

The Redemption of Creation

Scripture: Romans 8:18-25

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People of God: How is salvation related to the world in which we live? By world, I don't mean the human community but the created order--such as the animals and the plant life, the flourishing fields and the dry deserts, the sun and the moon, the mountains and the plains. How does the gospel affect the creation?

Now we know already that salvation is more than just an individual matter. Oh yes, each of us must confess our own sin and come to Christ for salvation. But salvation is not just a matter between me and God and no one else. It has a communal nature. In the previous verses of this chapter, we were reminded that we belong to the family of God. We are brothers and sisters to one another, crying out to our heavenly Father. But what about the rest of creation—the stuff of this world? Is it also touched by Christ's work of salvation?

Now there are a variety of possible answers to this question. On the one hand, you could say that salvation is meant to be an escape from this creation. This world is no good. It's full of evil and injustice. The forces of nature often cause destruction and misery—like hurricanes and earthquakes. The creation is full of diseases and dangers. Life in this world can be full of heartache and suffering. But salvation offers an escape. It provides a way out of this miserable state. Heaven is where is at. That's what we should long for. To leave this world behind and its bodily existence so that we can live with God forever in heaven. As a result, salvation is an escape from the creation.

On the other hand, one does not have to have such a negative view of the creation. It's not that salvation is an escape from it; it's just that salvation is indifferent to the creation. Yes, this is where we work and live. This is the environment in which we raise our family and conduct our business. For that reason we ought to have some concern for it. But it's not as if the gospel message affects the creation as such. The gospel is concerned about the

saving of souls and other spiritual issues, and has little to do with the environment, the economy, and politics.

Now both of these options need to be rejected. Neither of them fits with the biblical picture of creation and salvation as reflected in our text. The first view, that salvation is an escape from creation, is rejected because it denies the fundamental goodness of creation. When God created this world, he declared it be very good. Despite the devastating effects of the fall, this is still our Father's world. Salvation cannot be an escape from it, since we need the creation to live. We were created with bodies. That's how we function. As a result, heaven cannot be our final home. We need the creation.

For that reason, the second view needs to be rejected as well. Salvation is not indifferent to creation. It's not as if they are completely separate from one another. Rather, salvation includes the creation. After all, if we need the creation in order to function as God's image bearers; and if this creation is stained by sin; then it too needs to be redeemed by the blood of Christ. Redemption is not just a matter of personal salvation; it's a matter of the whole universe being renewed and restored to its original goodness.

That's what our text is all about. It deals with the redemption of creation. For you see, our salvation as God's children is dependent upon the redemption of God's creation. The two go together. The parallel is obvious in these verses. Verse 22 talks about the creation groaning, while the next verse mentions the groaning of God's children. Verse 19 mentions the creation waiting in eager expectation, while verse 23 speaks about our waiting in eager expectation. Verse 20 mentions the hope of creation, while the final verses of our text point out our hope. As a result, there is a parallel between the redemption of creation with our own. They are intimately tied together.

Perhaps it will help us to understand what this redemption of creation is all about by looking at it in terms of the past, present, and future. Verse 20 speaks about the past: *For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it.* The creation was subjected to frustration. What does that mean? How can the creation experience frustration?

Well, think about how you experience frustration. You get up in the morning, planning to spread some manure on the fields right after the chores are done. But when you enter the barns, you discover a burst pipe. Immediately, your attention is focused on that repair. As soon as you finish those repairs and your chores, you start up the tractor. But it won't start. Two hours later, you discovered the problem, fixed it and are ready to go. By this

time, it's way past lunch. In the meantime, the weather has changed so that you can no longer get into the fields. And so you head into the house completely frustrated. All your plans for the day were thrown out the window. You didn't accomplish what you had hoped to do. That's frustrating.

That's the way it is with the creation. God had a plan, a purpose for his world. God intended this world to be a place where his image bearers could serve and worship him. All of creation was put at the disposal of humanity to use for the glory of God. All aspects of creation were in harmony with each other so that this goal could be realized.

But this goal was frustrated. Instead, of being used to glorify and praise God, it is used by man in his rebellion against God. The sin of man unleashed a disturbance within the entire created order so that the entire created order was put out of kilter. Its purpose was frustrated.

We must see the fall of Adam and Eve behind this frustration. It was their act of disobedience that resulted in the failure of the creation to live up to its original purpose.

But we must also see here the outworking of the curse God, himself, placed on the creation. God said: *Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you.* Now it's not as if God created thorns and thistles after the fall in order to make life miserable for us. No, they were present as part of the original created order. They had their place and purpose. But the curse allowed God's good creatures to run wild; to break through the boundaries he had set for them.

As a result, thorns and thistles grew out of control in the fields, choking out the grain. A prime example of creation out of control was when God sent the flood in the time of Noah. God allowed the waters in the heavens and on the earth to get out of control, unleashing its destructive force. Today, we continue to see how through fires, hurricanes, and the like, the good creation spins out of control, resulting in much misery--both for the creation itself and for humanity.

Now Paul describes this present situation in terms of groaning. He says in verse 22: *We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.* Because of its frustration, because the creation is unable to fulfill its intended purpose, the creation is groaning. Groaning points to the pain of this world under God's curse. It expresses the horror of the world marred by sin and evil.

The creation groans when oil was spilled into the Gulf of Mexico, threatening fragile wetlands, coating the wings of birds, and causing the

fishing industry to be shut down. The creation groans when rivers are used not only as a garbage dump, but also as a sewer.

But this groaning is not just a negative image. Paul says *the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth*. Groaning can also have a positive image, as when a mother groans in labor. Yes, there is much pain in childbirth. There is much agony. But there is also joy and hope, because there is a positive end result. There is the birth of a new child. Paul uses that picture of a mother in labor to describe what the creation is going through. Yes, right now, the creation is in pain. But there is also the hope a new creation being born.

This leads us to consider the future of creation. Paul writes in verse 21: *The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God*. The creation will be liberated. It will not be destroyed, as if it was completely garbage. It will not be left behind, as if we had no need of it. Instead, it will be liberated. Paul emphasizes that it is the creation itself that will experience this liberation. Not just ourselves as individuals. Not just the church. But also the creation.

Paul expresses this liberation both in its negative and positive aspects. To put it negatively, the creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay. Right now, the creation undergoes the same process our own bodies go through, but at its own rate. Our bodies decay. Not just after death. But while we live. As we grow older, we experience the frailty of life. The creation, too, faces decay. The resources of the earth are being used up. The ecosystems are out of balance. The creation is in a slow death.

But the creation will be liberated from this decay. The creation will be renewed. It will be restored to its former glory and then some. Paul expresses this positive development by saying the creation will be *brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God*.

Just as in Christ, we gain freedom, so in Christ the creation will be freed. It will be freed from its frustration. It will be freed from its curse. It will be free to fulfill the purpose God intended it be. It will be free to display the glory of God for all to see.

Notice how this freedom is tied to the freedom of the children of God. The future of God's creation and the future of God's children are intimately tied. For you see, the redemption of creation is a necessary part of our redemption. If we want to enjoy the blessings of a new body, we need a renewed creation. We can't stay in heaven. We won't stay in heaven. Instead, we will inherit, as part of being the family of God, a restored creation.

But all this is still in the future. It is the hope that we as Christians

have. Yes, right now we hear the pains and groans of the creation and we groan alongside. Together, we feel the frustration of not being able to serve the Lord, as we ought. But there is hope. There is a certain expectation that all this will change.

As a result, we wait. We wait eagerly. There is anticipation of what lies ahead. We wait patiently. God will accomplish what he has promised. But as we wait, this hope of a redeemed creation ought to shape the way we view the creation today. Though subjected to frustration and groaning in pain, it is still our Father's world. We therefore ought to treat it as such.

Since God does not give up on his creation, neither should we. Instead, we are responsible to treat it with respect and care. We must manage its resources in a stewardly and sustainable way. We ought to alleviate its groans as best we can. We should pray for the day when it too will be liberated from its bondage to decay.

The groans of creation, and our groaning along with it, will one-day end. And our present sufferings, which we experience in this broken world, will pale in comparison to the glory that will be revealed when the whole creation is made new—we along with the creation; when we will experience life in the creation as God intended it in the very beginning—when God declared everything to be good. That's the hope we have in Jesus Christ. Amen.