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The unavoidable issue that challenges every believer is, “If God is good, WHY is there such suffering in the world and in my own life?”

THE GROANING AND THE GLORY

THE GROANING AND GLORY OF CHILDBIRTH

Every mother remembers the groaning. Not a few of the fathers do too, especially if they remained in the birthing room to “coach” their wives through the very personal ordeal of childbirth. The pain and tears, the sweat on the forehead, the guttural pants and cries, and the desperate need to push all explain why this is called “labor.” Those same mothers and fathers will testify that afterward, when the groaning has stopped and the baby has arrived, the hours of distress are swallowed up by the joy of a new life in the world. The groaning is dwarfed by the glory. “We have a child! Thank you, God!”

Romans 8 is a chapter that invites us into a cosmic labor room to witness “the revealing of the sons of God” (8:19). Paul speaks so vividly of both the groaning and the glory that we can see and hear and practically feel it in our bones. The tragic story of glory tossed away (Rom. 1:23) comes full circle here as Paul describes its imminent restoration. It’s an intensely personal Word from God that addresses us in lonely, empty times and in the darkest and most desperate places in our lives and summons us with astonishing promises to pray with confidence and hold fast to an unquenchable hope.

GROANING CREATION, GROANING CHRISTIANS

ROMANS 8:18–25

This section opens with pointed contrast between “the sufferings of this present time” and “the glory that is to be revealed” (v. 18). The unavoidable issue that challenges every believer is, “If God is good, WHY



is there such suffering in the world and in my own life?” Instead of answering that question directly, Paul presents his readers with a stunning comparison. “Hold these two things side by side,” he tells us, “and see which outweighs the other.” The sufferings, he asserts, are “not worth comparing” with the “eternal weight” (2 Cor. 4:17) of that glory. The Greek words suggest a financial calculation, as if one were weighing two piles of coins. The “glory pile,” says Paul, far outweighs the “suffering pile”!

Those sufferings, however, are not a trivial matter! They encompass the “whole creation,” which “has been groaning together” (v. 22). The groaning creation is marked by “corruption” (v. 21) and “futility” (v. 20), a word used 39 times in Ecclesiastes (“vanity”) to describe the sense of purposelessness in human life. The creation groans “together” with us. Human activity, in fact, often produces groaning in the rest of creation! Massive oil spills at Prudhoe Bay (2006) and in the Gulf of Mexico (2010) devastated marine life. The Apollo astronauts described seeing cancerous brown smog shrouding many of earth’s cities. Tourists in Israel have even reported with dismay that a once-lovely hillside near Nazareth, Jesus’ own home town, is now littered with garbage and junk cars.

“We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit” (v. 23) are groaning too. The term “firstfruits,” which described the first, best portion of a harvest brought to God as an offering (prescribed in Deut. 26) is here applied with a surprising twist, not as what we bring to God, but as what He has already given us (Eph. 1:13–14)! That Holy Spirit is a “down payment” toward the full delivery of the new creation. Meanwhile, God’s people still bear the same burdens as everyone else. We know financial setbacks, fractured relationships, and the cumulative impact of illness and aging. We ache for children bullied at school and hear the groaning of our dear ones at many a nursing care facility.

But the particular groaning Paul writes about here is that Christians must “wait” for our “adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (v. 23) to be finalized. God’s promise is not that we will shed our bodies and return as “ghosts” (“I’m going to come back and haunt

you!”), but that those bodies will be “redeemed” and restored in glory (1 Cor. 15:35–49), as was the body of Jesus. The pregnant mother must wait nine months for the baby’s arrival, with increasing discomfort. The “expectant” Christian, who knows there’s a new creation coming (Is. 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13), waits with increasing discomfort and longing, not knowing when it will be revealed.

Paul employs the metaphor of childbirth to assure us that the arrival of that newborn creation is certain, even if we don’t know when (see 1 Thess. 5:3). Joy will surely replace pain! Jesus Himself employed the image (John 16:21), saying that a woman’s “sorrow” (labor’s pain) will be forgotten when the baby comes. That will happen for us, He promises. So we live in a sure “hope” (vv. 24–25) that is akin to the “expecting” of a pregnant woman! Indeed, the whole creation, says Paul, shares our “eager longing” (v. 19). The Greek word literally means a stretching out of one’s neck toward something, like a giraffe stretching toward a tasty bunch of leaves. Ours is a hungry kind of waiting.

BEHIND IT ALL, GOD AT WORK!

ROMANS 8:26–30

As hope sustains the believer in suffering, the Holy Spirit helps him in prayer. Soldiers deployed far from their families have always needed to stay connected, whether by letters or, more recently, by skyping with their loved ones. In the same way, we who are deployed on the front lines of life’s battle need the lifeline that prayer provides. But it is not easy to pray at times when we are in chronic physical or emotional pain. We groan in our emptiness. We have no words. “We do not know what to pray for as we ought” (v. 26).

For those empty times comes a help unexpected and powerful. “The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (v. 26). The Spirit groans too! In the mysterious working of the Trinity, Jesus too intercedes (Heb. 7:25) and God the Father (“he who searches hearts” v. 27) receives the intercessions and works “all things...for good” (v. 28).

It is a promise that can sustain us in any situation, no matter how dreadful it appears. Jesus promised to be

with us “always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). So now Paul adds this mighty promise that “all things work together for good” for believers. Even crippling injury. Even our stupid, sinful blunders. Even death. If we live long enough, we can look back and see (by hindsight) situations where God “worked for good” that did not appear “good” at all as we lived through them. So Joseph says to his brothers (who had sold him into slavery!), “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20). God used the simple evil of the brothers to bring about a wondrous rescue of multitudes from hunger in a famine. Always God is in control!

The section makes clear that God has not left us alone in the world’s sea of troubles. Indeed, He had us on His heart and in His gracious “purpose” (v. 28) from the very beginning. Paul uses a sequence of words to portray how that purpose is being realized in us:

He [God] *foreknew* (v. 29)
 He *predestined* to be conformed to the image of His Son (v. 29)
 He *called*... He *justified*... He also *glorified* (v. 30).

The first two words (“foreknew...predestined”) indicate the gracious action of God before time began. The next two (“called...justified”) take place within our time, our history. The final term (“glorified”) will take place when time finally ends.

It’s common for people to puzzle over these terms, especially the first two. The verb “foreknow” does not refer simply to intellectual awareness of something, but is a relationship term. Adam “knew” Eve (Gen. 4:1) in terms of a sexual relationship. God says to Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jer. 1:5), meaning that He had decided ahead of time to choose Jeremiah for prophetic work. Here in Romans God assures us that He has similarly chosen us to be His people in Jesus Christ. The second term, “predestine,” makes clear that God also set us on a path with a particular destiny (see also Eph. 1:11–12) — all before we were born. The doctrine of predestination is intended to be a doctrine of supreme comfort for believers who wonder if they can “hang on” in tough times. These words are God’s emphatic “Yes!

I’ve loved you ever so long!” It’s something that makes one want to say, “Wow!”

Questions remain. One that is frequently posed is, “Why are some elected and not others?” Sainted professor Martin Franzmann wrote the following, using the common term “election” for predestination:

To speak of eternal election is simply an intensified expression of... “He has loved me with an everlasting love”... Questions like: “What of the others, those not elected?” “Why some and not others?”... “How can I be sure that He has chosen me?” Questions like these are gray and sightless creatures born to live in darkness... When the New Testament speaks of election, it is speaking a personal and heartening word to the called saints...about their sainthood.

The notion of God’s election faces us again in Chapter 9, and there will be more to say when we encounter it there.

A final word in this section deserves extra attention. Our destiny is to be “conformed to the image of his Son... that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (v. 29). We must not hear this word “firstborn” saying “There was a time when God’s Son didn’t exist,” as did the ancient Arians and modern-day Jehovah’s Witnesses (but see John 8:58!). The term “firstborn” describes His pre-eminence and the fact that He shares His privileges with us (Cranfield). His resurrection came first (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5). His glorifying came first. Because He has paved the way, we believers get to follow.

NOTHING WILL SEPARATE US FROM GOD’S LOVE

ROMANS 8:31-39

Now, just as it happens at a fireworks display, comes the grand finale to this chapter, and indeed the entire first half of the letter! Paul begins: “What then shall we say to these things?” (all the treasures Paul has laid out in 8 chapters). His immediate, triumphant answer is a rhetorical question that isn’t really a question at all: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (v. 31). Of course there is no “if.” God IS for us! C. E. B.

Cranfield calls this a “concise summary of the Gospel.”

To unfold the wonder of what it means for God to be “for us,” Paul addresses his readers with a further sequence of questions whose answers are obvious.

“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (v. 32)

That’s what father Abraham did long ago, you remember (Gen. 22). After waiting all those years, he willingly gave up Isaac, his “only” son, his “beloved” son, and brought him to Mt. Moriah to offer him. That act, says Michael Middendorf, profoundly foreshadows God’s own gracious offering of His “beloved Son” for us. If God has already done that “great thing,” He will surely handle the “lesser thing” of giving us everything else we need, won’t He? “Boom!” go the fireworks.

Now the second question, which sounds like a provocative courtroom challenge:

“Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect?” (v. 33)

The challenge will surely have no lack of takers who rise up to do this very thing! Satan (“the Accuser”) did so with Job (Job 1:6ff.) and will attempt the same with us. Our own consciences sometimes “accuse” (Rom. 2:15), bearing witness to us of what we have done wrong. But Paul has made it clear in Chapters 1–4 that God is the “justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (3:26). So the answer is simply “No one!” For against every attempted indictment of God’s people there stands the solid rock of Jesus Christ, “the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (v. 34). “Boom!” go the fireworks.

Now for question three:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (v. 35)

Many will try! For those who lack imagination, Paul supplies a whole list of potential separators: “Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or

nakedness, or danger, or sword?” (v. 35). This list runs the gamut from ordinary “pressures” that come to everyone to the dramatic threat of death that even now meets some Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere. It has ever been so, Paul says, citing Ps. 44:22 — “For your sake we are being killed all the day long.” The psalmist earlier makes the point that all this comes “though we have not forgotten” God or been false to the covenant (Ps. 44:17). What is striking about Paul’s list is that he himself faced many of these things — danger and hunger and nakedness (2 Cor. 11:26–27), persecution and distress (2 Cor. 12:10), and finally execution with the sword, according to tradition. No, none of these things can separate us. Paul stayed faithful because Christ’s love stays faithful. We also are “more than conquerors through him who loved us” (v. 37). “Boom” go the fireworks again.

Middendorf writes, “Paul marches triumphantly on toward his conclusion with one final sentence.” Is there anyone or anything else that wants to have a go at separating us from that astounding never-say-die love of God in Christ? Bring them all on! “Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (vv. 38–39). Nothing has been left out. “All creation” has been challenged, but nothing at all is found that can match the matchless love of God. “Boom!”

The fireworks display is at an end. This magnificent chapter that began with “nothing condemns us” now ends with “nothing can separate us.” The groaning is ending and the glory beginning. So “*with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify Your glorious name, evermore praising You and saying:*

*Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Sabaoth;
heav’n and earth are full of Thy glory.
Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest...*
(LSB, pp. 194–5)

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ROMANS 9:1-29

Lord God, all history and all people are in Your hands. Speak to me in this study of Your mysterious purposes at work in the people of Israel and also in me. I ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

For Review:

1. What approach does Paul take in answering the perpetual question of the suffering we see in the world?

2. How does Paul use the metaphor of childbirth to assure his readers of God's purposes?

3. What for you was the biggest "encourager" in 8:18-39?

Romans 9:1-5

4. Paul anguishes over Israel. Is there anyone over whom you presently anguish with concern about their salvation?

5. Make a list of Israel's privileges, as given in vv. 4-5.

Romans 9:6-13

6. What haunting question is Paul addressing in these verses?

7. How does he explain Israel's failure to believe in spite of their "privileges"?

8. One of Paul's purposes in Chapters 9-11 is to identify the "true Israel." According to verse 8, who is the true Israel?

9. Two pairs of sons illustrate his point. Who are the sons in vv. 7-9?

vv. 10-13?

Romans 9:14–18

10. According to verse 16, these stories illustrate that God’s choice and promise are not based on _____ but on _____
11. Paul again dialogues with an invisible opponent. What objection does the opponent raise in verse 14?
- _____
12. Now he makes use of the story of Moses and Pharaoh (Exodus 14). How would you summarize God’s purpose in “using” Pharaoh? Is God being “fair” or “unfair”? Give reasons for your answer.
- _____

Romans 9:19–29

13. What is the second objection the opponent raises in verse 19?
- _____
14. Paul uses yet another Old Testament illustration – the potter and the clay (Jer. 18). To whom is Paul referring in his mention of two kinds of pots?
- _____
15. How does Romans 2:4 aid your understanding of the “vessels of wrath” in v. 22?
- _____
16. How has God been shaping you? If you had to pick what sort of “pot” you are, which would come closest to what you think you are?
- a) Flower pot
 - b) Ash tray
 - c) Coffee mug
 - d) Wash basin
- OR? _____
17. Paul quotes several more Old Testament passages in vv. 25–29. Where are the quotations from?
- _____

What is their “point”?

Memory Verse Challenge for Chapter 9

Rom. 9:16 *So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.*