

We groan as we wait for the redemption of the body

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon
at Poplar Baptist Church, on 20th November 2016

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8.22 – 23)

Introduction

These verses tell us something very important: that the Biblical Gospel is all about the future. It is about being saved from the wrath to come, in order to be prepared for glory that is to come.

There are today many versions of “Christianity” which say something different. Many will tell you that God wants to bless your present life and prosper it, and that if you believe him and follow certain principles you will have a happy and prosperous life. Your diseases will be healed. Your dreams will be fulfilled. You will have a wonderful marriage and a perfectly happy family.

Even presentations of the Gospel that do not put it in such crass terms of material wellbeing and prosperity will often say something like this: “Come to Jesus and he will give you peace and joy, and help you to be satisfied, oh, and by the way, you go to heaven afterwards.”

What these verses tell us is that we do not yet experience more than a fraction of what God has for us. He has given his glory, yes, but it is hidden in Christ, who is in heaven. He has given us a foretaste of glory through the Holy Spirit, but the fullness of the experience awaits the resurrection. We will indeed, one day, be fabulously rich. We shall be the joint owners of the new creation. But for now, we might live in abject poverty. We shall, one day, be completely free from illness, from suffering and pain. But, for now, we may have bodies which are

wracked with pain, and very weak. We shall indeed, one day, be completely free from grief, but, for now, we experience tears and grief.

In the meantime we need to wait patiently. We need to realise that we do not yet have, in our experience, what God has promised to us. Our salvation is centred not on this life but on the life to come. Life in this world is just the foreshadowing of what is to come. The whole point of this life is to prepare us for eternity.

Let me remind you of the context of what the apostle is saying.

The apostle says in verse 18, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” We are to see the troubles that we go through in the light of eternity. When we do so, we realise that, grievous though our sufferings are, they are minuscule in comparison with the glory that will be ours at the resurrection.

Last week we were thinking about verses 19 to 21, which speak about the eager longing that the creation has for the glory of sons of God to be revealed. The creation is, as it were, standing on tiptoe, eagerly waiting for the glory of the sons of God to be revealed. We who believe have already been given this glory, but at the present time it is hidden with Christ in heaven. Only when Christ comes again will the glory that we have in him will be revealed.

We saw that at the present time the creation has been subjected to frustration, or to emptiness. When the world was first made, it was absolutely perfect and without any suffering. But then our ancestor Adam sinned, and his sin affected the whole universe. God has subjected the world to emptiness because of Adam’s sin. But the present condition of the world is not permanent. When Jesus comes again, this world will be set free from its “bondage to decay” and brought into the “glorious freedom of the children of God”. God will remake this world. When he does so it will be completely free from the suffering which has marred this world. We who believe will be raised up from the dead, and have glorious new bodies, and we shall enjoy the beautiful new world that God is going to make. Every tear will be wiped from our eyes, and there will be no more crying or mourning, or pain or death.

The verses we are thinking about today are building on what we saw last time. The apostle speaks about how the creation “groans, as in the pains of childbirth” in its present state, and about how we groan as well. In verses 22 and 23 the apostle says, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present

time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

We see here how the apostle again personifies the creation. The creation does not literally groan. But there is a sort of “pain” that it experiences and expresses, in metaphorical terms. Things are not what they are meant to be. There is something far better coming up in the future. If it could have feelings, and if it could express itself, it would be in the form of an anguished groaning, like that of a woman in labour.

The apostle says that not only does the creation groan, but “we ourselves who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons.”

We also are, as it were, in labour pains. Most of the time we are not crying out vocally, but, as the apostle says, inwardly we are groaning. We have, as it were, internalised labour pains.

Why is this? It is not just that we experience the pain of this world like the rest of mankind. There is something else. We know that something better is coming to us. We have, as the apostle puts it, the “firstfruits of the Spirit”. The Holy Spirit has given us a sort of foretaste of heaven. Having tasted something of what it will be like to experience the glory of God, in a way it makes the waiting all the harder.

Being stuck in a traffic jam is never fun. But if you hit a traffic jam when you are on a journey to a wonderful holiday to which you have been looking forward for months, something inside you groans saying, “When will this be over, so I can start the wonderful holiday?” So, for us who are God’s children, in one sense the sufferings of this age are harder for us to cope with than they are for unbelievers to cope with. Unbelievers do not know anything better. But we know that we are God’s beloved children. We know that we are heirs of the new universe. So it seems all the more incongruous that we should suffer, and it makes it all the harder for us that we do.

Those who teach that God wants us to be rich in this life often argue along these lines: “You are a child of God and an heir of God. God loves you. God is vastly rich. What rich parent would not want his child to share in his wealth? Of course God wants you to prosper.” The reasoning is fine up to a point. But it misses out one important thing: although we are sons of God and heirs, we have not yet come of age. We have not yet come to the point where we are ready to receive our possession. Hence the apostle says here that we are “waiting for our

adoption as sons". Someone might say, "But surely we have already been adopted. How can the apostle here say that we are waiting for our adoption as sons?" The way to interpret is that, yes, we are now adopted as sons of God, but we have not yet come into our inheritance as adopted sons. The fact that we are sons of God has not been openly revealed.

There is an illustration that the apostle uses in Galatians chapter 4 verses 1 and 2 that we can apply in this context. In this passage in Galatians the apostle speaks about how, before Christ came, we were held in slavery under the law, and were like slaves, even though we were the heirs of the Gospel. He says, "What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father." He then goes on to apply this to our relationship with the law. But we can also apply the illustration to our experience of the blessings of our salvation. We are sons of God. We are heirs. But we have not yet "come of age". We are not at the point yet where we can enter into our inheritance. That will only happen when Christ comes again. So in the meantime we are, as it were, in slavery to the effects of the fall on our bodies. We still suffer sickness, weakness and death.

The apostle then says that we are waiting for the redemption of the body. Note what the apostle says here. Our bodies are going to be redeemed. That is part of the work of salvation. But this redemption of the body has not happened yet. It is in the future. It still needs to take place. It will only take place when Christ comes again. When he comes these bodies that we live in will be transformed into bodies that are like Christ's resurrection body. But until that happens we will have to live in bodies that have not yet been redeemed. The apostle says in Philippians chapter 3 and verse 20,

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

He also says in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verses 51 to 54,

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

There is a day coming when our bodies will be redeemed. They will be clothed with immortality and become glorious. They will be imperishable. At that point disease will be banished for ever. But until that point, we shall remain living in bodies that are unredeemed, and prone to weakness, sickness and death.

So what do we do in the meantime? Claim victory over disease? Rebuke cancer? What does the apostle say? "We wait eagerly". We eagerly await the resurrection of the body. But we wait. We do not struggle against it. We serve God as well as we can in our weak physical state. Of course we ask that if it is his will he will make us better. But if the answer comes back "no" then we patiently wait for the redemption of the body. And when the time comes for us to leave this world, we do so serenely and calmly, confidently looking forward to the resurrection.

One of the sad consequences of the modern emphasis on healing is that Christians often do not know how to die well. You might be aware that John Wesley said about the early Methodists, that "our people die well". They died calmly and with joy, looking forward to going to be with the Lord. But with the current emphasis on healing, death is looked upon not as the gateway to heaven, but as a terrible failure. It is seen as a failure by God to answer prayer that the believer should be healed, and perhaps a failure on the part of the suffering believer to have enough faith to be healed. But we are nowhere promised that Christians will not suffer terminal illnesses and die. Death is not a failure. If you are badly ill, of course you and your Christian friends will pray for your recovery. But if God does not raise you up, do not see it as a failure by you, God, or anyone else. Realise that God has decided that your time has come to go to be with him, and look forward to it with eager anticipation.

So we see that in our present life we groan, because we do not yet experience the resurrection of the body. Before we move on to our next main point, I want to say one more thing under this heading. The apostle says that we groan. He does not say that we moan. There is a huge difference between groaning and moaning. Groaning is an expression of pain. Moaning is an expression of complaint. As Christians we are bound to feel pain, and it is not wrong to express the pain. But we should not complain. Complaint is, ultimately, an

accusation against God. It is saying that God is weak, or that he is not fair, or that he does not love us. None of those things are true. God is ruling over all things. His ways are perfect. And he deeply cares for us. As the apostle says later in the chapter, in verse 28, he is working all things together for good with those who love him and are called according to his purpose. So, yes, we groan. But we must not moan! Instead we should rejoice greatly, knowing that God is using our suffering to prepare us for a wonderful future.

Conclusion

We have seen today that a very large part of our salvation is in the future. Thanks be to God, we do now know God. We now enjoy his love. We now experience his power to overcome sin. At the present time we know his peace. We enjoy fellowship with the Lord's people. We know God living inside us by the Holy Spirit.

But we still live in bodies which have not yet been redeemed. We still live in a fallen world. We still are prone to temptation. We still have a fight against the devil.

So, although we are heirs of all things, and have been given everything in Christ, we do not experience the full blessings of our salvation now. We cannot expect to have a life that is free from suffering, disease, pain and death. Deliverance from these things is in the future. What we should do is to make a point of focussing on the future, so that we may strengthened and comforted as we go through our present trials.

Let me finally address those who may not yet be believers. This passage tells us of wonderful things that await true believers. But these things are only for those who are trusting in Christ as their Saviour. If you do not belong to Christ, then you have "only a fearful expectation of judgement and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (Hebrews 10.27). I urge you to come to Christ so that you may have a wonderful, rather than terrifying, prospect ahead of you.

This booklet contains the edited notes of a sermon which was preached by Henry Dixon. A recording of the actual sermon that was preached may be found at

<http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=31217423564>

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