

## **ROMANS 8 – THREE VIEWS FROM GOD’S EVEREST**

### **ROMANS 8:17-30: A VIEW OF NATURE**

Last time when we looked at the beginning of Romans 8 we came to the top of Everest. God had taken us, via Jesus’ sacrifice, from the dark valleys of sin to the shining summit of his presence. We can triumph in the battle with the evil nature we have inherited from Adam and Eve, thanks to the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit in us as believers.

Now, looking down from Everest, what do we see? We see nature, God’s creation. And what sort of state is it in? Everywhere we see beauty fades and loveliness decays. We see destruction. We see “nature red in tooth and claw” as parasites, predators, consume other animals. We see drought and famine threatening mass starvation. And we see mankind destroying his own environment, like the devastation of the rain forest – while man’s economy generates debt, unemployment and misery.

We look at ourselves, and we see a spreading waistline, less hair than we used to have, poorer eyesight and hearing as well. And we know that our time on this earth is limited; we must all one day die. And furthermore, besides mankind’s universal fate of physical decay, we see Christians around the world being persecuted, languishing in prison or even being killed for their faith.

There are big issues underlying these observations. They raise a question that many people find stands in the way of their belief in God. That is, how can God be sovereign in a decaying world of suffering? Is this the earth, the body, the life of faith that a good God has promised for us? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why was there a tsunami, unleashed by forces of nature beyond man’s control that killed maybe 100,000 people in 2004? Why did 200 Australians die in bush fires last week? Why are we vulnerable to cancer and heart disease that can cruelly cut short our lives?

For the answer we must return to Genesis. When Adam was put in the Garden of Eden, his original order from God was to “rule over the earth” (Genesis 1:28) but not as a tyrant, rather to care for creation as a steward under God’s sovereignty, as in Genesis 2:15, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it”. This is sometimes called the creation mandate.

Then after discovering mankind’s disobedience God banished Adam and Eve from his presence and the beauty of the garden of Eden. This is what God said to Adam “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ 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, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

This is a terrible curse. It affects nature – that the very ground is condemned because of what mankind has done, the beauty of growth is now to be marred by decay. It is a curse of work, that it will be unfruitful and difficult; no longer is man God’s joyful steward of nature, instead nature is a hard opponent. And finally, it is a curse of mankind, that like the rest of nature we will wither and die, returning to the dust of the ground. No wonder the passage from Romans we have just read out speaks of creation being subject to “frustration” and in a “bondage of decay”. Nature has in effect been implicated in mankind’s sin, despite being innocent itself. It

is frustrated by God himself, and I quote, “not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it”. Let’s emphasise this; nature’s disorder is due to man’s sin.

So, is the situation hopeless – and is our belief that God is good and loving disproved by the state of his creation? Our passage today seeks to reassure us that despite what we see in nature around us, God is indeed in control. He is leading both us as believers and creation in general, to glory.

From last times sermon, we saw that when we accept Jesus sacrifice, God’s Spirit lives in us. The ultimate consequence of this is that we become adopted as sons of God, like Jesus, his natural son. God wants us there on the peak of the mountain with him! Being adopted as a son along with Jesus means that we share everything with him. We have an inheritance from God, we are heirs. An inheritance of glory like Jesus’s. But here we have to ask, how did Jesus earn his glory? By suffering. By suffering the most agonising death on the cross, with the weight of all mankind’s sins on his shoulders.

So, should we expect the Christian life to be easy? Do we just dance with joy on the top of Everest? The answer at the start of our passage is no! We are told we are only counted as heirs “if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory”. As Jesus said “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.” In this decaying world, we must expect to suffer as Jesus did. The world is not yet redeemed for God. I think here of the wonderful Christian writer David Watson whose life was cut short in 1984 by cancer, despite prayers of healing and the best possible medical treatment. And no doubt you know of other fervent believers whose lives were tragically curtailed too.

Jesus promised us persecution as Christians too As in John 15:20 “‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” I think here of the suffering of Christians in countries like India, where at least 60 Christians killed and more than 18,000 injured by Hindu extremists in Orissa. Around 4,500 houses and churches and 300 villages have been destroyed, and 15,000 Christians remain in refugee camps. And this is now, not some time in history. In England I see creeping persecution too, Christian adoption agencies for example forced to give children to homosexuals. Of nurses forbidden to pray for patients. Of churches threatening with cutting off of government funding for their community work if they dare to speak of their faith. I heard the government minister Hazel Blears threaten this sanction at an Evangelical Alliance conference last week.

Paul is saying decisively that as Christians, we inevitably will suffer like Jesus did in a fallen and decaying world. Without God’s perspective it would be easy to conclude pessimistically that despair is the only answer to the human condition. This is what H G Wells said “man who began in a cave behind a windbreak will end in the disease soaked ruins of a slum”. But God, through Paul, wants to reassure us! The human situation is not hopeless. There is always hope for something better. “For in this hope we were saved.” as Paul says here, and our suffering is a part of it.

It’s like this. We live in a world of death and decay but we see beyond it, because we have a glimpse of heavenly perfection already when the Holy Spirit came to live in us. So we don’t only see the consequences of man’s sin, we see the power of God’s mercy and love. As the passage states “if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently”. And that hope is to be unleashed by our own following of Jesus! As Paul says “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” This

hope is fulfilled in three ways that God is in control. In our experiences. In our prayers. And in our future – along with that of creation itself.

First, God is in control in our experiences. We find ourselves at times in disagreeable situations, that we want humanly to avoid. But in one of the key verses in Romans, Paul tells us that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”. It is a lesson we learn slowly but surely as Christians, that things we thought were disasters at the time can work out for good, and things we thought of as disappointments often become blessings.

Think of Joseph, sold into slavery and put into prison, but who ultimately realises when he shows himself to his brothers “it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you”. By becoming Pharaoh’s minister, he saved the nation of Israel from death by starvation. Or in my own case, my coming to faith was accompanied by a very disagreeable illness called Lyme Disease, which I caught from an insect present in German forests. The disease mimics the symptoms of arthritis, and can be very serious and even fatal if left untreated a long time. But for me it forced me to stay at home from a very intense work life and I felt God commanded me to read the Bible. Starting to read the Bible in turn led me to experience Christ’s saving presence, to which I responded! Without the illness I would never have made that step of faith! Poor David Watson’s untimely end left behind an amazing account of a true Christian facing death which has been a comfort to thousands, including me. I feel much more reconciled to death having read his book.

To comfort us further, Paul then reminds us of how our calling as Christians fits in to our journey of hope. “those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” Is that not encouraging? God knew us in advance, that we would follow Jesus and be glorified, all through our sufferings and difficult times. It is nothing to do with us, and everything to do with him. What can we do as a consequence except praise him?

Second, God is in control in our prayers. At moments of great stress and anxiety we may simply not know what to pray, and become tied up in conflicting emotions. I remember when our previous pastor left the church, it was a time of great pain for all of us. We had a very powerful prayer meeting in our conservatory. And I remember one woman who could only cry out in pain for the situation. This is exactly as the passage states, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express”. The Holy Spirit in other words tells God what is actually in our hearts. Or, as a famous theologian put it, “prayer is the divine in us raised us to the divine above us”.

Finally, God is in control in our future. We started with the observation from the summit of Everest of a world of decay and misery. Creation is disordered through the curse of Eden, while mankind pursues the creation mandate in a sinful way, causing environmental havoc.

And here is the greatest hope of all. The hope of triumph in the battle with nature, famine and drought, with age, with our weakening bodies. And we have a key role to play, as the passage states – “the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed”. As sons of God, filled with the Holy Spirit, we shall take up anew Adam’s creation mandate, free from sin. We shall care for creation, no longer exploiting it – and that will in itself free creation from the curse God put on it.

For the passage promises that creation will be “liberated from its burden of decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God”. Paul sees nature as personified as a woman “groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” longing for the time when decay will cease, and it becomes as free and perfect as we are in Christ. See how nature awaits in the meantime in “eager anticipation”, from a Greek word which brings forth an image of a man who scans the horizon with head thrust forwards, eagerly searching for the first dawn break of glory.

Furthermore, we ourselves “wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies”. We already know from the book of Romans that as Christians our bodies will no longer be instruments of sin. Now, we know also that they will no longer be victims of decay but we will inherit glorious bodies as we walk with Jesus.

What is promised here ultimately is no less than the “new heaven and new earth”, the renewal of creation when God steps into history to judge mankind and remake creation. One where, as it states in Isaiah 11:6 “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.” A redeemed nature. And as promised in Revelation 22:1 “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away”. A redeemed mankind and the whole of creation freed from decay.

How do we respond to this wonderful passage, before the new creation comes? One possible response is to praise God and anticipate with pleasure the wonderful future. And that would be understandable if we were in a persecuted church, for whom this passage is one of great comfort. But I believe that we Christians who are not in that situation are called to action out of gratitude for the wonder of what God has done. We are not called to simply wait passively for God’s return. Several points support this. James for example tells us “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” Meanwhile, Jesus in the parable of the talents tells us to use our skills for the kingdom.

I believe the call to action for us as Children of God in this life from the passage is threefold. First, we are called to pray for and assist our brothers and sisters in the suffering church. One organisation that I believe is very worthy of your support is Barnabas Trust, which focused on persecuted Christians in the Muslim world. Then, we are called to give relief to the needy from natural and man-made disasters. And here I want to mention Tear Fund which is involved in disaster relief but also in advocacy for the poor of the impact of global warming. They are planning a “carbon fast” over Lent that I’m leaving information about.

But finally I believe we are called to safeguard and nurture creation, renewing the original creation mandate, to “work the garden and take care of it”. Lest you doubt, let me recall how our Lord in Mark 16 tells his followers to “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” Not just to all mankind! All creation! See how it links with Romans; Jesus is calling us to redeem nature only mankind, even as Paul is saying here. This can be the simplest thing like recycling, not littering and not contributing to global warming more than necessary. And bear in mind that global warming will hurt the poor most of all. But again I’d like to mention a charity worthy of your attention, which is A Rocha. This is a Christian environmental and nature conservation movement whose name is Portuguese for ‘the rock’ - their first initiative was a field study centre in Portugal. Their projects are and I quote “frequently cross-cultural in character and share a community emphasis, with a focus on science and research, practical conservation and environmental education.” I’ll leave some material on each of these charities for your interest afterwards.

Let me sum up. While the first part of Romans 8 showed the triumph of God in our battle with evil human nature (what Paul calls the flesh), the second part that we have looked at today is to do with the battle with death and decay. But they are intertwined. Because Jesus has triumphed over evil, so we who follow him are purified from Adam's sin, death and decay will be conquered. Our sufferings are not incidental but an integral part of the process of God's future triumph. As we share in the sufferings of our Lord Jesus, the world proceeds towards its redemption in the re-creation of a new heaven and the new earth. Even now, we are called to bring in the kingdom wherever we may, for the persecuted, the poor and to nurture God's creation. We are called already to take up again mankind's role as stewards of nature, the divinely appointed task that Adam lost. But there is more to come in the future. What God is promising is a reversal of the curse of Genesis 3, one where creation and we ourselves are to be renewed eternally. Where we shall finally again "work the garden and take care of it" in Jesus' eternal presence. Praise God!