

Exceeding Expectations

Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 | Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26 | Romans 8:18-25 | Matthew 6:25-34

ROMANS 8:18-25

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

INTRODUCTION

I'm quite fond of Alexander Pope, the British poet, not just because he managed to make philosophy and ethics rhyme beautifully, and not just because he made elegant translations of the Homeric epics, but because he was a clever satirist. I wonder, though, if his sharp wit didn't come from a place of profound pain. Born in 1688, he suffered from Pott disease by the age 12—a form of tuberculosis that mangled his spine, stunted his growth, and left him hunchbacked. The disease also caused respiratory problems, fevers, and severe pain throughout his life. Dying shortly after his 56th birthday, Pope spent most of his life as a Roman Catholic outcast from a largely Protestant London, and never married. A life full of challenges and undoubtedly disappointments, it is no wonder he quipped, in a 1725 letter to William Fortescue: "Blessed is the man who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed."¹ You can hear the self-protection in it. 'Don't expect anything good, and you will not be dissatisfied when nothing good happens.' What a sad way to live, though understandable when the world seems so plagued by disappointment, decay, destruction, and death. Yet, it begs the question. What about you and me? What do we expect? What do we anticipate in this life? Have we set our sights so low as to not be disappointed? Well, it seems to me, the Apostle Paul had a rather different approach than Alexander Pope when he composed his letter to the Romans. And as we take a look at our passage from the eighth chapter, Paul wants us to see this simple truth: *Despite our futile world, we were saved for hope.* So set your expectations high. *Despite our futile world, we were saved for magnificent, glorious, God-given hope.* Let's take a look at how Paul unpacks this idea.

THE CURSE OF CREATION (VV. 18-22)

Paul begins with a statement about suffering and picture of creation. But in order to make sense of this, we will need to consider the context. First, the preceding context is very important. If you had been reading Paul's letter to this point, you would have seen him describe, in the last chapter, the frustration of being born into a world of sin, that is rebellion against God and evil, constantly desiring to do good, but always being thwarted by the sinful nature. "For I do not do

¹ Alexander Pope, "Letter to William Fortescue," with John Gay, September 23, 1725. Alexander Pope, *The Works of Alexander Pope* (Volume IX; London: C. and J. Rivington, et al., 1824), 367. See also Alexander Pope, "Letter to John Gay," October 16, 1727.

the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do," he writes.² As he turns to chapter 8, however, he contrasts this vexing existence of being enslaved to sin, with life in the faith. *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."*³ That is, Christ Jesus died on the cross to defeat sin, and rose again, defeating death—the inevitable consequence of sin. And in so doing, he set his people free from sin and death, that they may live in the peace and freedom of the Holy Spirit. It is as though God's people, those who believe in Christ Jesus, have been adopted into his family and gain all the blessings thereof. This chapter, up to our passage, is one of the clearest and most triumphant articulations of what it means to be a Christian!

And then, that's where get to our passage, which begins with Paul considering the *"sufferings of the present time."*⁴ There is an acute tension introduced with this verse. If we who believe in Christ Jesus have already been saved and set free to live in the Spirit, why isn't this world better? Why do we still live in this fallen world? Why are there still sufferings in this present time? And what are we to do with this contradictory reality? This is where Paul turns, secondly, to the example of Creation. When sin entered into the world through the rebellion of Adam and Eve, all the way back in Genesis 3, so disappointment, decay, destruction, and death entered into the world. Just as the serpent, the woman, and the man were all judged for their sin, so Creation itself was also condemned. *"Cursed is the ground because of you,"* God said to Adam.⁵ And from that moment on, all have sinned and experienced the effect of sin. There is no person who is not depraved. There is no part of Creation that will not decay. And there is no living being that will not die. This is the Creation picture Paul evokes as he speaks of *"the sufferings of this present time"* and the Creation that *"waits with eager longing"* or how *"creation was subjected to futility"* and is under *"bondage to decay."*⁶ That word *futility*, likewise, has a rich biblical context. This is the word repeated throughout Ecclesiastes: *"Vanity of vanities... everything is meaningless..."*⁷ Paul brings together the powerful image of God's creation and the ultimate picture of futility to show that, for a time, we remain in this fallen world.

And in fact, he layers on yet another image, also probably referencing the curses against Eve in Genesis 3: the pain of childbearing.⁸ In terms of this passage, the metaphor is apt. The world that you and I live in is in pain. And this is substantial, messy, unrelenting pain. We see it all around us. But just as this pain comes to an end in the happy event of having a child, so the groaning of Creation will come to an end. It will be set free. There is a glory beyond the present pain that far surpasses the disappointment, decay, destruction, and death of the present age. And it is to that glorious reality that Paul points us.

THE HOPE OF HUMANITY (VV. 23-25)

And indeed, this is where Paul then brings the illustration, the metaphor, to us. Just as Creation is subjected to futility in this time, but anticipates a glory to come, so do God's people. We who have the Holy Spirit, who have been secured in salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, we also groan inwardly in the suffering of this present age. But we also look forward to the glory to

² Rom 7:19.

³ Rom 8:1.

⁴ Rom 8:18.

⁵ Gen 3:17.

⁶ Rom 8:18-21.

⁷ Ecc 1:2 (*vanity* and *meaningless* translate the same word, the NRSV opting for the first, the NIV opting for the second).

⁸ Gen 3:16.

come. And the means of our waiting is *hope*. Five times in these last three verses, Paul mentions *hope*. Back when we were saved at the cross, it was not so that our problems would be immediately solved. But rather, we were saved in hope. It is the manner in which we were saved. It is the existence to which we were saved. It is the necessary implication because we were saved. And it was always going to be that way: suffering in the present age, the hope of eternal glory in the age to come.

We were saved for hope. Despite this futile world and the decay and destruction of Creation, the death we all face, we were, from the beginning, set apart for hope. And we hope for the glory of redemption, the restoration of our bodies, the results of life in the Spirit. The logic here is unmistakable. As bad as this world is, as frustrating, so much more glorious will the New Creation be. And with all due respect to Alexander Pope, to lower expectations so that we might not be disappointed is to miss the point entirely. We were saved for hope, not blessed ignorance, not cautious optimism, not mild indifference, and certainly not any form of pessimism. We need not despair the present sufferings, nor do we need to fear what is beyond this miserable life. *"For in hope we were saved,"* Paul writes.⁹ Hope. As the Psalmist said: *"Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning."*¹⁰ And this hope is secured by the gospel itself. We were saved for hope. As certain as we are that Christ Jesus died for our sins and was raised for our life, so we may hope that the present sufferings of this world will be but a distant shadow compared to the glory of eternity in front of us.

And so, what are we to do with that? Well, three thoughts:

Firstly, if you truly do not have hope because you do not know that Jesus Christ secured your salvation through his death and resurrection, now is the time to consider it. We come to him in faith. I would be happy to speak with you. I know Patrick would as well. But you do not need to live in hopelessness anymore. Salvation and a hope beyond measure is available to you through faith in Jesus Christ.

Secondly, for those who do believe, but who still live in despair of a world plagued by the decay of our environment, the destruction of our bodies, the decline of our minds, the disappointment of a world constantly at war, the dwindling of natural and economic resources, and the seeming omnipresence of disease, cling to your hope. Dear brothers and sisters, I have to admit that this does not come naturally to me. Most of you who know me well would probably not describe me as an optimist. I'm someone who does not really appear to like most people or things. But the truth is, I am hopeful for the age to come, for eternity. And it is because of passages like this and the certainty I have of the gospel, that I can worry less about the muck and mess of this life. For example, I had a bad week a couple weeks ago. I did not do well in an aspect of my work. Yet, I remembered after a few days, after some hard hours of prayer, that the greatest critique against me has already been both lodged and addressed in the cross of Jesus Christ. I do not need to be brought down by this world, including my own sin. And while we all live through hard times and difficult circumstances, the thing in which we hope so far outmatches the sufferings of this present life, we can confidently and optimistically continue clinging to hope in our Lord.

⁹ Rom 8:24.

¹⁰ Psa 30:5.

Thirdly, we can continue to work toward that glorious future. Paul calls it 'waiting with patience' in the last verse of our passage.¹¹ But do not think, for a minute, he means that as passively as it sounds. Just a few verses later, Paul will talk about those who are among God's people are to be "*conformed to the image of his Son.*"¹² This means our hope is not an idle hope, but an active hope, a hope that protects our world, that seeks a beauty that befits our God, that challenges others to embrace his glorious name, and that promotes virtue (that is, the fruit of the Spirit that Paul mentions here).¹³ There is much to be done while we wait patiently. So let us rest secured in our salvation, give ourselves to a life that conforms to the image of our Saviour, and retain our hope in the life of the world to come.

CONCLUSION

Despite our futile world, we were saved for hope. So set your expectations high. Despite our futile world, we were saved for magnificent, glorious, God-given hope, a hope built on the surest of foundations. As the hymn from Edward Mote goes:

My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
but wholly lean on Jesus' name.

On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
all other ground is sinking sand,
all other ground is sinking sand.¹⁴

Let me pray. *Heavenly Father, we look to your Son, who died and rose again that we might live. Strengthen us through our difficulties that we might rest assured in the hope of your glory. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹¹ Rom 8:25.

¹² Rom 8:29.

¹³ For more on the fruit of the Spirit, see Gal 5:22-23.

¹⁴ Edward Mote, "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less," 1834.