

Malcolm's Monday Musings: 30 October 2023

Autumn leaves and groaning for glory.

SCRIPTURE

We are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Romans 8. 16b-23 (*English Standard Version*)

MEDITATION

Introduction

We are now well on the way through this autumn and I suspect that many of us have, at times, both (i) seen this year's swirling leaves stirred by the wind and (ii) stopped to admire the autumn colours. But I have a suspicion that not a few of us may have been deaf to the spiritual message proclaimed by those leaves and those colours.

The coming glory

In the scripture passage above, Paul speaks of the believer as being a joint-heir with Christ and of his or her being glorified together with Him.

For his part, the apostle says, he reckoned that such glory was worth, not only *waiting* for but also, if necessary, *suffering* for, because, in his eyes, the glory which awaits the believer is out of all proportion to all of his or her present-day trials. That coming glory, he explains, will be so magnificent ... so momentous ... so far-reaching in its effects that it will embrace the blessing and transformation of the entire created universe.

Poetic imagery

Indeed, in bold poetic language, Paul describes the whole of creation, vividly personified, as standing on tip-toe as it waits to witness and to participate in that glory.¹

If we find strange the attribution of human feelings and emotions to the material creation around, we have only to remind ourselves of the many times that the same poetic strains are heard in the Old Testament. By way of example only,² we might recall:

(i) the happy expectation of the psalmist that the very *'trees of the forest' shall 'sing for joy'* when 'the Lord ... comes ... to judge the world in righteousness',³ and

(ii) the description given by the prophet Isaiah of, on the one hand, the time when the *'gates' of Zion 'shall lament and mourn'*,⁴ and, on the other hand, the time when *'the mountains and the hills ... shall break forth into song and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands'*.⁵

Creation's yearning

Paul speaks of creation's 'eager longing', an expression which translates a word that conveys the idea of 'watching with outstretched head'.⁶ That is, the apostle graphically pictures the

whole of creation as a great crowd of spectators straining forward, with necks craned over the barriers, to catch a glimpse of some great pageant.⁷

And that is just how, he says, the creation eagerly awaits the time of our 'revelation'—for the time, that is, when our privileged relationship as the sons of God⁸ will be 'unveiled' and publicly displayed.⁹ For, in the words of Paul elsewhere, 'when Christ who is your life shall appear ('be manifested'), you also shall appear ('be manifested') with Him in glory'.¹⁰

But why should the whole of creation show such keen interest in our future prospects? 'Ah', Paul says, in effect, 'because it has *its own vested interest* in our day of glory, for it is that day which will trigger the universal transformation and renovation of the whole creation'.¹¹

Nature, as it were, grows impatient to see the royal guests arrive because it knows that, when they arrive, it will get to put on its new clothes ... and what magnificent clothes they will be!

The effect of man's fall

The apostle next explains the background to creation's earnest expectation. Through no fault of its own (rather, through the fault of man and as part of God's grim judgement on him: 'Cursed is the ground because of you'¹²), 'the whole creation' was subjected to corruption, decay and 'futility'—constantly failing to achieve its proper purpose and goal,¹³ and thereby destined to suffer continual frustration and disappointment.¹⁴

But, Paul adds, such subjection on the part of creation is only temporary and is accompanied by the bright prospect¹⁵ that one day it will be freed from its slavery to corruption and will come to share in the glorious freedom and blessing¹⁶ of God's children.¹⁷

The seasonal circle of futility

In the present, both plant and animal kingdoms produce their offspring, which in turn themselves produce offspring. But, without fail and without exception, each generation is eventually cut off by death. The whole natural world is fading and transient and the changing seasons provide you and me with an unmistakable example of this. Every spring, nature (so to speak) exerts itself and thrusts forth new life—lush and splendid—as if to proclaim, 'Look at me. This time I really have got the better of death and decay. Corruption will have its work cut out destroying all this'.

But what happens, pray? In one sense, all nature's spring effort is wasted, for, right on cue, autumn arrives and all of nature's finery dies away.¹⁸ It is happening at this moment, as it does every year.¹⁹ Yes, it is true that the autumn colours have a beauty all their own but, at the same time, they remind us forcibly that (on account of man's fall²⁰) the present creation is characterised by one long struggle between life and death—by one gigantic circle of futility and frustration.

Creation to be set free

Ah, Paul says, but not for ever ... another day, a better day, a blissful day, is coming. For the whole of the physical creation is destined to share in our indescribable glory, liberty and physical redemption.²¹ Then it will be liberated from its present bondage to frailty, corruption and decay and will fulfil God's great purpose for it. Nathan Fellingham summed up this truth well in a song he wrote in 2001: 'There is a day that all creation's waiting for; a day of freedom and liberation for the earth ...'.²²

Birth pangs

It is as if, then, Paul lays his ear to the ground and hears the creation sighing and groaning in agony.²³ All the failure and the futility in the world around (every autumn leaf and colour, if you like) speaks to him of creation's yearning for something better.

He likens it to a woman's cries in pain preceding the birth of her child—and he knew that where there is travail there will be a birth!²⁴ That is, creation's present birth pangs²⁵ point to creation's coming deliverance, when the creation will no longer be (i) subject to futility,²⁶ (ii) enslaved to corruption,²⁷ or (iii) confined in labour.²⁸

Groaning for glory

And we are linked to the present groaning creation in that we, too, groan for glory.²⁹ Indeed, as an added inducement, we have 'the firstfruits of the Spirit'. 'Our very privileges make us

long for something more'³⁰ ... our present enjoyment of the indwelling Spirit and of all the spiritual blessings which He bestows are to us the guarantee, foretaste and first instalment³¹ of spectacular vistas of transcendent glory which lie far beyond the present world.³²

And that which we now enjoy of the presence of the Holy Spirit and His blessings serves to whet our appetite for the glorious day of consummation when we shall experience the full manifestation of our adoption as sons³³ and when our present bodies shall be 'redeemed'.³⁴ For we know that, in common with the wider creation, we are to undergo a physical transformation ... that, when the Saviour comes from heaven, He will free our bodies from their humiliating weakness and mortality and will conform them to His own 'body of glory, according to the working by which He is able even to subject all things to Himself'.³⁵ All our sighs will then be turned to songs!³⁶

Listen to the leaves

So, when today, you kick (or, as I must at my age, 'pick') your way through the fallen leaves, listen for the sermon which they are preaching; namely, that the creation itself has a glorious future in store for it ... and how much more do we.

With an eye to current world events, don't allow yourself to be overwhelmed and discouraged on account of the widespread evil, violence and warfare. Rather, join creation around and look forward 'with eager longing' to the day when the Lord Jesus will establish His kingdom of peace and justice on earth,³⁷ when He will 'make wars to cease to the end of the earth' and when He will put an end to all weapons of death and destruction.³⁸

Notes

¹ J. B. Phillips paraphrases Rom. 8. 19 as follows, 'The whole creation *stands on tiptoe* to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own', *The New Testament in Modern English*, page 324.

² Compare also Psa. 98. 8; Isa. 35. 1.

³ Psa. 96. 12-13.

⁴ Isa. 3. 26.

⁵ Isa. 55. 12.

⁶ The Greek word is *ἀποκαταδοκία*, of which Mr Vine writes, 'primarily "a watching with outstretched head" (*apo*, "from", *kara*, "the head", and *dokeo*, "to look, to watch"), signifies "strained expectancy, eager longing", the stretching forth of the head indicating an "expectation" of something from a certain place', W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, article 'Expect, Expectation', B. 1.

⁷ 'The word suggests the picture of a person craning his or her neck to see what is coming', D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans: The New International Commentary of the New Testament*, page 513.

⁸ Paul noted earlier that we already enjoy this relationship: 'you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"' Rom. 8. 15.

⁹ The Greek word is *ἀποκάλυψις*, signifying an uncovering, an unveiling. We might say that, in one sense, 'the sons of God' are currently in disguise; cf. '*what we will be has not yet appeared*'; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him', 1 John 3. 2.

'When the Lord returns in manifested glory, the saints will be in association with Him and thus will be revealed to the creation', W. E. Vine, *Romans*, Page 123.

'As Christ was (Rom. 1. 4), so the saints will be, declared to be the sons of God with power, by the resurrection from the dead', Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, comment on Rom. 8. 23-25.

¹⁰ Col. 3. 4.

¹¹ 'Its deliverance from its actual misery hinges on them and their revelation', William Kelly, *Notes on the Epistle of Paul, the Apostle, to the Romans*, Part 2, comment on Rom. 8. 19.

'This revealing of the sons of God will be the signal for the great transformation', W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans: The International Critical Commentary*, page 207.

¹² Gen. 3. 17. Creation was not party to man's failure and fall but it shared his ruin and was dragged down with him.

'In spite of this curse, however, much of the beauty, grandeur, and benefits of the natural world remains. Although they all deteriorate, flowers are still beautiful, mountains are still grand, forests are still magnificent, the heavenly bodies are still majestic, food still brings nourishment and is a pleasure to eat, and water still brings refreshment and sustains life.

'Despite the terrible curse that He inflicted on the earth, God's majesty and gracious provision for mankind is still evident wherever one looks. It is for that reason that no person has an excuse for not believing in God: "Since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse" (Rom. 1. 20)', J. F. MacArthur Jr, *Romans: New Testament Commentary*, comment on Rom. 8. 19-22.

¹³ The Greek word translated 'futility' is *ματαιότης* ... 'The idea is that of looking for what one does not find—hence of futility, frustration, disappointment', James Denney, *St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, The Expositor's Greek Testament: Volume II, page 649.

'The futility of an object which does not function as it was designed to do (like an expensive satellite which has malfunctioned and now spins uselessly in space)', J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16: Word Biblical Commentary*, comment on Rom. 8. 20.

¹⁴ 'Nature is prevented from putting forth its powers, from manifesting its real grandeur, and from attaining its original destiny. All that nature brings forth is doomed to die ... Instead of sustained growth, its beauty and strength fade away. The powers of the material creation are bound in fetters of decay ... The storm which wreaks destruction and the roar of the hungry lion tell that the original purpose of the Creator has been perverted, and that nature is not what He designed it to be', J. A. Beet, '*Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*', page 236.

¹⁵ 'In hope', Rom. 8. 20. (It is likely that this expression properly opens verse 21; see RV, JND, ESV.)

'Hope describes the happy anticipation of good. The hope of the creation, like that of the believer, contains no element of uncertainty fraught with the possibility of disappointment. It is sure of fulfilment. It has to do with what is yet unseen', W. E. Vine, *ibid.*, page 124.

¹⁶ 'The regeneration when the Son of man shall sit down upon His throne of glory', Matt. 19. 28; 'The times of restoration of all things', Acts 3. 21.

¹⁷ Compare 'sons of God', Rom. 8. 19, with '*children of God*', Rom. 8. 21. Similarly in the previous section, 'all who are led by the Spirit of God are *sons of God*', Rom. 8. 14, with 'the Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are *children of God* and if *children*, then heirs', Rom. 8. 16-17.

¹⁸ 'Nature every year, as it were, makes an effort to renew itself, to produce something permanent; it has come out of the death and the darkness of all that is so true of the Winter. In the Spring it seems to be trying to produce a perfect creation, to be going through some kind of birth-pangs year by year.

'But unfortunately, it does not succeed, for Spring leads only to Summer, whereas Summer leads to Autumn, and Autumn to Winter. Poor old nature tries every year to defeat the "vanity," the principle of death and decay and disintegration that is in it. But it cannot do so. It fails every time. It still goes on trying, as if it feels things should be different and better; but it never succeeds. So it goes on "groaning and travailing in pain together until now". It has been doing so for a very long time but nature still repeats the effort annually', D. M. Lloyd-Jones, '*The Final Perseverance of the Saints: An Exposition of Romans 8. 17-39*', pages 59-60.

¹⁹ Cf. 'cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease', Gen. 8. 22.

²⁰ 'This fruitless effort was not nature's original destiny, but was a result of man's sin', J. A. Beet, *loc. cit.*

²¹ 'The freedom is to consist in, or at least to result from a share in, the glory of the children of God', J. P. Lange, '*Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical*', comment on Rom. 8. 21.

²² 'This is the fifth and last freedom mentioned in these three chapters (Romans 6-8). It is the grand consummation. There is (i) the freedom from the doom or penalty of sin by death, (Rom. 6. 7); (ii) freedom from the dominion or power of sin by devotion to the Lord (Rom. 6. 18, 22); (iii) freedom from the law by death (Rom. 7. 4); (iv) freedom from the law of sin and death by the law of the Spirit of life (Rom. 8. 2); and (v) the freedom of the glory (Rom. 8. 21)', J. M. Davies, '*Romans: The Christian's Statue of Liberty*', comments on Rom. 8. 21.

²³ Rom. 8. 22.

'When God finished His creation, it was a *good* creation (Gen. 1. 31), but today it is a *groaning* creation ... Today's *groaning bondage* will be exchanged for tomorrow's *glorious liberty*', Warren Wiersbe, '*Be Right*', page 92.

²⁴ 'Paul sees not only an expression of pain, but of meaningful pain like the pain of childbirth', Leon Morris, '*The Epistle to the Romans: Pillar New Testament Commentary*', comment on Rom. 8. 22.

²⁵ 'The metaphor of birth pains was a natural one to seize on for description of a period of turmoil and anguish likely to end in a new order of things', J. D. G. Dunn, *ibid.*, comment on Rom. 8. 22.

'These are birth-pangs, not death-pangs (Acts 2. 24)', F. E. Stallan, '*Romans: What the Bible Teaches*', page 191.

²⁶ Rom. 8. 20.

²⁷ Rom. 8. 21.

²⁸ Rom. 8. 22.

²⁹ Rom. 8. 23. Compare, 'in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling ... while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened--not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed', 2 Cor. 5. 2-4.

'The longing of creation is expressed in outward signs ... the longing of the believer is inward', E. H. Gifford, *'The Epistle of St Paul to the Romans'*, page 157.

The central section of Romans 8 provides us with three distinct cases of 'groaning':

(i) Creation: 'the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now', Rom. 8. 22;

(ii) Believers: 'we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly', Rom. 8. 23;

(iii) The Holy Spirit: 'the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words', Rom. 8. 26.

³⁰ W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *'ibid.'*, page 209.

³¹ 'The firstfruits of the Spirit', Rom. 8. 23; 'the earnest of the Spirit', 2 Cor. 1. 22; cf. Eph. 1. 14.

'The indwelling of the Spirit here and now is the "first fruits" (*ἀπαρχή*), i.e. the "first instalment" or "initial down-payment" of the eternal heritage of glory that awaits believers', F. F. Bruce, *'Romans; Tyndale New Testament Commentary'*, page 173.

For an illustration of 'the earnest of the Spirit, compare the grapes of Eshcol, Numb. 13. 23; 'We, having received such clusters in this wilderness, cannot but long for the full vintage in the heavenly Canaan', Matthew Henry, *loc. cit.*.

³² As I have said on a previous occasion (pages 6-7 of the 'Musings' dated 1 August 2022), I have always found the concluding lines of C. S. Lewis's, *'The Last Battle: The Chronicles of Narnia'*, very moving:

"There was a real railway accident", said Aslan softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadowlands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning".

'And as He spoke, He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story.

'All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before'.

³³ 'Our "adoption" is come already, Rom. 8. 15, so that we do not wait for it, but for the full manifestation of it, in our bodies being rescued from the bondage of corruption and sin', H. Alford, *'The Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary'*, Volume II, page 370.

'There is a sense in which believers are now the sons of God and partakers of adoption. But the full enjoyment of their blessedness as the children of God, the time when they shall be recognized as sons, and enter upon their inheritance as such, is still future', Charles Hodge, *'Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans'*, page 434.

'What we have now is real, but it is not the whole ... and our foretaste leads us to look forward with eager longing to the completion of what God has already begun in us', Leon Morris, *ibid.*, comment on Rom. 8. 23.

³⁴ Cf. 'the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed unto (or, 'for') for the day of redemption', Eph. 4. 30.

'The body is an integral part of us; not till it is rescued will our redemption be complete', J. A. Beet, *ibid.*, page 238.

"The redemption of the body" ... it shall then be rescued from the power of death and the grave, and the bondage of corruption', Matthew Henry, *loc. cit.*.

³⁵ Phil. 3. 20-21.

³⁶ 'We should also note that creation, even though it is the subject of these verses, does not constitute the centre stage of Paul's vision. What creation longs for and waits for is the unveiling of the children of God. The focus is not finally on the transformation of the created world, although that is included, but the future redemption that awaits God's children. Paul encourages believers to endure temporary sufferings ... the redemption they await is so stupendous that it will involve the entire created order ... Believers should be full of hope because the sufferings of this age are part and parcel of a fallen creation, and the glory of the age to come inevitably includes a renewed creation', T. R. Schreiner, *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, comment on Rom. 8. 22.

³⁷ See, for example, Isa. 11. 4-10; 32. 1; Psa. 45. 6-7; Jer. 23. 5; 33. 15.

³⁸ Psa. 46. 9; Isa. 2. 4; 60. 18; Micah 4. 3-4.