

Romans 8 v 18 to 39: Agony and Ecstasy

Someone once pointed out that all the sounds of nature are in the minor key. Listen to the sighing of the wind. Listen to the roaring of the tide. Listen to the thundering of the cataract. Even most of the sounds of birds are in the minor key. All nature is singing, but it is singing a song of bondage. Yet it sings in hope, looking forward to that day, Paul says, when it shall step into the freedom of the glory of the children of God... In this latter part of Romans 8 we see groanings and glory, agony and ecstasy – Paul explains the connection between the two... A good translation of verse 19 is: “the whole creation is standing on tiptoe, eagerly awaiting the revelation of the sons of God...” Notice all the ‘groanings’ – the creation groans (v 22); we ‘groan inwardly’ (v 23); and even the Spirit intercedes for us ‘with groanings’ (v 26)...

Future glory (Romans 8 v 18 to 27)

- In verses 18 to 25, what are all the negative words? There are at least six. What are all the positive words? There are at least four. What is the relationship between the two concepts? How do ‘groans’ lead to ‘glory’? See 2 Corinthians 4 v 17. What is the ‘hope’ in which we are saved (v 24)? What makes it possible to “wait for it with patience” (v 25)?
- The word “helps” in verse 26 is a very weak translation of the rich and dynamic Greek word *συναντιλαμβάνεται* (*sun-anti-lambenetai*), which literally means ‘takes-hold-of together-with against’. How does this assist our understanding of prayer as spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6 v 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” (v 18) – Paul was not ignorant or blind to the sufferings of human existence: he experienced more of them than most of us today. Yet he still considered that the future glory far outweighed the present sufferings. Without a heavenly hope, Paul considered the Christian life foolish and tragic (1 Corinthians 15 v 19); yet in light of eternity it is the wisest and best choice anyone can make.

“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God...” (v 19) – Paul considers that creation itself is eagerly awaiting the revealing of the sons of God, because the creation was subjected to futility on account of man’s sin, and will benefit from mankind’s ultimate redemption.

“The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (v 21) – mankind’s redemption benefits not only the children of God themselves, but all of creation. Until that day, creation groans and labours with birth pangs. “Who have the first-fruits of the Spirit” (v 23) – this means we have a ‘foretaste’ of the glory to come. “As we wait eagerly for adoption as sons” – while there is a sense in which we are already adopted (Romans 8 v 15, 16), there is also a sense in which we wait for the consummation of our adoption which will happen at the redemption of our bodies. “We wait for it with patience” (v 25) – the fulfillment of our redemption is something still distant, yet we hope for it with faith and patience, trusting that God is faithful to his word, and the promised glory will be a reality.

“Likewise the Spirit helps in our weakness” (v 26) – when we are weak, and do not know how we should pray, God himself, through the Holy Spirit, helps by interceding for us. “Groanings too deep for words” – such help from the Spirit may include praying with the spiritual gift of tongues (1 Corinthians 14 v 2; 14, 15), but it is certainly not limited to praying in an unknown tongue. The idea is of communication beyond our ability to express. The deep groanings within us cannot be articulated apart from the interceding work of the Spirit. This, of course, is the purpose of the gift of tongues – to enable us to communicate with God in a manner that is not limited to our ability to articulate our thoughts. “According to the will of God” (v 27) – the Spirit’s help in intercession is perfect because God searches the hearts of those whom he helps, and thus the Holy Spirit is able to guide our prayers according to God’s perfect will.

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More than conquerors (Romans 8 v 28 to 39)

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good” (v 28) – God’s sovereignty and ability to manage every aspect of our lives is demonstrated in the fact that all things work together for good for those who love God, though we must face the sufferings of this present time (v 18). “All things” – God is able to work all things, not just some things; he works them for good together, not in isolation. This promise is for those who love God, who manages the affairs of our lives because we are called according to his purpose.

In verses 29 and 30 Paul traces five steps that God takes for us, stretching from past eternity to future eternity: (i) He ‘foreknew’ us; (ii) he ‘predestined’ us; (iii) he ‘called’ us; (iv) he ‘justified’ us; (v) he ‘glorified’ us. In verses 31 to 35, Paul poses a number of rhetorical questions – designed primarily to demonstrate the amazing and unshakeable love of God...

- For whom does God work (v 28)? Do all things work together for our happiness, necessarily? What is God’s purpose for us (v 28)? What goal has God chosen for us (v 29)? How do you think God ‘calls’ people today?
- What does verse 31 mean? Surely we can expect opposition? See Psalm 27 v 1 to 3. What do verses 32 to 34 tell us about Jesus?
- What do verses 35 and 36 tell us about Paul’s experiences? Why can Paul say that we are “more than conquerors” (v 37), or ‘hyper-conquerors’ (to transliterate the Greek phrase)?
- Can anything, ever, separate us from the love of God (v 38, 39)?

“To be conformed to the image of his Son” (v 29) – our participation in God’s eternal plan is essential, reflected in this goal: to be conformed to the image of Jesus; and this is a process that God achieves with our cooperation. “That he might be the firstborn among many brothers” – this is the reason behind God’s plan: he adopts us into his family (Romans 8 v 15), making us similar to Jesus in the perfection of his humanity.

“If God is for us, who can be against us?” (v 31) – if all we had were the first few chapters of Romans, some might believe that God was against us. Now that Paul has shown the lengths that God went to save us from his wrath and equip us for victory over sin and death, who can doubt that God is for us? Despite the sufferings we may face, if God is for us, what does it matter if others are against us?

“He who did not spare his own Son” (v 32) – if the Father has already given the ultimate gift of his son (John 3 v 16), how can we think that he will not give us smaller gifts? “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect?” (v 33) – we are secure from every charge against us: if we are declared ‘not guilty’ by the highest Judge, who can bring any additional charge? “Who is to condemn?” (v 34) – we are secure from all condemnation: if Jesus is our advocate, who died and was raised, and is at the right hand of God, interceding for us, then who can condemn us?

“More than conquerors through him who loved us” (v 37) – no matter what our circumstances, none of the sufferings of this present time can separate us from the love of God. This makes us “more than conquerors”. How are we ‘hyper-conquerors’? (i) We overcome with greater power, the power of Jesus; (ii) we overcome with greater motive, the glory of Jesus; (iii) we overcome with greater victory, losing nothing in battle; (iv) we overcome with greater love, the love of Jesus, conquering enemies with love and patience.

“Nor anything else in all creation” (v 39) – nothing which appears to be good, and nothing which appears to be evil, can ever separate us from the love of God.

Prayer – We praise and thank you, Lord, that we can know that all things work together for good, for those who love you, for those who are called according to your purpose. Your Word tells us that neither tribulation, nor distress, nor persecution, nor famine, nor nakedness, nor danger, nor the sword can separate us from the love of Christ. We can know that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will ever be able to separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord! Help us always to remember and hold on to these truths, Amen.