

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOING ON WITH THE WORLD?
ROMANS 8:19-21

It's quite a world in which we live, isn't it? Everywhere you look, there seem to be problems.

I'm not talking about the problems from people who sin against us, or the problems that come from corrupt and ungodly legislation or judicial decisions. I'm not even talking about the problems that come from us as we sin and suffer the consequences of our own sins.

As we have seen continually in the book of Romans, when Adam sinned, he took all of mankind with him into sin (5:12). Operating as our federal head, when he sinned, it led to the condemnation of all men. All men became sinners and all men also sinned. We sin because we are sinners (by nature) and we are sinners (in identity) because we sin.

But the sin of Adam also had further implications beyond just mankind. It had an impact on creation; the physical world also was subjected to the curse that came through Adam's sin.

So I'm talking about the fallenness of the world — how creation itself doesn't work the right way. I'm talking about what one commentator said — “our heavenly destiny does not blot out the fact of our earthly existence and that the earthly existence is in a troubled world. There is pain and misery in this world, and they are not confined to human existence.” [Morris, *Romans*, 318-19.]

You know what this is like:

- ✓ You purchase flowers on Friday for your wife and put the preservative in the water and by Monday morning there are petals on the table and by Tuesday the flowers don't smell good and by Wednesday they are in the compost pile.
- ✓ You put down a weed barrier in your garden and plant your tomatoes and herbs and then you fertilize and wonder why the weeds seem to respond better to the fertilizer than your plants.
- ✓ We live in a world where there are repair shops — HVAC repairmen and plumbers and electricians and auto mechanics collision repair shops and phone and computer repair shops and emergency medical rooms and hospitals and pharmacies and hardware stores. And even when things are fixed it's always only temporary — they just break again.

Do you ever wonder, “What's wrong with this world? Why do so many things go so wrong?” It's because when Adam sinned, the world also was subjected to the condemnation that came to mankind, so that before Genesis 3 and Adam's sin, perfect people lived in a perfect world, but after Genesis 3, fallen people live in a fallen world. We sin in a world that doesn't work properly, invariably making certain aspects of creation to function even less well.

Is there any hope? Will this ever change? Will God ever interject Himself into our world to fix it?

In Romans 8, Paul reminds us of the work of the Spirit to assure us of our salvation. Part of that reminder is that if we are mortifying sin by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:13), it reveals that we are adopted sons of God (vv. 14-17). And if we are sons of God, then we have an inheritance so that even though we suffer in this world for a brief time, those sufferings are not remotely comparable to the revelation of our coming glorification (v. 18). If only we had eyes to see how extensive and grand this redemption is that will take us into Glory and make us completely glorious, then we would gladly suffer well.

Paul reminds us in vv. 19-30 of various kinds of groanings and struggles in anticipation of glory — the groanings of the world, the groanings of believers, and the groanings of the Spirit on our behalf. But these groanings (which really are manifestations of longings and desires) are fulfilled by God in the gospel of redemption. God satisfies the longings and desires the world and we have.

As he considers the longings of the world (vv. 19-21) the apostle hopefully says,

THE GREATNESS OF OUR REDEMPTION IS SEEN IN THE GREATNESS OF CREATION'S REDEMPTION.

How should we think about this world in which we live?

1. The **FUTILITY** of the World (vv. 19-20a)
2. The **HOPE** for the World (vv. 20b-20a)
3. The Hope for the **BELIEVER** in the World (v. 21b)

1. The FUTILITY of the World (vv. 19-20a)

- Verse 18 tells us that there is a glory that is to be revealed — what we will be in Heaven when we receive the complete inheritance as God's adopted sons. But we haven't received that revelation yet. So there is a longing for that revelation, which Paul indicates with three *groanings* — the groaning of creation (vv. 19-21), the groaning of God's people (vv. 22-25) and the groaning of the Spirit (vv. 26-27).
- In these opening verses (vv. 19-21), Paul is speaking of the groaning of creation for final redemption.
- Paul says that creation has an *anxious longing* for this revelation.
 - ✓ This *anxious longing* is an expectant watching. It was used of someone craning his neck to see something that is anticipated or coming — “is it here yet?” The one that is longing is standing on his tiptoes with outstretched neck in order to get the best view of what's coming.
 - ✓ And Paul doubles the idea when he says that it also *waits eagerly*. Interestingly, the other 6x that word is used in the NT it refers to the return of Christ (1 Cor. 1:7; Gal. 5:5; Phil. 3:20; Heb. 9:28). It's fitting that Paul uses that word because it reiterates that creation longs (present = constantly) for the revelation of man's redemption when the Son of Man will be revealed to us.
 - ✓ What creation wants is the day of revelation — the day when salvation will be revealed to the *sons of God* (e.g., Col. 3:4; 1 Jn. 3:2). Creation wants everything restored to what it was in Genesis 1-2 so that there is no sin and no effect of sin anywhere.
- Now there are two questions in relation to this longing by *creation*:
 - ✓ What is the creation that Paul is talking about?
 - There are several options:
 - ... It could refer to all created things including angels. Except righteous angels were never subjected to futility, so he cannot be referring to them.
 - ... It could refer to all created things including Satan and the fallen angels, since they *were* subjected to futility. Except the fallen angels will never be set free from their sin.
 - ... It could refer to all created things including unbelieving mankind. Except, like fallen angels, unbelievers will not finally be set free from their bondage to sin and God's judgment.
 - ... It could refer to all created things including believing mankind, except Paul deals with them separately in vv. 22-25. So he is not talking about believers.
 - So the best option is that Paul is talking about the created universe, apart from rational creatures (apart from mankind or angelic beings). *Creation* is “nature.”
 - ✓ But that leads to the second question: how can inanimate objects long for something?
 - Paul is using a poetic device called personification, giving inanimate objects human qualities.
 - We see this in the OT particularly:

... **Ps. 19:2** — “Day to day pours forth speech, And night to night reveals knowledge.”

... **Ps. 96:12** — “Let the field exult, and all that is in it. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy.”

... **Ps. 98:8** — “Let the rivers clap their hands, Let the mountains sing together for joy.”

... **Is. 14:8** — “Even the cypress trees rejoice over you, *and* the cedars of Lebanon, *saying*, ‘Since you were laid low, no *tree* cutter comes up against us.’”

... **Is. 55:12** — “For you will go out with joy And be led forth with peace; The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you, And all the trees of the field will clap *their* hands.”

➤ Paul uses personification to emphasize that there is something wrong with the world — and it is so wrong that the world itself seems to grieve over its situation. This Paul’s acknowledgement that when hard things happen in this world, it’s in contrast to original creation (Gen. 1-2).

• The reason that creation desires redemption is because it was **subjected to futility** (v. 20a).

✓ There is a sense in which the created world is vain and **futile**. There is emptiness to the created world. It is aimless and has lost its purpose. It is in a perishable, decaying condition. The created world that was made to reveal the glory of God is tarnished and incapable of fulfilling that purpose.

✓ The reason that creation is futile is that it was subjected to that futility. By that Paul means that creation was forced into submission to futility (notice that it was **not willingly**). Someone made it submit to futility. Someone removed its significance and might. That someone obviously is God. It was also **not willingly** because it was *our* sin that caused its futility — we suffer from creation not because creation is inherently bad/evil, but because we sinned and brought judgment on creation.

✓ When did this subjection take place? At the Fall — **Gen. 3:17-19** —

➤ The ground is resistant to give what it was created to give (v. 17) — it will take the work of man to get food from it (instead of the ground producing it naturally).

➤ The ground will produce a mixture of good food and faux food — painful substitutes that choke out the good food and food that is harmful and not nourishing (v. 18)

➤ Mankind needs to work hard (**sweat**) to make the ground produce its food (v. 19); and at the end of man’s work he will die and return to the ground...

✓ You know what this is like:

➤ You plant a garden and weeds overtake it, unless you work at it (no one ever says, “Look — the tomatoes choked out the weeds!”)

➤ Like us you purchase a house with an older shed; it has holes in the wood and the mice come in and then the squirrels and snakes follow the mice and pretty soon the shed is falling down...

➤ You workout to lose weight and get fit and take three weeks off and it’s almost like starting over.

➤ Creation itself gives us a picture of its futility — every Spring trees bud and flowers bloom as if to say to Winter, “We will not be defeated...” and then comes the searing heat of summer, and if

that doesn't kill the plants, the freeze of Winter does. The cycle of the seasons reveals the futility of the world to be what God created it to be — there is vanity, not salvation, in creation.

➤ Even the humanist Woody Allen understood this process:

“I always see the death's head lurking. I could be sitting at Madison Square Garden at the most exciting basketball game, and they're cheering and everything is thrilling, and one of the players is doing something very beautiful – and my thought will be, 'He's only twenty-eight years old and I only wish he could savor this moment in some way, because, you know, this is as good as it's going to get for him.' ... The fundamental thing behind all motivation and all activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and against death. It's absolutely stupefying in its terror, and it renders anyone's accomplishments meaningless. As Camus wrote, it's not only that he dies or that man does, but that you struggle to do a work of art that will last and then realize that the universe itself is not going to exist after a time. Until those issues are resolved within each person – religiously or psychologically or existentially – the social and political issues will never be resolved, except in a slapdash way.” [In Ortlund, *Supernatural Living for Natural People*, Kindle 1274-1282.]

- There is futility in this created world and the very existence of that futility is a reminder that the creation needs redemption along with us. So what is the significance of these verses?
 - ✓ That even inanimate and irrational creation is impacted by the fall of mankind makes us see the horridness and the vastness of sin's destructive powers. If even plants and animals and the ground itself are under the curse of God because of sin, how terrible sin must be.
 - ✓ Because of the fallenness of creation, we should never see creation as our solution. There is no power in “Mother Nature” (there is no such being), and there are no special powers and forces in the environment. Creation is not the savior of mankind. In fact, mankind's salvation serves as the redemption of creation (note the end of v. 21).
 - ✓ Because of the fallenness of creation, we should not find our satisfaction in things that the world can offer. There is no satisfying end when we pursue the pleasures of creation as our ultimate desires. There is *nothing* in this created world that will satisfy you ultimately.
 - ✓ If creation longs for redemption, we should long for it even more. We should not act like this place is our home and when we experience loss (illness, death, accidents, financial hardship), we should not act as if we have lost what is ultimate. If we are in Christ, we have not lost our greatest possession.

2. The HOPE for the World (vv. 20b-21a)

- Verse 20 is emphatic that God after the fall of Adam, God also cursed and made creation futile.
- But it was a futility with an end-point — it was futility, Paul says, that also had *hope*.
 - ✓ When Paul says creation was subjected *in hope*, he is using one of the great words of salvation to refer to the created world.

- ✓ **Hope** appears 53x in the NT (13x in Romans) and means to look forward in expectation. It is a word of confidence. In **vv. 24-25** we will see that it is something of a parallel to faith — it is a confident belief that God will do what He has promised.
- ✓ And Paul doesn't just say that the subjection of the world was "in hope," but it was "upon hope" — that is, hope serves as the foundation of creation's future.
- ✓ It is possible that Paul has **Genesis 3:15** in mind — the beginning of the Gospel. At the very time that Satan led Adam into sin, God condemned and secured Satan's destruction (which is our hope and the hope of creation). We see this also in **Rom. 16:20**.
- ✓ The present state of creation is not its final end. There is confident hope for the created world.
- The hope for the creation is that it will be **set free from its slavery to corruption** (v. 21a).
 - ✓ Currently creation is in bondage and enslaved to corruption — decay and destructiveness (e.g., 2 Pt. 1:4; 2:12 [2x]). Corruption is the very opposite of the glory that is to come. Corruption is everything that glory is not and glory is everything that corruption is not.
 - ✓ Creation cannot set itself free, but the One who subjected it will also liberate it.
 - ✓ This liberation will be a restoration to all that creation was intended to be in Gen. 1-2.
- What will the liberation look like?
 - ✓ Stage 1 — when Christ returns to establish His earthly throne, He will restore creation (**Is. 11:5-9; 65:20-25**). This is what was originally intended, and God will make it that way.
 - ✓ Stage 2 — Christ will renovate or create a "new Heaven and a new earth" (**Rev. 21:1, 11-27**). There will be an eternal King over an eternal kingdom that is perfect in every manifestation.
- This is a reminder that all the things that are wrong in the world, all the things that do not operate rightly will be renovated and restored to their original intent. Bodies that fail and a creation that is hostile and hard to mankind will be made to function rightly. Colds and cancer will be removed. Extreme cold and heat will be removed. Hurricanes and blizzards will be removed. Biting dogs and invading insects will be made peacable.
- Do not fret or despair over the hardships of the world; the end of these things is coming soon. All the troubles associated with living in a fallen and corrupt world are a short and minor annoyance for the believer.
- And don't see creation or things in creation as your hope and Savior. Right now they can only fail you.
- How do we know it's coming to an end soon? Notice the end of v. 21 —

3. The Hope for the BELIEVER in the World (v. 21b)

- Creation is set free **into the freedom of the glory of the children of God**.
 - ✓ The creation shares in the glory that God's sons receive (the glory from v. 18).

- ✓ In the same way that God's sons are redeemed and restored to full enjoyment and fellowship with God by being in His presence, so creation is redeemed and restored to its original intent.
 - ✓ The redemption of mankind serves as a kind of promise for the redemption of creation.
 - ✓ The decay that the created world now experiences will one day be removed.
 - ✓ Mankind and creation will be moved from slavery to freedom; believers to a freedom to obey Christ and creation to a freedom to fulfill God's purposes of creation.
 - ✓ It has been said of this world, "Change and decay in all around I see." But the change and decay are not permanent. One day, all creation will be freed from this curse. (We can act hopefully.)
 - ✓ This was Paul's final encouragement in his great chapter on the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:51-54).
- Notice also that the redemption of mankind doesn't just serve as a promise of creation's redemption. Our redemption will *be accompanied with* creation's redemption. Just as creation accompanied us in the Fall into sin, so creation will be right alongside us in the redemption.
 - ✓ This is a reminder of the great grace of God. His judgment on mankind and creation in Genesis 3 was not final. There was room for grace to redeem fallen sinners and fallen creation. And the redemption of creation *will* accompany the redemption of mankind.
 - ✓ He makes *everything* right. There will not be one wayward atom in all the universe that will not submit to His control and authority in the restorative act. And that means that all the trouble we have in and with the world (and we have much) will be reversed. If we are in Christ, our trouble is not final or fatal. But if you are not in Christ, then there is no redemption for you, and what you have in this world (as flawed and hurtful as it is), is the best you will ever have. To have life and hope, you must repent and turn from sin and embrace Christ as your Savior.

CONCLUSION: How is this hopeful for us? Listen to Ray Ortlund, Jr. —

Verses 19-21 simply show that, if we will set our hearts on him, God will throw in a renewed creation as well. But if you look for your happiness to the world as it is now, you will end up with nothing. And your life will be worth nothing. You will live out your days with one slapdash attempt at satisfaction after another, until Death lays down his trump card. So think. Respect your own happiness. Stake your all on the promises of God. Do not see your life now as the final measure of your happiness, your worth, your significance. This present life of sighs and groans will yield to shouts and dances. Let that certainty define you. [*Supernatural Living for Natural People*, Kindle 1301-1306.]

- ✓ There is suffering in this world. Flowers wilt. Things break. Storms destroy. People die.
- ✓ But our certainty and hope is for redemption — both for ourselves and this world. In hope the creation will be set free alongside us who are redeemed. Make that your meditation today.

BENEDICTION: Romans 8:37-39