

Romans 8:18-25 The Purpose of our Creation

Introduction

On Wednesday evening 26 February 2014 Mississippi farmer seventy-eight year-old Walter Williams collapsed at his home. Medical attention was received but to no avail. The local coroner pronounced him dead with the agreement of the family, in view of the evidence at their disposal. His body was taken to a mortuary in Lexington, Mississippi, for embalming by the funeral home staff the following day. What happened next will live with all concerned for years to come. When staff removed the body bag from the place of storage to their horror a fairly vigorous kicking motion was observed taking place inside the zipped up body bag. Quick calls to the family and the local hospital ensured that Walter was reunited in the hospital some time later with loved ones who had assumed he had departed this life! A clearly delighted Walter was reported in the press as telling his family that 'he was happy to be alive' [Daily Mail, 1 March 2014]. This is naturally good news within that family circle, but the passage before us in Romans 8:18-25 points to even greater good news that can be the experience of us all. These words are an incredible glimpse into the future and hint at something incredibly special that will take place at the end of this age.

1. Two contrasting realities- suffering and glory (Romans 8:18-19)

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ *For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.* (Romans 8:18-19)

(a) **Suffering and glory are indissolubly linked** Anything worth achieving in life comes at a cost. A swimmer wishing to compete for a gold medal at an Olympic Games final knows they will have years of early morning swims before school and work and probably more of the same in the evenings for starters. All kinds of other hobbies or activities are a non-starter as there will be no time to fit them into their schedule. It is part of the package. In all kinds of careers to accomplish good quality professional standards requires years of studies and preliminary work to become proficient with the knowledge and skills required to be good at that occupation. All of us could give examples of areas of life where this is the case. Paul here in looking forward to what God has in store for us in the future acknowledges that in the present there is a cost to accomplishing the calling entrusted to us. What he describes as *sufferings* and *glory* are two sides to the same reality in the experience of a believer. In II Timothy 2:11b-12a Paul expressed it this way: *If we died with Him, we will also live with Him; if we endure we will also reign with Him.* For us as Christians in the Western world where the Church numerically has been shrinking over the last century, despite explosive growth in two-thirds of the world, need to ask the question –what is it that is different about our collective witness compared to that in other places? Our brothers and sisters in Christ in these places have counted the cost of living for Jesus and reordered their priorities that demonstrate to their fellow citizens how precious Jesus is to them. We at times struggle to find ways of expressing that to unchurched people. The challenge to us is this –if being a Christian for you is something that is easy and never presents any difficulties then either you have been extraordinarily fortunate or there is a pressing need to pray to the Lord to discern whether we are living as we should for Him.

(b) **Suffering and glory represent the present and the future respectively** What is included here in the *suffering* Paul is describing? It can be actual physical persecution by individuals or a state; it may be lesser discrimination from the same individuals or

institutions; this reality can be the hardships experienced of living through natural disasters or poor health or unexpected unemployment or a range of other negative life experiences. It might even be the culmination of lots of small doses of frustration at things that happen in life; whatever it is that you have to live with and possibly work through, Paul indicates, it is not for ever. One day all these things will be over for ever, hallelujah! It is a very real experience of the present but our lives include a longer future beyond this life where these negative aspects of life now will be absent. In the future sin-free world we will experience something of the amazing splendour and majesty of our great God and Saviour. What is most amazing of all is how Paul writes at the end of Romans 8:18: *...that will be revealed in us*. We will not just see it but experience it, be a part of it in God's new creation. My finite mind struggles to find vocabulary to express the incredible beauty and pleasure of such amazing truths revealed here.

(c) **Suffering and glory are not comparable** Put the two together, or side by side, there is absolutely no comparison: *our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us* (Romans 8:18). There are times when in our conversations we turn to another person and ask the question: 'Is it worth it?' In your life you may have had struggles to overcome some hardship and you have wondered –is it worth keeping going? Maybe you have been hill-climbing and as a result of the steep pathway you are struggling and are tempted to give up –but climb over that ridge, attain the summit and the hardship suddenly is put into perspective. Or the mother holding her new-born baby in her arms after a difficult and painful labour knows plenty about the pain and suffering –but the glory, the blessing that follows is infinitely greater. No words can express it adequately. In our Christian lives here and now might be years of hardship and disappointments, despite faithful service, but one day when we look on our Lord's beautiful face we will know it was worth every effort of dedicated service. The glory of that moment will be judged more significant than all the heart-ache and hardship experienced along the way, because the suffering and the glory are simply not worth comparing, but sometimes we need to remind ourselves of this truth. It is good to remind ourselves of Paul's words in II Corinthians 4:16-18: *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.*¹⁷ *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*¹⁸ *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

(d) **Suffering and glory are experienced by the whole of creation** (Romans 8:19)¹⁹ *For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed...* It is not just about you and me and humanity. God has a vision / perspective that encompasses the whole created order. As a species we have become more conscious in recent years how our actions affect the rest of the created order. Because of human greed and folly we have damaged the environment and caused the extinction of too many creatures on this planet. The space we inhabit is there to share in a quality experience of life with the rest of creation. Paul is hinting that the rest of creation cannot wait to experience a sin-free humanity inhabiting this planet. Longing for the day when humans treat other creatures and our environment with the respect it deserves; with a right use and development of resources for the common good of all. We are not required to wait until life beyond the grave to do our best in this aspect of life, but can make a start now! The apostle wants us to lift up our eyes and see a much greater perspective on life and its significance. These revelatory moments are few and far between, but they are times when we may be stopped in our tracks to reflect on the way we are living and our priorities. Yes, God has a plan and purpose for my life, but He also has a plan and purpose for the whole of His creation that will one day be renewed and restored. Praise God for that!

2. The Suffering and glory of God's creation (Romans 8:20-22)

(a) The frustration of creation (Romans 8:20a) *For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it...* Was this how God intended the world to be? No! In Genesis 1:31 it reads: *God saw **all** that He had made and it was **very good**.* We look at the world today and cannot use such strong language to describe it. There are exceptionally good things but other things that are far from good and honouring to God. What has gone wrong? Genesis 3, following the account of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God, records this statement from God. *'Cursed is the ground because of you through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. ¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ 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.'* (Genesis 3:17-19). Paul does not spell out all these details; instead he uses principally one word – *frustration*. This Greek word can be translated as: 'emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness' (Arndt-Gingrich, *Greek English Lexicon*, pp.496-7). It is the same word chosen by the translators of the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint version) in Ecclesiastes 1:2: *'Meaningless! Meaningless!'* says the Teacher. *'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.'* In a world damaged by human sinfulness there will be significant proportions of people's lives characterised by activity that produces sensations of pointlessness, meaninglessness and without any sense of purpose and value. In fact without the reference to God there will be people who genuinely wonder why we are here at all! What is the purpose of my life? Is there a purpose –or am I merely the product of random biological activity? All of us at times have experienced these emotions, maybe with yet more paperwork or forms in the workplace or some other form of bureaucracy? Few people get up in the morning motivated by the thought of joining another committee or doing some routine tasks. As Christians who have put out faith in the Lord we can see something of the bigger picture of what is going on and of God's plans for His world. The apostle here hints that God allows people to go their own way and make their own choices for a purpose. With a view to them recognising that life without Him is diminished and lacking in the sense of direction and purpose for which we were created. Paul refers to this theme in Ephesians 4:17-19 where he makes reference to the *futility of their thinking* with reference to the behavioural choices of some people who consciously gave God no place in their decision-making.

(b) The liberation of creation (Romans 8:20b-21) *in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated...* Why does God allow people to go their own way and make their mistakes? *in hope...* with the intention that they would come to see the error of their ways and turn to Him. In any case what is going on in the world is not for ever, God has placed a time limit on it. However, sometimes people have to be allowed to make unwise or actually wrong choices in order for them to grasp why they took the wrong option and to provide the necessary motivation to do what is right. Paul makes this point in first a negative and then a positive way.

(i) negatively from decay from its bondage to decay... A house that is not maintained will show signs of disrepair. Over time if it continues the problems will escalate until it becomes a ruin. A garden that is neglected will gain a higher proportion of weeds and then they will take over denying space to the plants that might otherwise have grown in that location. this is true of the natural world and sadly true of a life with little or no self-discipline; one day the created order will be the best it was intended to be by God, but in this life 'the cycle of conception, birth and growth are followed by decline, decay, death and decomposition' (J. Stott, Romans, p.239). Paul here is expressing what scientists can see clearly about the universe that it is

decaying; this point is expressed in the second law of thermodynamics. Mass or energy is not lost but converted into other forms; in the case of the sun's energy, for example, it is being used up by being dissipated into space so that at some time in the distant future it could call into question the continued existence of life as we know it on planet earth. Every living thing in the created order has a time limit on its life. The clock starts ticking down at the moment of birth! However, his purpose was to highlight the positive side not the negative here!

(ii) positively into freedom ...and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. A study of the Scottish psyche a few years ago suggested that the prevailing attitude was a negative one. So that when some one remarked about good news, for example: 'Isn't it great to see the sun shine?'; the predictable response would be something like 'it'll probably be raining before long!'. The author claimed that the Calvinistic Presbyterian heritage in Scotland was partially responsible for such a mindset. We would have to admit that there are some gloomy Christians whose faces suggest that their favourite fruit to eat might be lemons! But I think they would be a small minority in our ranks. Certainly the Bible and here in Romans 8 there is a very different perspective God wants the best for His children; into a quality of life that has a real purpose and significance for the good of the individual and other people –to the glory of God. This does not mean an easy life or one spared the heartaches that others go through. However, in our times of trial and discouragement He wishes us to keep going because He will bring us through to a time of blessing and encouragement, though its form may be very different to what we are expecting or even praying for. As early as Genesis 3:15 there is God's big hint at the defeat of the evil one and the ultimate triumph of God's plans for good. It states: *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*' These words point forward to the battles between the evil one and God recorded on the pages of Scripture. However, even when Satan thought he had triumphed when Jesus was hanging on the cross. In that very moment was his final defeat as Jesus' cry of victory proclaimed (John 19:30); The resurrection of Jesus on that first Easter Sunday confirmed the victory of God through the sacrificial death of Jesus in our place. The Bible in different places gives hints at what God has prepared for us in the new heavens and new earth. In Isaiah 11:6-9 the prophet Isaiah in the eighth century BC wrote these words to illustrate what kind of world God has planned: *The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. ⁷ The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. ⁹ They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.* These words in Isaiah or the glimpses of the future in the book of Revelation are an attempt to describe the indescribable in poetic or visionary form. They are not a sample of a scientific treatise on the subject. No form of words can do justice to what God has planned. Our calling is to live in the present in the light of what is coming in the future, because God's will must be realised in His creation. Evil can never have the last word.

(iii) agonising with intent! ²² *We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.* In Romans 8:20-22 Paul brings together the past and the future with the present age. It is not just human beings that long for a better world; the rest of creation also longs for that which is still to come. What Paul stresses here is that in the here and now some people will go through incredibly difficult times; others face frustrations and disappointments; a further section of humanity will do comparatively well and a few will be extremely fortunate; but all God's children will be acutely aware that this life is not the end, nor the best we will experience. We rejoice and are encouraged in the present because the best for us all is yet to come. His new creation will be liberated from all evil and suffering; it

will be saturated in the glory of God and transformed to be better than anyone of us could yet imagine, anticipate or pray for. When we grasp this reality we will still work our hardest to improve this world to the best of our ability to aid the homeless; get medical care for the sick and feed the hungry; we will pray for our political leaders and even send them communications of advice from time to time, but knowing all along that they like ourselves are sinful men and women and that power so easily corrupts leading to those in authority forgetting they are elected to serve the nation not benefit themselves and their social circles at the expense of the wider population.

3. The Suffering and Glory of God's Children (Romans 8:23-25)

(a) **Our possession** ²³ *Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit...* Paul will conclude this section of Romans 8 with reference to five insights into our lives at the current time. The word translated as *firstfruits* both referred in New Testament times to the beginning of the harvest when the literally 'first fruits' were ripe for picking and eating and also as a pledge that the full harvest was just around the corner, but definitely going to happen. In other words you had a chance to catch a glimpse of what a full harvest would be like through the arrival of the first taste of a year's harvest. Elsewhere in Ephesians 1:13-14 and II Corinthians 1:21b-22 is the use of a different image to make the same point: [God] *He anointed us, ²² set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.* This Greek word translated as a 'deposit' or a 'seal' was an absolute guarantee of something taking place. In Modern Greek this same word is used for an engagement ring, in effect a promise of a forthcoming marriage. However, we must be aware that the kind of agreement Paul is describing could not be broken. The participants had to follow through with it, unlike a modern engagement which can be broken off by either party that made the commitment to the other person. What the apostle wants to communicate here is that our future heritage is absolutely guaranteed. So many things in this life are not. Some years ago the panic by customers of Northern Rock brought that institution to its knees. They feared they might lose their money. In the natural disasters in the southern parts of the United Kingdom in winter 2013 some people lost their houses- presumably had they ever dreamed such a possibility might happen they would not have purchased or built a house in that location. In terms of this world we can lose everything under certain conditions, but in terms of the world to come our heritage is absolutely secure. Paul really wants to underline this truth in this chapter. The child of God is totally secure under the watchful care of their heavenly father. Do you need to be assured by that fact today?

(b) **Our struggle** ...we... *groan inwardly* This fact has to be placed alongside the earlier one. We may be secure, but it only highlights our current frailties and weaknesses. It only draws attention to the shortcomings and flaws of life as we experience it now compared to the future. In the life to come there is no pain, sorrow or death (Rev.21:4). In the present time you or someone close to you may be slowly declining due to a health condition for which there is no cure; or you may live with a painful arthritic condition that won't kill you but it affects your mobility and in its more serious forms can significantly affect your quality of life. In II Corinthians 5:4 Paul likens our earthly body to a tent, and describes the 'tent' of an older person: *For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.* In effect he is saying what several older people have told me over the years that 'old age never comes alone'. Energy levels decline; aches and pains increase; life at times can genuinely be a real struggle for many older people no matter how graciously they face their struggles at times. However, you may be younger and struggle with difficulties in

your family circle. Or you may love your job but the stresses and strains that are an increasing part of the package seriously diminish your 'get up and go' which some days has simply gone! Life can be a real struggle at times. Paul deliberately puts these two things alongside each other because they are equally true for many a Christian in their daily experience.

(c) **Our expectation** *as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.* Paul had already spoken about our adoption into God's family in Romans 8:15; a young person may enjoy the ceremony of adoption and starting out on family life, but it will take time to experience the fullness of the blessing of being a part of a loving family. The Christian receives in principle our full inheritance in Christ the moment we are saved, but it takes into eternity to experience all that God has for us. Under Roman law the young person may have been adopted as an heir, but it would take some years before they receive the fullness of the inheritance entrusted to them. Paul is saying explicitly here that the Christian will only receive the full blessings God has for us when Jesus comes again; in other words he is declaring that all believers from every era to the day Jesus returns get their inheritance in full which includes a new body like Christ's body after the resurrection, together, on the same day. Time is not an issue for those who have gone to heaven before us so they will not be hanging about impatiently hoping the second coming of Jesus is 'soon'! It is important to maintain the distinction here with what happens the moment we die. Immediately we leave this life we go to be with Jesus, but our new bodies are only received later (II Corinthians 5:6-8). The question we need to ask is this: Have I retained my enthusiasm and expectancy of Jesus' return? Paul declares here: *we wait eagerly* for it... Some Christians in the past talked about nothing else and in extreme cases might have been so heavenly minded they were of little earthly use; the tragedy today is that too many Christians are so earthly minded that they have forgotten what we are here for and fail to grasp what lies in store for us in the future. We have an expectation says Paul. I hope and pray this is the case for each one of us.

(d) **Our certainty**²⁴ *For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?* Paul here used the Greek aorist tense - *we were saved*... This tense is used of a definitive past event that is absolutely certain because it has happened at a moment in time. In other words because of the death of Jesus on the cross and God's acceptance of His sacrifice, the future benefits that accrue from His substitutionary act in our place are as certain in the future as if they had taken place in the past! We cannot physically see the future; we struggle with our sins; our bodily infirmities; the temptations of the evil one and our sinful tendencies, but our future is guaranteed because of the one who guarantees it. The notes in your wallet or purse are guaranteed by a bank that issued them; even more the gift of salvation God gave you is guaranteed by Him for ever and in full. Do you need to accept the gift of salvation for the first time and enter into these blessings today?

(e) **Our patience**²⁵ *But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.* 'Are we there yet?' was the familiar request of a child to a parent on a long trip in the car! Some times God's children make similar requests in their own words to their heavenly Father when they are growing weary with life's circumstances. Paul has earlier urged a sense of expectancy, but alongside it he urges patience. What God has willed He delivers on time and in full. The purpose of the creation of the world and all it contains including humanity will one day be revealed in full. It will be what God originally intended for His creation and will be far more wonderful than you or I have ever imagined as Paul wrote in I Corinthians 2:9: *No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him.* Praise God for that, Amen.