

Waiting eagerly

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- [0 : 0 0] Let me welcome you to this Lunchtime Bible Talk. Now, we started last week a short series in the letter to the Romans, chapter 8, under the general title of the Spirit of Life, how the Spirit both helps us in our present life and prepares us for life in the future.
- And we saw last week how the Spirit gives us assurance so that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Now we move on to the second part of the chapter.
- You'll find on page 944 in the Bibles, and we're going to read verses 18 to 27.
- Incidentally, don't take these divisions in the ESV or indeed in any Bible as part of the inspired text. I think the particular division here is a bad one.
- That's why I'm stopping at 27 rather than going on to 30, which I think more naturally belongs to the final part of the chapter.
- [1 : 1 0] That's not absolute, of course. I could be wrong as well. But remember, it's the inspired text, not the glosses, which the ESV and others have. Because one of the things that often marks these headings is they are extremely unimaginative and fail to engage.
- Wonderful passage at the end of Colossians about the life of Christ in the family is described drearily as family relationships. Anyway, forget that. Let's read the scriptures.
- Chapter 8, verse 18 on page 944. And Paul says,
- Amen. This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to our hearts and to our minds. Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you for the glorious passage here, which we have read about the future, not just for the children of God, but for the whole creation.
- And we pray indeed that it may inspire us, may encourage us. It may show us that your purposes are good purposes in spite of so much around us and within us.
- [3 : 5 0] It seems to deny that. And bless us in these moments as we listen to your word. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. We live in a beautiful world, don't we?
- Take all these glorious autumn days that we've had over the last week or two, the trees turning in colour, the landscape looking so fresh, and the kind of frosty but not too cold mornings, which give the promise of autumn.
- It's a beautiful world. Beautiful things happen in it. People fall in love and get married. People have children. People go on holiday.
- People enjoy themselves in all kinds of ways. And there are innumerable acts of kindness, both by individuals and by communities. So we live in a good world.
- But we also live in an evil world, don't we? We've seen these terrifying pictures from Aleppo on the television news over the past weeks. The absolutely dreadful.
- [5 : 0 3] You wonder if any of that city can possibly survive, even if anyone knows what to do. And no one does seem to know what to do. Is there anything left to save there? The terrible hurricanes that buffeted the Caribbean and the eastern seaboard of the United States.
- The children who suffer terribly. Parents who lose stillborn children. Cancer. Cancer. Death.

All these sorts of things. We live in an evil world. We live in a beautiful world, but we also live in an ugly world. And that is exactly what is at the heart of the gospel.

You see, there's two wrong views. One is the view that everything is as good as it can be. A view sometimes described as natural goodness.

That people are naturally good. That life is generally pleasant. Now, if you live in a pleasant area and you've got plenty of money and everything is going well, it's possible for at least a time to believe that.

[6 : 15] But sooner or later, that view is going to be destroyed. Beginning of the 19th century, there was a poet called Henley who wrote, I am the master of my fate.

I am the captain of my soul. It matters not how straight the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll. I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.

When his little girl died, he found that was cold comfort. That's one extreme view. Everything is good. Everything is pleasant. Everybody is lovely.

The other extreme view is that everything is as bad as it could be. When the reformers talked about the total depravity of humanity, that's not what they meant. They didn't mean that every individual was utterly evil, that every community was utterly corrupt.

What they meant was the natural tendency of human beings to go wrong. There are good individuals, but they're not perfect.

[7 : 20] There are good communities, but once again, they're not perfect. There are good marriages, but they're not perfect. So, what they meant, that's what they meant by total depravity.

Not that everything was utterly evil. As the German philosopher Nietzsche said, the earth has a skin, and that skin has diseases. One of these diseases is called humanity.

Now, that's the opposite view. The Bible holds neither view. The Bible says that both these things are true. There is evil, there is sin, there is death, but there is also goodness and salvation and life.

And that's particularly what this passage we've looked at is about. In this passage, Paul is moving from simply talking about individuals and their salvation moving more widely to creation itself.

The fallen creation where there is curse and death and sin and looking forward to the future of that. And just three things very, very simply.

[8 : 31] First of all, what is it like now, says Paul? Verse 18, and he uses the word sufferings. He's already used that in the previous verse.

If children then heirs, provided we suffer with him, we be glorified with him. Suffering here, not only of people, but of the whole of creation. And notice his phrase, I consider.

This is not whistling in the wind. This is a firm conviction based on the facts of the gospel. He's been talking about the facts of the gospel. He's been talking about Christ's defeat of sin and death.

And he now says, because of that, I consider that the sufferings of the present time. He's not saying there is nothing in this present time but sufferings.

What he is saying is that there is no possibility of avoiding sufferings of one kind or another in this present time. And everybody here knows that very well.

[9 : 31] We know it personally, we know it in our families, we know it in our communities, and we know it on a nationwide and worldwide scale. Suffering is inevitable.

Earlier on, Paul had said, we are in Adam. He said that in chapter 5. In other words, we are fallen. We are sinners. And we can't help that. But creation itself is fallen.

That is the point. Read Genesis 3. When Adam fell, creation fell with him. And the world of Eden disappeared.

Well, Eden disappeared totally. As I said, there's still beautiful and lovely things in creation and in human life. But the curse was there. And that's why prosperity gospels are so misleading.

The kind of thing you hear, particularly in America, but anything that happens in America blows across the Atlantic fairly quickly. Much hope that doesn't apply to Donald Trump, but that's another story.

[10 : 36] Forget that. If you're recording this, blot it out of the tape. Anyway, prosperity gospels that the Lord wants us to be well.

The Lord wants us to be prosperous. The Lord wants us to have a lot of money. Now, it's probably true that if you read the book of Proverbs, you can read these kind of things, but that's only if you read it very superficially.

In the book of Proverbs, these things are gifts of God. Good health, wealth, all the blessings of this world are gifts. They're not entitlements.

And all of us know that in the fallen world, there is going to be illness. There's going to be suffering. There's going to be violence.

And there is going to be death. Suffering, says Paul, in this present age, in this present creation is inevitable. But secondly, he says, suffering is only part of the story.

[11 : 43] It's placed in its largest context. This is the way it is, but it's not the way it will always be. Verse 19, the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

And also, he says, the sufferings are not worth comparing. Glory outweighs suffering.

In other words, suffering is real, but glory is even more real. And it's already there. Notice, eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

Now, something that's revealed is something that's already there, but yet, but still unseen. Abraham, we are told, looked for a city which had foundations, whose builder and architect was God.

The city was already there. He hadn't yet seen it. So, what is it like? Verse 18. What will it be like then? Verses 19 to 22.

[12 : 45] What is God going to do with creation? Now, you notice creation here is personified. Creation was subject to fertility, but first of all, verse 19, creation waits with eager longing.

Literally, creation stands on tiptoe. Creation is personified, standing on tiptoe, waiting for the glory that's going to happen. Creation is still good, but it's fallen.

Now, why is creation longing? What is it? Longing for the revealing of the sons of God. Let's see, the background is Genesis 3. The end of Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve fall and drag down the whole created order with them.

Evil comes into the world. Evil comes into the world and the person of the serpent. And sin comes into the world as well. But also, fallenness comes into the world.

I often used to say this, the Cornhill people, distinguish between evil, sin, and fallenness. They're not identical. Evil is the hostile power embodied in Satan and his minions, which comes in from outside.

[14 : 08] Irredeemable, implacable, determined to destroy God's purpose. Sin is our allying ourselves with that power when we deliberately choose to go against God.

Now, of course, there are different kinds of sin. There are sins we commit because we are weak. There are sins we commit, but there are other sins we do deliberately, even though we know we're wrong, because we enjoy doing them.

But there's also fallenness. And fallenness is because we live in a fallen world. You see, it's because of fallenness that all kinds of dreadful things happen.

When there is a plane crash, people will often say several hundred innocent lives were lost. Now, we know very well that none of these people were truly innocent.

Some of them may indeed have been on the plane for a very bad purpose indeed. We don't know that. But the point is, there's no proportion between what they were and what happens to them.

[15 : 12] Similarly, illness. Illness comes indiscriminately. Whether a person has sinned or not, illness comes because we are part of a fallen world.

And death comes because we are part of a fallen world. And the scripture is very plain about that. Now, of course, as I've said before, some sins happen because of our carelessness, our stupidity, misusing our bodies and so on.

But not all of it happens like that. And things like depression are part of fallenness. They're not... It's... So many Christians get this so wrong and say Christians should never be depressed.

That's our likes saying Christians should never have diabetes or blood pressure. These things belong in the realm of fallenness. And they're part of the fallen world.

And Satan exploits this, of course. Now, the creation, we are told, verse 20, was subject to futility. That's the word of Ecclesiastes. Everything is futile. Everything is empty.

[16 : 19] And by the way, that affects Christians as well. Don't imagine if you become a Christian. Suddenly, the emptiness of this world is transformed. Obviously, there is the world to come to look forward to.

There is the presence of the Spirit. But we'll still feel the pressures of living in the fallen world, the emptiness of living in the fallen world. So who...

The creature, the creation subject, not willingly because of him who subjected it. Now, who is the him? Some argue it's Adam himself.

But Adam is part of the fallenness. He was responsible in me. Is it Satan? No, Satan exploits it. I think it's referring to God.

This is God's judgment on the fallen world. In chapter one of this letter, we read three times, God gave them over. God gave them over. God gave them over to a sinful mind.

[17 : 19] But, these are birth pangs. These are not death pangs. These are not the sufferings of death. They are birth pangs. So, there is hope.

So, why is creation longing? Creation is longing because creation is broken, tired, cursed, and wants to be free. So, what is creation longing for?

Creation is longing, we are told, for the revealing of the sons of God and then in verse 21, the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Why was humanity created? Humanity was created to be God's representatives on earth, to rule the earth, to cultivate it, to rule over creation as God's representative.

And that is still true. Although, once again, like everything else, there is a paradox. Humanity, in many ways, has ruled well over the earth.

[18 : 19] Think of, for example, marshes that are drained, land that is reclaimed. Think of all the advances in medicine and science and so on. But then, all these things are paralleled by, you know, destructiveness.

I mean, look at these awful pictures again of a level. Look at the destruction by humanity of what humanity has made. Look at the dust balls, the acid rain and all the rest of it.

So, humanity's rule over creation has proved to be a very, very mixed blessing. And you see, Paul is saying, when humanity is redeemed, when humanity is, when the redeemed humanity is totally like Christ, then creation can be free from its slavery to fulfill its eternal purpose.

Because that is God's purpose for his redeemed people to rule over the new earth. When you read about, I mean, about reigning with Christ, forget about marble thrones and dressing gowns and crowns and so on.

That is talking about humanity resuming its ancient mandate to rule over the earth. God's never changed his mind about that. Look at Genesis chapter 9.

[19 : 38] After the flood, God said the same things to Adam, sorry, to Noah, as he had said to Adam. And that's still his eternal purpose. That's why the very end of the Bible echoes the very beginning of the Bible.

The images, the pictures and so on of Eden are there in double measure in the new creation, the tree of life on both sides of the river. That doesn't mean two trees of life.

It means the tree of life in even greater fullness than it was in Eden. The desert blossoming as the rose. The wonderful pictures you get in Isaiah and other prophets.

The created landscape rejoicing, you get in some of the sounds as well, the rivers clapping their hands, the trees rejoicing, for the Lord comes to judge the earth.

So what is it like now? It's suffering. Not totally suffering, not that there aren't good things and good times, but suffering is inevitable.

[20 : 38] Secondly, what will be like then? It will not just be Eden restored, it will be far better and more secure than Eden ever was. And then finally, in the next few verses, 23 to 27, how can we know this will happen?

Now, excuse me, the main thrust of chapters 5 to 8 after all has been can we be sure?

How can we know that this is going to happen? And the guarantee once again is the spirit within us. Not only that we who have the first fruits of the spirit, creation groans in ignorance if you like, even though we have the spirit within us, we recognize that there is still suffering and futility as we wait for adoption of sons, the redemption of our bodies.

The first fruits means we've already been given the down payment, we've already been given the anticipation and the adoption. Now, notice that our bodies are going to be redeemed.

It's not simply souls, it's all of us. Our bodies are going to be redeemed as well and perfectly fitted for the new creation. In the resurrection of the body, read 1 Corinthians 15 about how not only will the universe be transformed, but the people of God will be transformed.

[22 : 18] And it's, you see, it's not a fear that the glory will not come, but that we are still tied to the old age of sin and death.

There are times that it's going to be difficult to believe this. There are times when it seems as if nothing will ever change. But, that's why Paul says, in the same way and he who searches hearts knows the mind of the spirit.

We, verse 26, the spirit helps us in our weaknesses. You see, prayer is a paradox, isn't it? It's both a sign of our weakness. We don't pray if we feel on top of things, do we?

And yet, it's an openness to God's power. It doesn't create God's power. It's not true to say that prayer changes things because that would suggest that prayer was some kind of magic and the longer we prayed, if we prayed for nights on end, then the God would have to move.

Remember, that is essentially a pagan idea. In 1 Kings 18, the priests of Baal had an all-day prayer meeting getting ever more fanatical, hammering at Baal's door and Baal wasn't in.

[23 : 33] The point is, prayer opens the way to God working. That is the point. It's God who changes things. And there are two things here.

First of all, the Spirit bears the burden with us. The Spirit himself, verse 26, intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

There are many times, not only do we not feel like praying, we don't know what to say. We don't know what to pray for. And longings that we can't quite put into words.

We don't actually know what we want. Paul says when that happens, the Spirit is there and he is presenting our prayers.

So that what God in heaven hears is not, if you like, my feeble Twitter, but the words of the Spirit. And secondly, the Spirit's intercession is effective.

[24 : 31] 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. In other words, the Spirit inspires us to pray things that God wants to give us.

Even when our thoughts are incoherent and our words are inarticulate, God hears and sees the longings of our hearts.

Part of our problem is that we don't actually, I certainly don't understand just how deeply God sees into our hearts and minds. We think often that if we don't say certain words, the Lord will think we don't mean them or that even if we try to suppress certain thoughts, the Lord won't know what we're thinking.

The point is we are still struggling and we'll struggle as long as we're in this world. But the Spirit says, Paul, intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

And that is the point of these verses. Creation will be redeemed. The Spirit who brought creation into life will bring the new creation into life.

[25 : 52] The Spirit who came into our hearts and lives and we came to Christ will bring us safely to glory. And that is a wonderful and glorious thought.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord, we know that in this world we often experience much more of the struggles, much more of the heartbreak, much more of the inarticulate nature of our prayers.

Help us to trust in you. Help us to give room for that spirit to work in us day by day and so bring us the glory.

Amen.