

Sermon 73: Romans 8:19-22: How the Christian Views Creation

OUTLINE

Creation in the present

Creation in the past

Creation in the future

INTRODUCTION

Here is just a quick sprinkle of some of the wrong views of creation today. We have the evolutionist who believes that the universe suddenly appeared out of nowhere, that everything came from nothing, or if they reject this version of events then they will claim that the universe has no beginning and was always there. We have pantheists who believe that everything that exists is God; that this world and all we observe and experience is an illusion and that one has to find the god in everything through a process of enlightenment using meditation and other techniques. We have eco-feminists who view creation as the body of Mother Earth, that she gives life to all through her body the earth, and that it is a women's high calling to take up conservation in her defence. Closely linked with this is eco-Paganism, this is an activist group that practices eco-magick which usually involves spending lots of time in nature to build a connection to it, and then as the Dragon Environmental Network did, they built 'dragon tree runes' which would protect any tree or protestor that wore it from construction companies and threats to nature. These renewed pagan religions are panentheistic, which means that the goddess/god is the soul that inhabits the world, which usually means that human beings are part divine as offspring of the deity. These views of creation are worlds apart from the Christian's biblical understanding of the world.

Paul in the verses we are going to consider today shows us how the Christian sees the world and what is wrong with it. Romans 8:19-22, 'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 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. 22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.' Paul sheds light on the story of creation and suffering by reflecting on Creation's present, past and future, these are our three points for consideration today.

Creation in the present

Paul has been talking about our hope of glory after this life of suffering which dwarves it. Paul wants us to reflect a little deeper on the magnificence of that glory and the he does this by looking at our hope from the point of view of creation. He engages in a little poetic device where he personifies nature and shows how nature is waiting with eager longing for our hope to arrive, 'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.' The words 'eager longing' literally means 'to look with outstretched necks' or has the

idea of to stand on one's tippy-toes. The reason creation is living in anticipation is because it too will share in our glory when it is revealed.

We do need to stop and consider what Paul means by 'creation.' You might think that given the wording of these verses that all created things are included, but this is not the case. We know that those elect angels that were preserved from falling were not subjected to futility. We also know that the fallen angels are not looking forward with great anticipation to our glorification in the new heavens and the new earth. In verse 23 Paul distinguishes 'us' the Christian from the rest of creation. And Paul does not mean the natural man for he does not long for this glory either. What we have left then is all plant and animal life and perhaps the planet itself with its ice caps, tectonic plates, atmosphere etc.

This idea of creation longing has been misunderstood. We need to emphasize in an age of neo-Paganism that Paul is not implying that the earth is a person and a deity. No he is using a familiar tactic of the OT. We find in the OT that nature is personified as a means of drawing us into right feeling and thinking. A well-known example is Isaiah 35:1, 'The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus.' Deserts cannot be glad nor rejoice, but in this instance we see the curse on the world that has resulted in deserts reversed and waters springing up in the wilderness (v6). This chapter speaks about the time that God will finally restore His people and it is done by using nature as a co-victim and co-beneficiary in the removal of the effects of sin. The goal of v19 is to say this, 'if creation is longing for that day and leaning into it with great anticipation, so should you be.' Paul describes the creations present pains as labour pains, not pain that ends in death but in life, v22, 'For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.'

Already Paul is helping us to think about our environment, our suffering and our future. Notice that he describes our fallen world as 'creation'. It is not eternal matter, or something that has made itself from something. Our world and universe is created by God. All things that exist in time and space necessarily need a beginning, and a creator. Anything that is in this universe was put here by someone—God. Bertrand Russell, the famous atheist, as a teenager rejected this argument that all things come from someone when he realised that he still needed to ask the question, 'but who made God?' It was his floundering on this question that set him upon atheism. What he did not realise is that the question must necessarily be rejected because it is committing a category mistake. God is not bound by time and space, He is eternal Spirit and is not subject to the normal laws that govern things that are bound by time and space. To put the question to God is necessarily a category mistake, a question loaded with false assumptions with things that apply to matter but not to Him; it is a question that must be rejected when applied to God. He is not a part of creation but the Creator.

Secondly, we see that creation is not on an upward spiral in an always perfecting evolutionary curve. Creation sees its deliverance not in the process of evolution continued over many more years but a breaking by God to make all things new. The key to understanding this lies in understanding the past history of creation, and to this we turn.

Creation in the past

In verse 20 we see that Paul believes in a literal creation, a literal fall into sin and God's literal judgement upon sin being the reason for the present state of the world, 'For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope.' Why do we die, why do we suffer, why is nature out of balance and a place of fierce storms, earthquakes, tsunamis, famines, and plagues? Here Paul gives us the answers. In the beginning God made man and put him over creation. Creation when it was first made was good and everything was in balance, lions did not tear out the throats other animals, wolves did not begin to eat another animal while it was still alive, weeds did not take over the face of the earth, the weather was mild and conducive to growth, we did not die, get sick, or old. The world as it is now is not the way that God originally made it. The original creation was a gift, it was something that we would enjoy to the glory of God, we were not given the world and all its good to reject it and live out a form of monkish self-denial, it was God's bounty and tokens of His love to us. It was originally given as a trust to man who was to fill and subdue, having dominion over it and expanding the borders of paradise to fill the whole earth. The original potential of nature was not given to be exploited but harnessed to build a society for God's glory. However, our text tells us of a time when the creation was subjected to futility.

Paul is of course referring to the curses of Genesis 3:16-19,

- ' To the woman he said,
"I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children.
Your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you."
17 And to Adam he said,
"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,'
cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
19 By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust.'

Women would be cursed in the area of their calling—childbirth; and men would be cursed in their area of calling—working the ground. Sin would affect how men and women would relate to each other so that women would try and dominate their husbands, and men would dominate over women. Thorns and thistles will now dog all our efforts, and the work we

were called to which should have been bliss is now painful. And after a long life of interrelational strife and hard work that yields little, we all die! We experience the loss of God's blessing in our relationships, our work, our world and our bodies. Futility is the word Paul uses and a good word it is, it is the same word used by the Septuagint to translate the book of Ecclesiastes when it talks about vanity.

Why do we die, why do we fight, why do we suffer? All because we are under a curse, we are living in a world that has been afflicted with God's judgement until He makes all things new, Paul says, 'but because of Him who subjected it, in hope...'. Why did a God who delighted in His own creation subject it to all the death and decay that we are experiencing now? He did it in order to save it. God could have wiped out the universe right then and started again. He could have enacted the punishment of death that man deserved and withdrawn all his gifts in creation as well. But no, instead God gave a smaller judgement, a judgement of death, but a death that only comes on by inches. The judgement that we feel every day of disease, decay and death. It is true that as soon as we are born we are dying, but we now have a window where we can be born, live, and learn of Christ and populate a new heavens and earth with Adam's fallen race. God would not suffer defeat by the devil and thwarted the devil's plans who tried to force the hand of God against His own creation, but instead of destroying creation, God gave a promise. God promised that a child of Adam, the seed of the woman would come and he would crush the serpent where Adam had not, he would give His life in obedience to God where Adam had not, He would pay for the sins of Adam's fallen race and make all things new.

The question that Christians often grapple with is this one, if I am no longer under the curse but redeemed in Christ, shouldn't I as a Christian be free from sickness, poverty, affliction and live a life of prosperity and blessing? It is the failure to answer this question correctly that has resulted in the prosperity teaching of Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer and others. It has also resulted in many Christians being cast into doubt when they experience the pain, the thorns and thistles, the relational breakdown or death. Let me make two points to help you see why as a Christian you will continue to groan along with the rest of creation although you are no longer under the judicial sentence of death.

Firstly, let me paint a picture. Imagine a murderer who kills in cold blood. However, shortly after he has committed his crime he takes refuge in a church and there he hears the gospel. He sees how bad he has been, he repents and trusts in Christ for salvation. He goes to the pastor who tells him that he needs to hand himself in. Tell me, do you think that this man will still go to prison to pay for his crime even though Christ has paid for it to be forgiven before God? The answer is yes, and likewise, even though we are forgiven, the ongoing consequences and judgement upon that original sin is still being played out. When you suffer in this life as a Christian, you can know that it is not God enacting His wrath upon you as if you were an unbeliever, but the suffering of this life continues, in part, due to the original curse upon sin.

Secondly, some thoughtful people might want to pursue this and ask, but what about the OT, there we see that God promises blessing in Deut. 28:4-6, 'Blessed shall be the fruit of

your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. 5 Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. 6 Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.' Why do we see it here, but not in the NT? This is a very good question. Here is an answer. See Israel as a re-enactment of the Garden of Eden, a place where God dwells with His people. A place where His people keep His garden, tending it, protecting it, developing it, multiplying and filling it. Given the fact that the OT mission was one of attraction, and that Israel was under a hypothetical covenant of works, as Adam was under a literal covenant of works in Eden; the blessing of the Israel reflects the abundance and blessing of Eden. When Israel sin, like Adam their blessings are cursed and they are exiled from God's presence. This outward tangible material blessing was part of what God was doing when He was foreshadowing heaven, and re-enacting Eden, it was fitting that some suspension of the curse should be had in the place where God has His temple. However, in the NT, we see that our inheritance is no longer a land that we can dwell in that acts as a shadow of heaven, our inheritance is now revealed to be better than the land of Israel, the new heavens and the new earth. Listen to what Wayne Grudem says about the change of blessing in the NT from the Old as he comments on some verses in 1 Peter 1.

"Peter here (v.4) reminds his readers that in the New Covenant, God's rewards are less material, physical, earthly. There is less emphasis on the present material prosperity as a reward, for God has 'chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith' (Jas. 2:5, a statement which does not and could not appear in the O.T.). The enjoyment of physical health is also less prominent, for 'though our outer nature is wasting away our inner nature is being renewed day by day' (2 Cor. 4:16). There is less emphasis too on freedom from persecution, for 'if you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you' (1 Pet. 4:14). Having many children in the New Testament is not regarded as a necessary sign of God's favour, for both marriage and celibacy are his gifts (1 Cor. 7:7).

Christians should not be dismayed at this relative lack of present material rewards, however, for faith recognizes the New Covenant reward as something far greater: a present sufficiency for material needs (Phil.4:19), a present spiritual fellowship with Christ (1 Pet. 1:8), and a future inheritance both material and eternal, which is 'imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you' (1 Pet.1:4).

Just as God in the Old Covenant encouraged his people to look forward to the future messiah with faith, so he now encourages us, for whom the Messiah's coming is a fact about history, to look forward to our heavenly inheritance. Here is an encouragement for every New Covenant believer. 'So we do not lose heart.... For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.' (2 Cor. 4:16-18). (p59-60).

If anyone tells you that you should be experiencing the riches of OT blessing, they have made some fundamental errors, they do not realise the symbolism of the land of Israel as pointing to our new creation inheritance which we no longer dwell in as a type but wait for with faith. We would call this mistake 'overrealised eschatology' wanting to make all our

future blessings present. Ironically they also make the mistake of underrealised eschatology, they are still living in the OT and have not moved into the new. They are still living in the age of shadows expecting those blessings that accompanied the shadows instead of living in the new covenant.

Creation in the future

Paul moves on in v21 to give us the future of creation, '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.' This is the hope that we are to hold to in our sufferings, this is the hope that creation is straining towards, this is the hope that God had when He subjected the world to futility. What is interesting about this verse is the order. It does not say that we will be part of all of creation being renewed but that creation will be a part of the glorification of the children of God. This is a necessary corrective to the eco movements that want to see the earth as more important than humanity. God made man His vice-regent over earth, it was when man sinned that creation shared in man's fall because it was under man. And likewise creation will now have the hope of deliverance because man has rescued us. It was the God man Jesus Christ who obeyed where Adam failed. Christ has received the name above all names and has ascended to the throne that sits over all of God's creation, it is Jesus who now rules where Adam could not, and it is in His reign that we share and will share in His rule over the new heavens and the new earth. We will experience a new Eden which will be resided over by the second Adam.

The last thing that we will note from these hope filled verses is the timing of creation's glory with our own. There are various millennial views, that is Christians who have different views about whether and when there will be a literal 1000 year reign of Christ. These verses show us that the day creation is renewed is the same day that we receive our new bodies, we will be glorified together. There will be no rapture of the church in glorified bodies with a rotting creation left behind. Both our bodies and this old creation will experience renewal together.

Let's conclude.

Why do we die, why do we suffer, why do things break and go wrong, why do we fight with each other, why are we here? These and many other questions can only be answered rightly by those who take the book of Genesis seriously. And it is only those who realise that Christ has come as the promised deliverer, as the second Adam, and who has obeyed and conquered, who can have the hope that one day all this suffering will be over, the world and our bodies will be remade in perfection, never to die again, never to sin again, always in the presence of the Lord. Until then we suffer, but we do not lose hope.