

# “Glorious Freedom”

## Sermons on Romans # 22

*Texts: Romans 8:18-27; Isaiah 11:1-10*

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God will not only save all of those whom he has chosen in Christ, he will also save all creation from the horrible effects of the fall of the human race into sin. In Romans 8:18-25, Paul’s focus moves from the individual dimension of sanctification to the cosmic dimension. In the last few sermons, we have seen how God redeems his people “in Christ” by removing from them the curse, condemnation, and bondage to sin. Now we will see how “in Christ” God redeems all of creation, thereby ensuring glorious freedom for all of God’s people, and all that God has made.

Once again, this section of Romans must be viewed against the backdrop of Paul’s eschatological contrast between the “already/not yet,” between “this age,” and the “age to come,” what we are “in Christ” vs. what we were “in Adam.” As we saw last time, in Romans 8:17 when Paul wrote—“*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*”—the apostle begins to contrast the suffering associated with this present age with the glory of the age to come. As believers share in Christ’s suffering, so too, creation groans under our feet. But for all those in Christ, present suffering will give way to eschatological glory and the creation itself will be liberated from the principle of decay.<sup>1</sup> God will save his people and God will renew his creation.

A number of commentators point out that according to Paul’s eschatological categories, suffering belongs to “this present evil age” while glory belongs to the “age to come.”<sup>2</sup> Because of the fall of the human race into sin, suffering is one characteristic of “the already,” while glorification in Christ is the mark of

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<sup>1</sup> According to Douglas Moo, “this passage develops the reference of suffering and glory in v. 17b, continues the overall theme of assurance that dominates chap. 8, and brings us back full circle to the opening paragraph (5:1-11) of this major section of the letter” (Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 508).

<sup>2</sup> Anders Nygren puts it as follows: “in the foregoing, Paul has shown how, through Christ, we have been removed from the power of death and received into new life. But can he actually sustain that view of the Christian life? Death has clearly not yet lost its grip on the Christian. As long as he lives on this earth, he has definite experience that he’s still in death’s country. To that fact the sufferings which come to him bear their unequivocal witness. To such objections Paul can answer simply by pointing to the coming glory. It is so great, beyond measure, that it sheds its clarifying light over the present life with its suffering. ‘I consider that the sufferings of this present time that are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.’ (V. 18). The seed of glory that is to be lies in the suffering that is here....It is clear from the way he expresses himself that Paul is speaking of two aeons [ages]. ‘The suffering of the present time,’ means simply the suffering of this aeon. [*Ho nun chairos*—this present time] is a familiar parallel expression for [*ho aion outos*—this present age]. And ‘the Glory that is to be’ bears a glimpse of ‘the aeon that is to come’....In the coming aeon the tension, which has marked the Christian life in this world, will be resolved. But for that reason the present suffering is not worth comparing with the glory which will then be revealed to us. The victory of life over death has already been won. Therefore this present life with all its infirmity reaches ahead, and sighs with yearning, towards the final manifestation of the glory” (Nygren, Commentary on Romans, pp. 329-330).

the “not yet.” Since our suffering will finally come to an end at the second coming of Christ, the Christian’s unquenchable hope in the midst of present suffering is that the glories of the age to come will become a reality on the Day of Christ Jesus.<sup>3</sup> And yet, Paul’s point is that even in the midst of our sufferings which we must endure in this present evil age, even now, in some way, we participate in the glories of the “not yet” through word and sacrament. Therefore, the theme of glory and how we participate in it now and how it gives us hope for the future, dominates the balance of this entire chapter.<sup>4</sup>

But we must not understand Paul as a theologian of suffering, nor is our suffering the essence of the Christian life, even though we will indeed suffer in this present evil age. Paul is a theologian whose focus is clearly directed to the coming eschatological glories of Christ. It is this glory for which we long, and the glory for which we must wait. This is important because it means that Paul is not a millennialist [pre or post]. There will be no “golden age” upon this present earth either before or after our Lord’s return. Rather, Paul’s expectation is a renewed heaven and earth connected to this eschatological glory and Christ’s Second Advent. What gives us hope and what gives our present suffering meaning, is not the promise of a millennial age where things are partially renewed, but the return of Jesus Christ, the Second Adam, who will judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new.

**I**n verse 17, Paul has already set out the contrast between the sufferings which the believer must endure with Christ in this present age, with that of the glory of Christ, which is yet to be revealed in the age to come. This statement serves as a transitional bridge to what follows, Paul’s treatment of the renewal of the cosmos in verses 18-25.

In verse 18, Paul contrasts the already with the not yet, when he states, “*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*” Paul’s understanding of present suffering grows out of his anticipation of future glory. The term translated “*consider*,” by the NIV can mean something like “a calculation, a mental weighing of the evidence,” as “strong assurance and not doubt.”<sup>5</sup> For Paul, this consideration is anchored in the fact of Christ’s sufferings for our sins (v. 17) which were but the precursor to his glory, manifested in his resurrection from the dead and his

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<sup>3</sup> Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I. 408.

<sup>4</sup> Moo makes a strong case that this section 18-25, must be seen as a part of the larger section that ends in verse: “Although ‘glory’ is mentioned only three times, in vv. 18-30, it is the overarching theme of this passage. Occurring both at the beginning (v. 18— ‘the glory that shall be revealed in us’) and at the end (v. 30— ‘these he glorified’), this concept frames these verses, furnishing us with an important indicator of Paul’s central concern. This ‘inclusio,’ the noticeable shift from v. 17b from the Christian’s present status to his future inheritance, and the parallels between 17-30 and 5:1-11 . . . show that vv. 18-30 comprise a coherent unit of thought, whose focus is eschatological glory. Paul enlists several other concepts in his elaboration of this glory: ‘freedom’ (v. 21), ‘the redemption of the body’ (v. 23), and, most important, ‘sonship’ (vv. 19, 23, 29). The casual connection suggested in v. 17b., between glory and suffering— ‘if we suffer with Christ *in order to be glorified* in him’—is not developed in vv. 18-30. To be sure, ‘suffering’—of both creation (vv. 19-22) and of Christians (vv. 18, 23, 26 [‘weakness’])—is still present, but Paul is not so much interested in its relationship to glory as he is in their sequence. He assumes the fact of suffering as the dark backdrop against which the glorious future promised to the Christian shines with bright intensity.” Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 508-509.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 319.

ascension on high. Yes, Christ suffered at the hands of evil men during this present evil age. But he triumphed in the midst of it. So too, Paul expects that all those in union with Christ will suffer as well. Suffering is an evitable part of the Christian life. But because Christ has triumphed over death, so too will we, for Paul has just explained that since we are in union with Christ through faith, and sealed in him with the Holy Spirit, we do indeed put to death the deeds of the flesh and therefore we live.

This is why Paul can say so emphatically that the sufferings of this life are not worth comparing (“cannot be compared”) with the glories of the age to come. In 2 Corinthians 4:17, he puts it this way: “*for our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*” This present evil age is even now passing away. It will come to a cataclysmic end on the day of the Lord Jesus when all things are made new, when the temporal gives way to eternal.

It is important to consider that glory will be revealed, not created.<sup>6</sup> Christ’s glory is even now a present reality in heaven although it is not yet realized on earth, except for brief intrusions through word and sacrament. This is why Paul longs for this glory. It is part of the age to come. This is where he places his hope. Materialistic images throughout the Old Testament such as in Isaiah 11:1-10, (our Old Testament lesson) which speak of fruitful vines, lions lying down with lambs, etc., describe future glory in strictly earthly terms, characteristic of Old Testament prophecy. Earthly images are used to describe future fulfillment and heavenly realities which far transcend anything which the prophets could have possibly known. Even though Christ’s glory is revealed in us at the first resurrection (when we pass from death to life—i.e., at the new birth), it is only fully realized at his coming in glory in the bodily resurrection. Thus the way to understand present suffering in contrast with future glory is through the already/not yet distinction. Paul’s point is that as adopted sons and daughters of God, we participate even now, in some sense, in that glory which is yet to be fully realized at Christ’s return.

In verse 19, Paul speaks of this already/not yet tension when he says “*the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.*” Cranfield points out that “the sentence is introduced as support for the statement made in v. 18, but, once introduced, it itself requires expansion.”<sup>7</sup> This is unpacked in the next few verses before culminating in Paul’s doxology at the end of the chapter. This is Paul’s explanation as to why suffering must go on, despite Christ’s finished work, and despite the fact that our Lord has triumphed over this evil age. It is through the lens of the already/not yet that believers must endure their suffering with Christ until the end of the age.<sup>8</sup> God is saving his people, “the sons of

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<sup>6</sup> Leon Morris, who doesn’t utilize the two-age model as his reference here, has a bit of uncharacteristic trouble making full sense of Paul’s words. Says Morris, “the implication that is that it [glory] is already existent, but not apparent. The Jews had some very materialistic ideas of what life would be like in the coming age, and there are some striking sayings [in the Old Testament?] which emphasize unusual fruitfulness of vines and the like. Paul is just as certain of the glory, but he does not see it in any materialistic way. The glory, he says, will be revealed in us, where his preposition is not the one we might have expected [*eis*]. He may mean that in the coming age all that is involved in our being ‘sons of God’ will become apparent and that this will be a revelation in us as well as to us” (Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 320).

<sup>7</sup> Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I. 410.

<sup>8</sup> Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 513-515.

God,” and God is saving creation, which I take to mean the material world (as opposed to the spiritual world). Paul goes so far as to personify creation, speaking of creation as anticipating the redemption which is yet to come. It is this anticipation of individual and cosmic restoration which gives God’s perspective on our present suffering.

Paul uses a most unusual word here which is translated by the NIV as “eager expectation.”<sup>9</sup> The term conveys the thought “of persistent and eager expectation” and literally means “stretching the head forward.” According to Paul, creation personified “cranes its neck forward,” anticipating the revelation of the sons of God, the event which marks what Paul will call in verse 21, the liberation of “creation’s own bondage to decay.”<sup>10</sup> When Christ’s eschatological glory is revealed at the end of the age, creation will also be redeemed. God is saving the cosmos and creation itself longs for this restoration. In order to make this point more emphatically, “Paul uses two unusual double compounds (NIV, “waits” and “eager expectation”) which together give a vivid picture of the hushed expectancy with which the creation awaits the disclosure of the coming glory. Creation waits for the revelation (*apocalypsis*) of the sons of God.”<sup>11</sup> Paul’s focus is upon the revelation of Christ’s eschatological glory on the day of his return. But there is an already/not yet focus here as well which we must not overlook.

This is why Paul now refers to the fact that the true sons of God will at some point be revealed from among the aggregate of humanity.<sup>12</sup> Paul is setting forth an argument which is in some ways parallel to Jesus’ teaching about the separation of wheat from tare, sheep from goats, at the time of judgement. At the Second Advent of our Lord, the sons and daughters of God, who are still in their earthly stations as slaves and masters, and who are in some ways virtually indistinguishable from the reprobate, will be finally set apart from the sons and daughters of Adam. It is not until the “last day” that this “appearance” of lowly status will change, for we must not forget that even now Christians are citizens of heaven and the age to come.<sup>13</sup> This is why millennialism fails. Paul’s eschatological hope is not in a gradual and/or partial transformation of this age, typical of “pre” and “post” millennialism, but Paul’s hope is squarely

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<sup>9</sup> Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 321.

<sup>10</sup> Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 513.

<sup>11</sup> Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 321.

<sup>12</sup> As Cranfield points out, “believers are already sons of God in this life, but their sonship is veiled and their *incognito* is impenetrable except to faith”(Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I. 412-413).

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Moo puts it this way: “The ‘revelation of the sons of God’ that creation keenly anticipates is the ‘unveiling’ of the true nature of Christians. Paul has already made clear that Christians are already ‘sons of God’ (vv. 14-17). But, experiencing suffering (v. 18) and weakness (v. 26) like all other people, Christians do not in this life ‘appear’ much like sons of God. The last day will publically manifest our real status. Nevertheless, since this ‘being revealed’ as God’s sons takes place only through a further transforming act of God—causing his glory to reach out and embrace us (v. 18), transforming the body (v. 23)—we are justified in attaching a degree of dynamic activity to ‘revelation’ here also. The ‘revelation’ of which Paul speaks is not only a disclosure of what we have always been but also a dynamic process by which the status we now have in preliminary form and in hiddenness will be brought to its final stage and made publically evident” (Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 515).

focused upon the coming of the Lord and the renewal of all things—i.e. a new heaven and earth.

In verses 20-21, Paul continues with his explanation as to why present sufferings cannot be compared with Christ's coming eschatological glory. *“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.”* The use of [γὰρ] “for” indicates that the logical sequence continues from that which began in verse 18. The reason why the present sufferings of God's people cannot be compared with Christ's coming glory has to do with the fact that *“the creation was subjected to frustration,”* or better, “futility” as in the NASB, a term which means “emptiness,” “futility,” “purposelessness,” or “frustration.”<sup>14</sup> As Paul understands the history of redemption, the fall not only effected Adam and all of his descendants, it extends to all of creation.

This is evident in the fact that since the fall, creation is no longer fulfilling the purpose for which it had originally been intended. Eden was that place where God and man enjoyed unbroken fellowship together and where man exercised dominion over all of creation as God's vice-regent. Because of human sin creation's original purpose is frustrated. Weeds grow, a woman's labor is painful, and man's appointed task which is to work, now produces sweat and blisters. Even man's dominion over the creatures is marginalized. That which was good, is now subject to “decay,” “change,” and “chaos.” But this too is part of God's decree. Creation has been subject to this frustration as a consequence of human sin.

This is explained in some detail in the final clause of v. 20 as well as in verse 21. The frustration of creation's original purpose does not come from any inherent defect in creation. God created all things “good.” The frustration comes *“not by [creation's] own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it.”* To argue that creation is inherently defective is to adopt an unbiblical and pagan dualism between spirit and matter. We must see creation as inherently good, although we experience creation after the fall. The aorist tense (“it was subjected”) points to a single moment in time.<sup>15</sup> Creation is not defective. Rather it was subjected by the will of the one who subjected it, leading some to conclude that this is a general reference to the Fall or specifically to Adam's act of rebellion—a sinful act of will.

If we think about this carefully, to assign all of the consequences of this to an act of Adam's will raises the following problem: “Scripture never assigns to Adam or to Satan, the power to bring about such a far-reaching change.”<sup>16</sup> For Paul, the subjection of creation had an ultimate purpose, a purpose which is expressly taken up in the next verse, [It was subjected] *“in hope”* for *“the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”* The Fall of Adam into sin and the subjection of creation to futility is not the final word.

Although Paul does not say so explicitly, is this not but another way of speaking of God's eternal decree executed in time through a covenant of works and a covenant of grace as first introduced in Romans 5:12-21? When Adam sins, he brings down upon himself the covenant curse upon all creation, something which God has decreed to come to pass and of which we read in Genesis 3:17-19: *“cursed is the ground because of you, through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce*

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<sup>14</sup> Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 321.

<sup>15</sup> Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 321.

<sup>16</sup> Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 321-322.

*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.*” When Adam disobeys God’s command during the probationary period in Eden, God subjects the creation to futility, that which is elsewhere spoken of as the curse. The equation of the one who subjected creation to frustration with the one who will ultimately redeem it, means that it was God’s will to subject creation to futility when Adam sinned and brought the human race under the threatened curse under the terms of the covenant of works.

And yet this subjection of creation to the curse is not creation’s final condition. Paul ends his discussion on a note of great hope and triumph, giving us the ultimate reason why we cannot compare our present sufferings with the coming glories of Jesus Christ. In Romans 6-8, we have seen Paul’s case that God will redeem all his people, and now, the apostle explicitly speaks of the redemption of creation 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.”* When the apostle uses the phrase, “creation itself,” he is contrasting what Cranfield calls “sub-human” creation (that is, the material world), with the redemption of God’s elect.<sup>17</sup> Creation refers to the material world (perhaps even to the animal world) and as Paul puts it, creation will not only be liberated from its present bondage to decay, it will also be brought into the same glorious freedom that God’s elect enjoy as a result of their redemption.

Therefore, it is in the midst of this present evil age of suffering, that Paul looks forward to the time when creation’s bondage to decay and the curse gives way to freedom when all things are made new. In the midst of human suffering and travail in this present evil age, while all we see is the continuous change and decay of creation associated with the curse, nevertheless, our hope is to be anchored in the fact that God will redeem creation even as he will redeem his people. As our own bodies are raised in the resurrection, so too, by virtue of this cosmic recreation, creation itself will be made new. This is what John means in Revelation 22:3, when we read that in the re-creation of all things, *“no longer will there be any curse.”* And this is what Peter is getting at, when in he describes the Day of the Lord and the renewal of the cosmos in 2 Peter 3:1-18. Such is a glorious freedom, for the curse is gone!

In verse 22, Paul takes up the theme of patience in light of the fact that we cannot compare present suffering with future glory. Emphasizing the present reality of the curse, says Paul, *“we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”* It is virtually self-evident that things are not as they should be. Creation is fallen. Speaking of creation in personified terms, Paul describes all of creation as “groaning,” or “sighing like that associated with throbs of pain.”<sup>18</sup> Creation is going through deep travail, very much like that of a woman in the pains of childbirth. Recall that birth pain imagery was used by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:8) to explain the apparent paradox associated with the simultaneous presence of both specific “signs of the end of the age,” and Jesus’ teaching regarding his sudden and unexpected coming in judgement. This too, makes sense in the already/not yet understanding of the future course of human history. As Calvin notes, the presence of “groaning” and “sighing” in pain is not associated with death *but* with life.<sup>19</sup> This groaning and sighing is not the “death rattle,” but the birth pains which are the precursor to life. Creation

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<sup>17</sup> Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I. 414.

<sup>18</sup> Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 323.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians, p. 174.

itself is growing in anticipation of liberation from the curse, not from a fear of destruction. Creation groans in anticipation of the coming future renewal, not because it is dying.

But creation does not groan and sigh in isolation. We groan right along with it! The curse is comprehensive. In verse 23, says Paul, *“not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”* In the midst of our sufferings, we groan even as the ground we walk upon groans under our feet. And as creation groans in anticipation of cosmic renewal, “stretching its neck forward” in anticipation of the day when it will be *liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God*, so too, we long for the great resurrection and the final redemption of our bodies at the end of the age. Once again, Paul expresses the Christian hope in distinctly eschatological terms. While we await the glories to come, we do not allow the chaos of fallen creation to discourage us, because, even now, in the midst of this present evil age, we have the “first fruits of the Spirit.”

What does Paul mean by this? Most likely, he is referring to the things he has just enumerated earlier in the chapter. Since we are in Christ we are also in the Spirit (Romans 8:10), we put to death the deeds of the flesh (8:13), we live by the Spirit (8:13), we are no longer slaves to fear (8:15), we are made sons and daughters of God (8:15), we are led by the Spirit (8:14), we can cry “Abba” father (8:15), the Spirit bears witness that we are Christ’s (8:16), we are full heirs of God and of Christ (8:17), and last, but most important given the context, we will share in Christ’s suffering so that we may share in his glory (8:17). In the midst of present travail, we have the “first fruits of the Spirit,” which is, in Paul’s thinking, the guarantee of future resurrection. How are these things connected?

It is vital to connect this to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:20, where he speaks of Christ’s resurrection as the “first fruits.” The bodily resurrection of our Lord is ultimately the guarantee of the resurrection of the believer. All believers are united to Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This is expressly stated in Ephesians 1:13-14, where the apostle writes, *“and you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.”* Jesus Christ’s resurrection constitutes the first fruits, and since the Holy Spirit indwells all those whom Christ will raise, Paul can use a kind of shorthand here, by saying the present possession of the Spirit is the “first fruits,” which guarantees not only “the redemption of our bodies,” [resurrection] and that “adoption as sons,” which is but another way of re-stating what was said in verse 19—*the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.*

To answer the dilemma first posed back in verse 18 about the difficulty of contrasting present suffering with future glory, Paul again turns to his eschatological framework in verses 24-25. Hope in the midst of present suffering comes from our eschatological expectations. We long for the blessings of the not yet, because we participate in them even now in the “already.” We have the first fruits, so we long for our adoption and for the resurrection. Paul puts it this way: *“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.”* The answer to the problem of enduring suffering while we await the coming of Christ, is to be found in Paul’s already/not yet distinction. We have present hope of future deliverance in the midst of our suffering, because we hope for a future resurrection. It was in this hope of a future bodily resurrection—based upon Christ’s resurrection—that we are saved. Though we do not yet see it, we have hope based upon what Jesus Christ has done for us in his life and in his death. This is why we can be patient. God will not only raise us from the dead, he will also renew creation itself!

Closely linked to the preceding, in verses 26-27, Paul now addresses yet another blessing associated with being indwelt by the Holy Spirit as we are united to Christ through faith and that is that the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

Because of the already/not yet tension, believers are to await the cosmic renewal with the same hope and expectation with which we await the resurrection of our bodies. Although creation has been subjected to futility, yet Christians have hope in the midst of present suffering, because the same Holy Spirit who is the first fruits of the resurrection is even with us when we pray.<sup>20</sup> Thus Paul links the intercession of the Spirit directly with the inward groaning of believers as they wait for personal and cosmic restoration, when he states, “*in the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.*” When believers groan inwardly, which is an expression of our weakness, we are not left on their own, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, specifically our weaknesses in prayer.<sup>21</sup> This is Paul’s word of hope in the midst of suffering. The Holy Spirit helps us in the midst of our “groaning.” Says Paul: “*We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.*”

Our weakness is evident in our ignorance, especially as this is connected to prayer. As we groan inwardly awaiting the redemption of our bodies and the renewal of the cosmos, our weakness is manifest in the fact that we do not even know what to pray for, much less how to pray at all. That “*we do not know what we ought to pray*” is often taken to mean that we do not know how to pray. That is true, but it does not seem to be what Paul is saying. He is rather referring to the words we use, and perhaps the objects for which we pray. . . . The two go together. It is not only that we do not pray very well; it is also the case that, while we often think we know what we need, we are not always good judges of that either.”<sup>22</sup> Yet, we probably should not drive the wedge between not knowing “how” and “what” to pray for too widely. When considering the sense of not knowing “how” and “what” to pray for, Paul is saying

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<sup>20</sup> “Believers ought not to be unduly perturbed by the difficulties of life. Paul has pointed out the frustrations and futility inherent in this life are not proof against the Christian hope. He now goes on to add to that. Just as the Spirit is with us as the first fruits while we await the consummation (v. 23), so he is with us in the difficult business of prayer. It is easy to become discouraged in our praying, for we are conscious that we do it so badly. But here, too, we are not left to our own devices. The Spirit intercedes for us” (Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 326).

<sup>21</sup> According to Morris: “believers are helped in their earthly troubles (in which they ‘grown inwardly’, v. 23). Likewise they are helped in their weakness, specifically in their weakness in prayer. Perhaps we should see a reference also to the hope of which Paul has just been speaking. The Spirit’s help preserves and enlarges the hope in which we live. The Spirit’s help preserves and enlarges the hope in which we live. The Spirit *helps us*, says Paul, using a most uncommon verb [a double compound stressing God’s help]...We should notice further that Paul does not say that the Spirit removes our weakness; it is still there, and we live our whole life in conditions of weakness. What the Spirit does is to help; he give us the aid we need to see us through. Weakness is not sin....Paul is simply referring to the fact that we who are Christians are not the spiritual giants we would like to be....We are weak, and left to ourselves we will always be in trouble” (Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 326).

<sup>22</sup> Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 328-329.

that we do not know how to pray according to God's will (cf. v. 27), of which we are too often ignorant.<sup>23</sup> But the word of hope is that even though we are weak and ignorant, the Spirit graciously helps us pray.<sup>24</sup>

Let us never forget that it is in our weakness that God's power is manifest. It is the same blessed Holy Spirit who indwells us, leads us, and bears witness to us that we are Christ's who helps us to pray. As the Spirit unites us to Christ, so too, we are in constant union with the risen and ascended Christ through the Spirit's intercession. But what does Paul mean when he says the Spirit intercedes for us? There is a long history of the Christian church of interpreting this text along the lines of *glossolalia* [tongues], in which the Spirit is seen to help the struggling believer utter forth some form of ecstatic praise, which he or she cannot put into words. The obvious weakness with this interpretation is that Paul's grammatical construction rules this out. For one thing, these groanings, which words cannot express, are not the groanings of a believer in prayer, but are instead, the groanings of the Holy Spirit—his groanings are imperceptible to us, his words are not spoken, since as Paul will say in verse 27, the Spirit knows the will of God. "The Spirit's groanings are not spoken, because they do not need to be, since God knows the Spirit's intention without its being expressed."<sup>25</sup> According to Doug Moo, "this means, of course, that 'groans' of creation and the 'groans' of Christians 'in' themselves, has prepared us for such a meaning. I take it that Paul is saying, then, that our failure to know God's will and consequent inability to petition God specifically and assuredly is met by God's Spirit, who himself expresses to God those intercessory petitions that perfectly match the will of God. When we do not know what to pray for—yes, even when we pray for things that are not best for us—we need not despair, for we can depend on the Spirit's ministry of perfect intercession 'on our behalf.'"<sup>26</sup> And this should give us all hope!

This leads to Paul's next point, hinted at above: "*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.*" The fact that the one who searches our heart is not named, is not a problem. This can only be God as is expressly stated in

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<sup>23</sup> "We take Paul's meaning here to be that all praying Christian men . . . remains under the sign of this not-knowing, or real ignorance, weakness and poverty, and that even in their prayers they live only by God's justification of sinners. It would indeed be strange if the continuing sinfulness of Christians (cf. 7:14-25) were altogether without effect in the matter of their knowledge of what to pray" (Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I. 422).

<sup>24</sup> Even the apostle Paul himself struggled with this. As Morris reminds us, "Paul tells us that three times he asked God to take away his 'thorn in the flesh,' only to be told that God's strength 'is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 12:7-9). Or we might think of Moses' prayer to enter the promised land (Deut. 3:25-26), or Jeremiah's for the Jews (Jer. 15:1). So difficult is it to know what it is best to pray for that some of the heathen philosophers advised their followers not to pray at all! Our horizon is always limited, and we do not know what is best" (Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 327).

<sup>25</sup> Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I. 423. Moo adds a second point which our charismatic friends also fail to consider. "The word *alaletois* probably means 'unspoken' rather than 'ineffable' [to great for description in words]; and this makes it almost impossible to identify the 'groans' with glossolalia; for tongues, of course, are verbalized if not understandable....It is preferable to understand these 'groans' as the Spirit's own 'language of prayer,' a ministry of intercession which takes place in our hearts (cf. v. 27) in a manner imperceptible to us" (Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 525).

<sup>26</sup> Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 525.

several texts: Psalm 7:9— “*O righteous God, who searches minds and hearts;*” Proverbs 17:3— “*but the LORD tests the heart*”; Acts 1:24— “*Then they prayed, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart’*”; 1 Thessalonians 2:4— “*On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.*” God knows the mind of the Spirit. As one writer points out, “since God knows the hearts he certainly knows what the Spirit is doing in those hearts.” The idea is, that if God knows the minds of men, he certain knows the mind of the Holy Spirit. For the mind of God is the mind of the Holy Spirit! In addition to this, “God knows the Holy Spirit’s mind and thus takes full account the Spirit’s intercession for saints. Perhaps we should say that as God searches the hearts he finds the ‘unutterable groanings’ which are the intercession of the Spirit. He knows the Spirit’s mind, and the implication is that he answers prayers so offered.”<sup>27</sup>

The reason as to why the Holy Spirit’s intercession is effectual is that his intercession is in accordance with the will of God. This cannot be said of us. For in our weakness and frailty, we often pray in ignorance and with sinful and short-sighted motives. We pray for things we think are best, but which are not. Thus we are to take heart knowing that God’s Spirit helps us pray, by interceding for us in such a way, that God’s will is done, even if and when we don’t know and understand God’s will as we should.

Therefore, even in the midst of this present evil age, as we suffer the effects of fallen human nature, and while all creation groans under our feet, let us never lose hope. For even as our Jesus Christ was raised from the dead in triumph, so too we will be raised. And on the day when we are raised, all of creation will be redeemed and liberated from decay. Although while must wait and place our hope in God’s promise, and while we crane our necks forward along with the cosmos in anticipation of the coming of the Lord, we are not left on our own. The blessed Holy Spirit who indwells all those who trust in Christ, is with us in our sufferings, helping us when we pray. While we groan in weakness and ignorance, his groanings are always in accordance with the will of God. Thus in the midst of our present sufferings, Paul points us ahead to a day of glorious freedom, when all things are made new, when the sons and daughters of God are at long last revealed and when the curse is removed from creation. And what glorious freedom it will be. Maranatha, come quickly Lord Jesus!

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<sup>27</sup> Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 329.