as the Spirit's own 'language of prayer,' a ministry of intercession that takes place in our hearts (cp. v. 27) in a manner imperceptible to us. This means, of course, that 'groans' is used metaphorically. But in vv. 22 and 23, with their references to the 'groans' of creation and the 'groans' of Christians 'in' themselves, has prepared us for such a meaning. Paul is saying that our failure to know God's will and consequently inability to petition God specifically and assuredly is met by God's Spirit, who Himself expresses to God those intercessory petitions that perfectly match the will of God. When we do not know what to pray for – yes, even when we pray for things that are not best for us – we need not despair, for we can depend on the Spirit's ministry of perfect intercession 'on our behalf.' Here is one potent source for that 'patient fortitude' with which we are to await our glory (v. 25); that our failure to understand God's purposes and plans, to see 'the beginning from the end' does not mean that effective, powerful prayer for our specific needs is absent.

Contrary to the interpretation of most charismatics, the 'groanings' of the Spirit are not utterances in unknown tongues, much less ecstatic gibberish that has no rational content. As Paul says explicitly, the groans are not even audible and are inexpressible in words. Yet those groans carry profound content, namely divine appeals for the spiritual welfare of each believer. In a way infinitely beyond our understanding, these groanings represent what might be called inter-Trinitarian communication, divine articulations by the Holy Spirit to the Father.

(2) The Effectiveness of the Spirit's Intercession (8:27)

²⁷And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Verse 27 continues Paul's discussion of the intercession of the Spirit and focuses on the effectiveness of this intercession. The reason for this effectiveness is the perfect accord that exists between God, 'the one who searches' hearts, and 'the mind of the Spirit.' God, who sees into the inner being of people, where the indwelling Spirit's ministry of intercession takes place, 'knows,' 'acknowledges,' and responds to those 'intentions' of the Spirit that are expressed in His prayers on our behalf.

'He' refers to God the Father, 'who searches the hearts' of men. If the Father knows the hearts of men, how much more does He know 'the mind of the Spirit.' The Father understands exactly what the Spirit is thinking 'because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.' Because the Spirit's will and the Father's will are identical, and because God is one, Paul's statement seems unnecessary. But he is pointing up the truth in order to give encouragement to believers. Because the three persons of the Godhead have always been one in essence and will, the very idea of communication among them seems superfluous to us. It is a great mystery to our finite minds, but it is a divine reality that God expects His children to acknowledge by faith.

Romans – Lesson 17

The second clause of the verse is usually taken as explicative: God ‘knows’ what the Spirit intends, in that, or ‘for,’ the Spirit intercedes in accordance with God’s will for the saints. But the emphatic position of ‘in accordance with [the will of] God’ suggests that Paul is rather giving a reason for the first statement. God knows what the Spirit intends, and there is perfect harmony between the two, *because* it is in accordance with God’s will that the Spirit intercedes for the saints. There is one in heaven, the Son of God, who ‘intercedes on our behalf,’ defending us from all charges that might be brought against us, guaranteeing salvation in the day of judgment (8:34). But there is also, Paul asserts in these verses, an intercessor ‘in the heart,’ the Spirit of God, who effectively prays to the Father on our behalf throughout the difficulties and uncertainties of our lives here on earth.

We understand that our communion with God the Father is not a simple one-on-one communication. We pray in the name of Jesus because one of the most important roles that Jesus exercises even now is that of our high priest in heaven. He makes intercession for us every day. We should always keep in mind when we pray that Jesus is praying for us. Prayer is a Trinitarian activity; it is more than simply praying to the Father through the Son. In this text we see that our great Helper, the Holy Spirit, assists in the articulation of our prayers addressed to Christ and the Father. When we pray, we must remember to ask the Holy Spirit to assist us because so often we do not pray rightly. If we really want to see answers to prayer that will put strength in our souls, we pray according to the leading of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit helps us pray according to the will of God rather than according to the will of our flesh.

In this passage Paul emphasizes the divine intercession that is necessary for the preservation of believers to their eternal hope. We can no more fathom that marvelous truth than we can fathom any other aspect of God’s plan of redemption. But we know that, were not Christ and the Holy Spirit continually on guard in our behalf, our inheritance in heaven would be reserved for us in vain.

For next time: Read Romans 8:28-39.