

The Groaning of Creation

From Groaning Into Glory – Part II

Romans 8:19-22

Introduction – There is Trouble in Our World!

If there was ever a word that could characterize the human condition on earth; the condition of our planet from non-rational plant and animal life up to and through the human experience, it could be the word “trouble”! Everyone today has this in common – we have all experienced and, even now, are experiencing, and will continue to experience some sort of trouble. We live in a world filled with it; consumed with it; and even enamored by it.

A few days ago, I received the year end edition of *World Magazine* in which the major news stories and events of the past year had been summarized. These stories have riveted the attention of the world.¹

The first story, of course, referred to the trouble with Iraq and the war effort. A picture of a disheveled, captured Saddam Hussein graced the cover of the magazine.

Additional articles and pictures reminded me of some of the past year’s tragedies and troubles. They included:

- A picture of the Space Shuttle Columbia’s crew, who were killed when their space shuttle disintegrated and rained charred debris from Texas to Louisiana.
- A picture of Elizabeth Smart, who was rescued from an abductor who claimed to be the Messiah.

- Several articles that dealt with hurricanes, forest fires, floods, and earthquakes that have claimed the lives of thousands worldwide.
- One picture that recalled the largest blackout in United States history; a power loss that affected fifty million people.
- Stories of murder trials that made headlines, as husbands were accused and/or found guilty of brutally murdering their families.

Without a doubt, there was trouble in our country!

This was the year when trouble surfaced in the already confused arena of moral and medical ethics. Examples include:

- One husband was successful in ordering his wife’s feeding tube removed. His wife had suffered a heart attack and, through mishandling, was left brain damaged; for the most part, comatose. Yet, she able to smile, respond to touch, and recognize the voices of her loved ones. Her husband won a two million dollar malpractice suit on her behalf. He then moved in with another woman, used some of the money to hire an attorney, who then argued for the wife’s right to die. In reality, what that meant was, she had the right to be starved to death. Her feeding tube was removed and for six days, she was left without food – until state legislators and the governor ordered her feeding tube reinserted.
- The United States Supreme Court, this past summer, delivered a devastating decision to

our country's moral foundation when they ruled to allow sodomy as a constitutional right for homosexuals. One Justice was so incensed by the ruling that he read aloud his dissent from the bench, declaring that this ruling marked the "end of moral legislation."

- At the same time the highest court revealed how far from Judeo-Christian ethics it had fallen, the church revealed how far it had plunged as well. One mainline Protestant denomination ordained for the first time in history, a practicing homosexual to the office of bishop – voting as well, to bless same-sex unions as, "within the bounds of church life and belief."
- While this battle was taking place within the Protestant world, the Catholic church was reeling from the public exposure of many of its priests who were nothing more than pedophiles. These priests had been moved from parish to parish to outrun their victims. They were victims who had been betrayed by the worst predator of all – a predator who came in the name of God.
- Additional articles reminded me of how the world was held captive this year by fear, not only of terrorists, but by an infection named SARS. This disease has claimed the lives of nearly nine hundred people worldwide.
- The irony of our world's attitude toward SARS however, is that AIDS, which is killing and will kill millions of people, remains an untouchable disease simply because it is primarily the result of sexual promiscuity.
- There is at least one African country where half its population is infected with HIV and will be wiped out in ten years or less. I was in that country not too long ago. It is a country that is riddled with poverty and illiteracy and a sense of despair. One African pastor told me that the young people of his country did not care to even protect themselves from AIDS. They have said to him, "What do we have to look forward to as we grow to become your age . . . we might as well enjoy whatever pleasures we have and then die . . . there is no good reason to live."

There is trouble in our world!

And, I have not mentioned even half of the magazine's summary of world events yet. I have not

gotten to the stories of professional athletes and media stars accused or indicted of drug abuse, spousal abuse, child abuse, murder, or rape. I have not gotten to the stories of mothers who killed their children or children who killed their parents.

There is a continual glorification of sin and a growing hatred for anything representing God and His commands. For example:

- One MTV special this past year, in mocking tones, of course, recorded a special two hour program profiling what superstars thought of sin – or what the church has considered to be sin.
- They asked Queen Latiffa what she thought about pride. She said, "Pride is a sin? I wasn't aware of that." They asked Kirstie Alley about pride and she said, "I don't think pride is a sin, I think some idiot made that up." They asked a member of Aerosmith if he thought lust was a sin and he said, "Lust is what I live for; it's what I got into the band for . . ." When Ice Tea, that well known theologian, was asked about anger, he said, "Anger is no sin . . . anger's necessary! You have to release this tension because life brings tension." When asked about pride, he responded, "Pride is mandatory."
- The MTV program concluded that there is no absolute right or wrong; the Ten Commandments are not absolute standards; you can do whatever you want. Then, they ended the two hour program with this unbelievable statement that I will quote, "The most evil sin in the world is the killjoy attitude of those who think sin is offensive to God."

In other words, "The worst sin is the sin of feeling bad about doing something bad, because God isn't really offended by sinful things."

How twisted is that?! They concluded that anyone who thinks God is offended by sin, is committing the worst of all sins because they are going to ruin the party!ⁱⁱ

By the way, this is not just the attitude of superstars and public figures, it is the attitude of our land. The prevailing attitude today, is that what is morally wrong for you can be morally right for someone else.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is trouble in the land!

What is the believer to do? What is the Christian supposed to think of all this and how are we to respond?

Romans – Response to a Troubled World

I am here today to deliver the message of God from the book of Romans which speaks to these issues – and to ours!

You see, for the Christian in Rome or in Rwanda; the believer living in Corinth or living in Cary, about the time you would think the believer is driven to despair and discouragement over the condition of his world, the apostle Paul comes and delivers a surprising message. He begins by saying, in effect, “This is all to be expected. I expected the unbelieving world to act like unbelievers! I expected pagans to act like pagans.”

Paul has already described the digression of a society in Romans, chapter 1, where sin is applauded and the Creator is replaced with a worship of nature.

In a very real sense, the growing Christian becomes more and more aware that he does not belong. In fact:

- Paul writes that our true citizenship is not on earth, but in heaven (Philippians 3:20).
- The growing believer accepts the Bible’s promise that in the world you have the guarantee, not of health and wealth and prosperity, but of tribulation (2 Timothy 3:12).
- The true believer expects that evil in a society that rejects God, will go from bad to worse (2 Timothy 3:13).
- The believer recognizes that the gospel divides families as well as unites others (Matthew 10:34-35).

That is the true effect of the gospel.

I want to say something that is not politically correct – and I do not mean to the world, I mean within the Evangelical church. This needs to be said:

- The goal of the church is not conservative politics, though Christians can be called by God to the political arena where they can exert a holy influence. The goal of the church is not realized with a Republican majority. (Am I bothering you yet?)
- In addition, the mission of the church is not the elimination of poverty and disease,

though Christians can find their calling from God in fighting against both.

- The hope of the church in this country is not heterosexual marriage being constitutionalized. I read of one well known Christian leader saying, a few months ago to his vast constituency, that the only hope for marriage is a constitutional amendment. Our hope is not in Washington.
- Furthermore, the purpose of the church is not making life safe and prosperous for all the peoples of the earth, even though the gospel changes a person, a family, a culture and a nation for the better. While that may be the byproduct of the gospel, it is not the purpose of the gospel.

Dear friends:

- The goal of the church is the glory of God (Philippians 1:10-11).
- The mission of the church is the making of disciples (Matthew 28:19-20).
- The hope of the church is the coming of Christ (Romans 8:23-25).
- The purpose of the church, in the meantime, is to act as the agency of God in declaring the gospel of Christ to the ends of the earth (Romans 16:25-27).
- The function of the church is to so love the word of God and so love one another that the world will know we must belong to God (John 13:35).

The church today is as confused as the world, because it has lost its:

- Goal;
- Mission;
- Hope;
- Purpose;
- Function.

So, what do we do about it?!

We have to go back to the perspective of God revealed in scripture in order to clear the fog away. Otherwise, it will become all too easy to either become discouraged in the world or distracted by the world. Either one of which can be deadly.

“Groaning” in a troubled world

Paul addresses the troubles of his Christian friends in Rome by re-ordering their perspective. He begins in verse 19 of chapter 8. Look at verses 19 through 23 and verse 26.

For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly 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 also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.

And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. . . .

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words;

Three times in this text, we read the word “groan”. You should circle all three. There is:

- the groaning of creation in verse 22;
- the groaning of the Christian in verse 23b;
- the groaning of the Holy Spirit in verse 26b.

The solution for the believer to be neither discouraged in the world or distracted by the world is found in a biblical understanding of what it means to groan!

What does it mean for the Christian to groan?
What does it mean for the Spirit of God to groan?

Two points about the groaning of creation

We have time in our discussion today, to begin looking at the meaning of the first groan, which is the groaning of creation. As this section begins in verse 19, the apostle Paul tells us two things about creation. Let me give them to you.

Creation is eager about something

1. First, creation is eager about something. Notice verse 19 again.

For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.

There is an anxious longing about creation.

Now, when Paul refers to creation, just what is he referring to?

- He cannot be referring to *angels*, since they are not enslaved to corruption (verse 21).
- He cannot be referring to *fallen angels, or demons*, because they do not long for the revelation of the sons of God.
- He cannot be referring to *believers*, because they are addressed separately in the next verses.
- Furthermore, he cannot be referring to *unbelievers*, since they have no desire to see the glory of God.
- The only remaining part of creation would be the *non-rational creation*; that is, plants and animals and all inanimate things like rivers and mountains and heavenly bodies.

Paul is using what is called, personification. He is giving to non-rational elements of creation, the attributes of human personality.

As you know, it is not unusual for the Bible to use personification. For example, Isaiah talks about:

- the wilderness and desert rejoicing (Isaiah 35:1);
- trees clapping their hands (Isaiah 55:12);
- mountains and hills breaking forth into shouts of joy (Isaiah 55:12).

So Paul says that creation is “longing for”. The Greek word literally means, “to stand on its tiptoes; to watch with outstretched head.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So, what is creation longing for? Paul says, in verse 19b,

. . . the revealing of the sons of God.

The word “revealing” translates the Greek word “apokalupsis” (or apocalypse), which refers to an uncovering; an unveiling; a revelation. This is the same word from which the book of Revelation gets its name.^{iv}

The book of Revelation is the book of the Apocalypse; it is the book of the unveiling of the future of the world.

Creation is longing for that future time when Christ returns to earth; when the glory of His bride is

revealed to the universe. Creation is eagerly awaiting this revelation.

Creation is enslaved to something

2. Paul also tells us that creation is enslaved to something.

Paul gives us several hints as to what he means as he continues in verses 20 through 21a.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption . . .

Creation is enslaved to corruption. Plants, however, do not sin; trees do not battle temptation; rivers and mountains do not struggle with pride and envy and greed.

Corruption, in this verse, refers to the fallen state of nature. Most commentators referred to the law of entropy, or the law that states that things move toward disorder and disharmony and decay.

Travel back to Genesis where we are reminded that after the fall of mankind into sin, God indeed cursed His creation with this law of corruption and decay. He told Adam, in Genesis, chapter 3, verses 17b through 18a.

. . . Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you . . .

Since the fall of man, decay and disease were built into the fabric of nature.

Kent Hughes writes,

Even now the animal world is filled with fear and violence. Even the loveliest scenes in nature, while remaining beautiful, are also witness to bloody and violent horrors. Floods, hurricanes, droughts, tornadoes, blights, avalanches, and earthquakes stalk the earth.^v

These are the sounds of earth's groanings.

The curse of plant disease decimates crops year after year. The loss is estimated to be in the millions of dollars for each separate disease. Plant pathologists spend their days developing disease prevention and reduction methods.

Paul says, in verse 22,

For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.

Before the fall of man, no weeds or poisonous plants, no thorns or thistles or anything else existed that could cause misery or harm. There are those who cry out today for living in harmony with nature. But the truth is obvious – when people were supposedly living closer to nature, without the benefits of civilization and medicine and invention and resources, there was less comfort, more pain, more disease, and people died at a younger age. This is not a friendly earth, but a violent and dangerous one.^{vi}

God's plan for a troubled world

God, however, has a plan – He will lift the curse and create a new heaven and a new earth.

Isaiah prophesies of that new earth that is no longer bound to decay and violence and fear. He says, in chapter 11, verses 6 through 9,

***And the wolf will dwell with the lamb,
And the leopard will lie down with the goat,
And the calf and the young lion . . . together;
And a little boy will lead them.
Also the cow and the bear will graze, . . .
The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra,
And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den.
They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain,
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord . . .***

Imagine that! Creation will return to God's earliest design. It will produce free from pestilence and danger; animals will dwell with mankind without fear on either side. The beauty of God's creation is wonderful in part now, but in total then.

Paul's message is – things are bad now . . . but they are going to get better!

That is why he uses the illustration of childbirth. Did you notice that in verse 22?

. . . creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth . . .

The groaning and the pain will not last forever. In fact, it will soon be all but forgotten.

For men who are married and have children – have you ever noticed that none of us carry around pictures of our wives in labor?

“Here she is in the middle of a contraction! Look at that expression!”

“What’s she saying?”

“I can’t repeat it!”

No, we do not have pictures of that! Frankly, I do not care to see any pictures of that time. What were we thinking?

Guys today set up video cameras and record the whole thing! Who is going to come over and watch it?! Even your wife does not want to remember!

Then the baby is born . . . but even in the first few days, those pictures are somewhat questionable. I know, I am a pastor and I am supposed to say, “Oh what a beautiful baby!”

That is what I am paid to say, right?

I do not particularly think newborn babies, around the time of their birth, are all that, well, beautiful. Even my own were somewhat . . . troubling. I am sorry, I cannot tell a lie.

If I see your newborn, I am probably just going to say, “Wow!”

You can fill in the blanks. You can tell your family, “Hey, the pastor was speechless!”

I was.

J. Vernon McGee let his congregation in on his secret by telling them that his standard line when seeing a newborn was simply, “Now that’s a baby.”

The parents could interpret it any way they wanted.

I like “Wow!” better.

Actually, there are so many things about the birthing process that are agonizing and painful and unattractive. And there are some things about it that are precious and unforgettable and miraculous.

So, in that same manner, creation is marked by wonder and beauty and the revelation of God’s creative glory (Romans, chapter 1), but creation is also bound to decay and pain and violence and fear and agony (Romans, chapter 8).

However, there is coming a day when the agony will be over. It will not end by nature’s own hand or because of something mankind did to rescue it, but by God Himself, who will end the groaning of creation by renewing it.

We cannot even imagine the pictures we will take of this new heaven and new earth. John’s revelation described it, and it is beyond comprehension.

All we can know is that Paul says the groaning of creation will one day give way to the glory and beauty of God’s new creation.

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ⁱ World Magazine, (Dec. 27, 2003/Jan. 3, 2004).

ⁱⁱ Nov. 11, 2003, <http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/FORGIVES.HTM>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament (Baker Book House, 1989), p. 179.

^{iv} John MacArthur Jr., Romans: Volume 1 (Moody Press, 1991), p. 453.

^v R. Kent Hughes, Romans: Righteousness From Heaven (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 160.

^{vi} MacArthur, p. 455.