

THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY

by Ray C. Stedman

First John 3:2 says, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God; but it does not yet appear what we shall be," {cf, 1 Jn 3:2a KJV}. That is the theme that Paul brings to a focus in Verses 18-28 of Romans 8. He deals with two themes: the sufferings of believers, and the glorification of believers.

First John 3:2 has always been a comfort to me, as a pastor, because it reminds me that, though we are all sons of God, sometimes we don't appear to be his sons. Sometimes when I am beset by saints who come to me and criticize various things that are going on, I have a difficult time relating to them. Then I have to remind myself, "Well, they are still children of God, even though it does not yet appear what they shall be." As I see the increasing decrepitude in people's deteriorating physical bodies as they grow older, I have to say again, "It does not yet appear what we shall be." Things are moving toward a great day, but it is not here yet; and until that day, we have to put up with the difficulties and the hardships and the sufferings that our current situations bring us to.

These are the themes that Paul links together in this great section of Romans 8. He stated this very plainly earlier, in Verse 17:

Now if we are children, then we are heirs -- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. {Rom 8:17 NIV}

This verse links together two things that we probably would not put together: sufferings and glory -- hurts and hallelujahs. They belong together, and you find them together in almost every passage of Scripture that deals with the suffering of the Christian. In fact, the Apostle Paul links them directly together in Second Corinthians 4:17:

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. {2 Cor 4:17 NIV}

So, our sufferings as believers -- physical, emotional, whatever they may be -- are directly linked with the glory that is coming. The important thing we need to see is that both the sufferings and the glory are privileges that are given to us.

It is easy for Christians reading these passages to get the idea that we earn our glory by the sufferings that we go through -- those who go through the greatest suffering will earn the greatest degree of glory. But it is wrong to see it that way. We never earn glory. As this passage makes clear, glory is given to us as part of our inheritance in Christ. And suffering, also, is our inheritance in Christ. Suffering is a privilege committed to us. Paul says this again very plainly in Philippians 1:29:

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him [or, for his name's sake], {Phil 1:29 NIV}

In the early part of Acts, it is recorded that the early Christians actually did this. They rejoiced in their sufferings. They rejoiced because they were counted worthy to suffer for the sake of the Lord. And though they were beaten and mistreated, they went away rejoicing because God had counted them worthy to bear suffering for his name's sake. I think this is the transforming view that makes it possible for us to endure suffering and, more than that, to actually rise above it with triumphant rejoicing. We can do this when we see that our sufferings are privileges committed to us. Our Lord Jesus said this himself in Matthew 5:11-12. He said, "Blessed are you when men persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely for his name's sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets

who were before you," {cf, Matt 5:11-12 KJV}.

Nothing will help us more in enduring suffering than a clear view of the glory that is linked to it. That is the theme of this section in Romans 8, beginning with Verse 18:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. {Rom 8:18 NIV}

The theme of that verse and the next nine verses is that incomparable glory lies ahead -- glory beyond description, greater than anything you can compare it with on earth. A magnificent and fantastic prospect awaits us. All through the Scriptures there has been a thread of hope, a rumor of hope that runs all through the Old Testament, through the prophetic writings, and into the New Testament. This rumor speaks of a day that is coming when all the hurt and heartache and injustice and weakness and suffering of our present experience will be explained and justified and will result in a time of incredible blessing upon the earth. The whisper of this in the Old Testament increases in intensity as it approaches the New Testament, where you come to proclamations like this that speak of the incomparable glory that lies ahead.

Now, we tend to make careful note of our suffering. Just the other day, I received a mimeographed letter from a man who had written out in extreme detail (even though rather humorously) a report of his recent operation. He said he had had to listen to all the reports of other people's operations for years, and now it was his turn! We make detailed reports of what we go through in our sufferings. But here the apostle says, "Don't even mention them! They are not worthy to be mentioned in comparison with the glory that is to follow."

Now, that statement would be just so much hot air if it didn't come from a man like Paul. Here is a man who suffered intensely. No one in this room has gone through even a fraction of the suffering that Paul endured. He was beaten, he was stoned with rocks, he was chained, he was imprisoned, he was shipwrecked, starved, often hungry and naked and cold. He himself tells us this. And yet it is this apostle who takes pen in hand and says, "Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that shall be revealed in us." The glory that is coming is incomparable in intensity.

Our sufferings hurt us, I know. I am not trying to make light of them or diminish the terrible physical and emotional pain that suffering can bring. It can be awful, almost unendurable. Its intensity can increase to such a degree that we actually scream with terror and pain. We think we can no longer endure. But the apostle is saying that the intensity of the suffering we experience is not even a drop in the bucket compared with the intensity of glory that is coming. Now, you can see that Paul is straining the language in trying to describe this fantastic thing that is about to happen, which he calls the revelation of the glory that is coming.

This glory is not only incomparable in its intensity, but it is also incomparable in its locality. It is not going to be revealed to us, but in us. The word, literally, means "into us." This glory is not going to be a spectator sport, where we will sit up in some cosmic grandstand and watch an amusing or beautiful performance in which we actually have no part. We are to be on the stage. We are going to be involved in it. It is a glory that will be "revealed into us," and we are part of it. I think that incomparable spokesman, C. S. Lewis, has explained this more accurately than anyone else. I would like to share with you a paragraph or two from his message, *The Weight of Glory* :

We are to shine as the sun. We are to be given the morning star. I think I begin to see what it means. In one way, of course, God has given us the morning star already. You can go and enjoy the gift on many fine mornings, if you get up early enough. "What more," you may ask, "do we want?" Ah, but we want so much more. Something the books on aesthetics take little notice of. But the poets and mythologies know all about it. We do not want merely to see beauty, though God knows even that is bounty enough -- we want something else which can hardly be put into words -- to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why the poets tell us such lovely falsehoods. They talk as if the west wind could really sweep into a human soul. But it can't. They tell us that beauty, born a murmuring sound, will pass into a human face. But it won't -- or not yet, at least.

[Lewis sums it up in a previous sentence in this way]

The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last.

That is what Paul says is about to happen. This is the incredible glory that God has prepared for those who love him, that he has given to us -- not because we have been faithful, not because we earn it, but because we are heirs of God, and co-heirs with Christ. And also we are called and entrusted with the privilege of suffering for humanity. All Christians suffer. There are no exceptions. If you are a true and genuine believer in Jesus Christ, you will suffer. But we are not only given the privilege of suffering with him now, but also of sharing in his glory that is yet to come. We can endure the suffering, and even triumph in it, because we see the glory that is to follow.

In the paragraph that follows, the apostle shows us two proofs that confirm this hope of glory. The first one is that nature itself testifies to this, the second is our own experience. Paul says the whole created universe bears witness to this day that is coming. Verses 19-22 explain the testimony that is found in nature.

Verse 19 tells us that nature is waiting for something:

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. {Rom 8:19 NIV}

The word in the original language which is translated "eager expectation" is an interesting word. It is a word that pictures a man standing and waiting for something to happen, craning his head forward. That is why I think Phillips translates this correctly when he says, "The whole creation is standing on tiptoe, eagerly awaiting the revelation of the sons of God." The word means "to crane the neck, to look on with a visible sense of anticipation that something is about to happen." That is what Paul says the world is doing. It is eagerly awaiting this remarkable event toward which the world is hastening, and has been hastening, since the beginning of time.

Paul goes on to explain why he makes such a statement in Verses 20-21:

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. {Rom 8:20-21 NIV}

Paul is saying that creation not only is waiting for something, but that it is doing so because it is linked with man. Creation fell with man, the apostle declares. Not only did our whole race fall into the bondage of sin and death, as the earlier chapters of Romans explain, but the entire physical universe fell as well. It was man's sin that put thorns on roses. It was man's sin that made the animals hate and fear each other and brought predators and carnivores into being. With the fall of man came the spreading fear, hostility, and hatred in the animal world, and the whole of nature testifies to this fact. It is, as Paul describes it here, subjected to frustration.

Recently we have been hearing a lot about how plants are sensitive to people, how they even understand something of what we say, and how our attitudes are conveyed to them. Can you imagine how frustrated a plant can get when it wants to produce and grow, and yet it is always treated with a circumstance or attitude that frustrates it. Some of us have to live with these frustrated plants in our homes. Think of the beauty of nature -- and yet every area is spoiled by thorns and thistles, and various things that mark this decay. Futility prevails in the natural world.

This phrase "the bondage to decay" is a very accurate description of what scientists call the second law of thermodynamics. This is the law of infinite increase of entropy. Everything is decaying; everything, with no exception, is running down. Though for a while something may seem to grow, eventually it dies. Even human life dies, and so does all that is with it. All of this is because of the fall of man.

I just spent a few days in the beautiful High Sierra, where the great Sequoia trees grow. As I walked about, I was sad to see how the crush of man has spoiled what is left of the beauty of creation. In the area where I was, there was once a great forest -- the world's greatest forest of sequoia trees, those great redwoods. But man

came in, and in less than a decade there is nothing but blackened stumps and rotting logs where once there were thousands of trees. Ironically enough, though it was all done in the name of profit, nobody made a dime on the whole operation. At least half of the lumber that was cut was never removed and was left to rot. This is how man despoils creation wherever he goes. He pollutes the air and ruins the environment. This is all a part of the bondage to decay that we see all around us.

But the apostle argues that, if that is true, it is also true that when man is delivered from this decay, nature will be delivered as well. Therefore, when the hour strikes when the sons of God are going to be revealed -- when it shall appear what we are, as John would say, when what we have become in our spirits, sons of the living God, shall become visibly evident to all -- in that hour, nature will be freed from its bondage. It will burst into a bloom and fecundity that no one can possibly imagine now. The desert will blossom like the rose, the prophet says, and the lions will lie down with the lambs. None shall hurt and destroy in all of God's holy mountain. Rivers will run free and clear and sweet again.

All that God intended in nature will come into visible manifestation in that day. Nature will be delivered into "the freedom and the glory of the children of God." That is a literal rendering of what Paul says here, and it means that glory has a great deal of freedom about it. It is a stepping into an experience of liberty such as we have never dreamed, such as has never come into our imaginations at any time. It is incomparable glory.

Now, in anticipation of that day, the apostle says, nature groans, but it groans in hope (Verse 22):

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. {Rom 8:22 NIV}

As Paul has said earlier, nature groans in the hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage of decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. Somebody has 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 roar 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.

Not only does nature testify to this bondage, bearing witness to the hope that is waiting, but, Paul says, we ourselves have this testimony. Our present experience confirms that this glory is coming. Paul sets this evidence before us in Verse 23:

Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. {Rom 8:23-25 NIV}

In some ways, I think that is the most remarkable statement in this remarkable paragraph. Paul says here that though we ourselves are redeemed in spirit, our bodies are not yet redeemed; we, too, are groaning. All through this paragraph there is a constant contrast between the groan and the glory; yet there is a link between the two. Nature groans; we groan. And yet the groan is producing the glory. I remind you again of what Paul said in Second Corinthians 4:17:

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. {2 Cor 4:17 RSV}

Have you ever thought of afflictions in that way? Our afflictions are working for us. Every time we groan, it is a reminder to us of the promise of glory. I do not think anything will transform our sufferings more than remembering that.

My daughter, Laurie, has reached the stage where she delights in mimicking me, repeating back to me the things that I say in the way that I say them. I must admit it is a great help. It's just like holding up a mirror before me. I have been so struck by the fact that in the tone of voice she employs in mimicking me there is

often a groan. I am groaning all the time. I groaned this morning when I got up. So did you, probably.

Our lives consist of groans. We groan because of the ravages that sin makes in our lives, and in the lives of those we love. We groan because we see possibilities that are not being captured and employed. We groan because we see gifted people who are wasting their lives, and we would love to see something else happening. It is recorded that, as he drew near the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus groaned in his spirit because he was so burdened by the ravages that sin had made in a believing family. He groaned, even though he knew that he would soon raise Lazarus from the dead. So we groan in our spirits -- we groan in disappointment, in bereavement, in sorrow. We groan physically in our pain and our limitation. Life consists of a great deal of groaning.

But the apostle immediately adds that this is a groaning which is in hope. As nature groans in hope, so we believers groan -- but we groan in hope too. For in this hope we were saved, in the anticipation that God has a plan for our bodies as well. Among the Greeks, it was taught that the body was evil, and that the best thing was to get out of it, to get away from it, to escape into whatever glory awaited the human spirit, for the body was a prison, holding us in.

I am afraid that this pagan concept is more prevalent among Christians than we like to think. I find a lot of Christians who have an ejection-seat mentality. As soon as they get into difficulty, they want to pull the ejection chord and zip off into glory. They want to get away from it all. We are all tempted to feel that way, but that is not the Christian point of view.

The Christian viewpoint is that, though the body is in pain and suffering and is limited now, this is an important aspect of our lives. It is something that is part of the whole program and plan of God, part of the privilege committed to us as Christians. We suffer with Christ. As he suffered, so do we, that we might also be glorified, as he is. Therefore, what is happening to us now is something that we never need to see as meaningless. It holds great meaning. That is why I think that boredom is the most non-Christian attitude that we can have. Boredom is an attitude of enduring, waiting for something better to come, but seeing nothing meaningful in what you are going through at the time. I don't think the Scriptures ever support that idea of Christians.

We are saved in hope, Paul says, and by that hope we live. It is true that hope, by its very nature, is something yet in the future -- "But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently." But what makes it possible to wait is that we already have the firstfruits of the Spirit. We know that the Spirit of God is able to give joy in the midst of heartache. He is able to make us feel at peace even when there is turmoil all around. This happens to even the weakest and newest among us. This is what Paul calls the firstfruits of the Spirit -- the power of God to make a heart calm and restful and peaceful in the midst of turbulent, trying, and difficult circumstances. Because we have these firstfruits we can wait patiently for the hour when, at last, even our bodies will be set free, and we shall step into an incomparable glory, such as we have never imagined or seen before. No one, in all the wildest dreams of science fiction, has ever imagined or conceived of something so vast and so magnificent as the glory God has waiting for us.

There is more involved in this program of patient waiting, as the apostle goes on to explain in Verses 26-27:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know how we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. {Rom 8:26-27 NIV}

Now the Spirit is groaning. There are three groans in this passage. Nature is groaning, we are groaning, and now the Spirit is groaning with words which cannot be uttered. This passage helps us in our understanding of prayer. The apostle says that we do not know what to pray for as we ought. We lack wisdom. I want to point out immediately that this is not an encouragement to cease praying. Some people think this means that if we don't know how to pray as we ought, and if the Spirit is going to pray for us anyway, then we don't need to pray. But that would contradict many other passages of Scripture, especially James 4:2, which says. "You

have not because you ask not," {Jas 4:2b NIV}. God does want us to pray, and we are constantly encouraged to pray. Jesus taught on prayer. In Philippians 4:6, Paul tells us that we are never to be troubled or anxious, but in everything, with prayer and supplication, we are to let our requests be made known to God.

There are many times when we do know what to pray for. But there will come times when we won't know what to pray for. My wife and I had a time like that last night. We knew something was wrong, but we didn't know how to analyze it, or how to explain it, or how to ask God to do something about it. We were without wisdom. It is at that time, the apostle tells us, that the Spirit of God within us voices, without words, his request to the Father.

I have always been amazed at people who emphasize the gift of tongues and take this verse as proof that the Spirit prays in tongues through us. This verse could not mean that. Paul tells us that this praying of the Spirit is done with groans which *words cannot express*. Now, tongues are words, words of other languages. If this referred to the gift of tongues, it would merely be putting into other languages the feelings of our heart. But this passage has nothing to do with that. This describes the groans of the Spirit within, so deep and so impossible to verbalize that we cannot say anything at all. We just feel deeply. The apostle says that when that happens, it is the Spirit of God who is praying. The Spirit is putting our prayer into a form which God the Father, who searches the heart, understands. The Spirit is asking for something concerning the situation that we are trying to pray about. Now, what is the Spirit asking for?

That is explained in Verse 28:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. {Rom 8:28 NIV}

Never separate this verse from the previous two verses. The apostle is saying that what the Spirit prays for is what happens. The Spirit prays according to the mind of God, and the Father answers by bringing into our lives the experiences that we need. He sends into the life of those for whom we are concerned the experiences that they need, no matter what they may be.

Now, that means that even the trials and tragedies that happen to us are an answer from the Father to the praying of the Spirit, doesn't it? You may leave this service this morning and become involved in an automobile accident on the way home. Someone may steal your purse. You may get home to find your house is on fire. There are a thousand and one possibilities. What we need to understand is that these things do not happen by accident. They happen because the Spirit which is in you prayed and asked that the Father allow them to happen -- because you or someone close to you needs it. These are the results of the praying of the Spirit.

The joys, the unexpected blessings, and the unusual things that happen to you are also the result of the Spirit's praying. The Spirit is praying that these things will happen, he is voicing the deep concern of God himself for your needs and mine. Out of this grows the assurance that no matter what happens, it will work together for good. This verse does not tell us that everything that happens to us is good. It does say that whether the situation is bad or good, it will work together for good for you if you are one who is loved and called by God. What a difference that makes as we wait for the coming of the glory! God is working out his purposes within us.

Paul is telling us here that we can wait with patience because nature testifies his glorious coming, and our own experience confirms it as well. We are being prepared for something -- we can't really tell what it is, specifically, but we are getting ready for something. And one of these days, at the end of our lives, if not before, we will step out of time into an incredible experience of glory, something that begs description -- a glory that Christ himself shares, and that we all shall share with him.

This is what God is preparing us for. No wonder the apostle then closes this passage with one of the greatest paeans of praise in the Scriptures. As we face the sufferings we are going through now, what a blessing, and what a help it is to remember the glory that has been granted to us. We have been counted worthy to suffer for his name, that we may also share in the glory that is to come.

Prayer

We thank you, our Father, for these mighty promises. How magnificent they are, how rich they are! We thank you for them. We know that one day these words, which are essentially forms and empty sounds to us, will be filled with a content that is beyond description. You will astonish our minds and our hearts by what you have prepared. We pray that we may understand this, and thus be able to endure patiently and with thanksgiving what we are going through now, knowing that it is the very suffering that is working and producing the glory. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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