

On Tiptoe with Expectation: Expanding our Hope in the Face of Suffering

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The prospect of suffering and hardship is never pleasant. Whatever its cause, it's something that most people would gladly avoid whenever possible. Could there be conditions, however, which make suffering not only tolerable, even welcome? Paul thinks that there are.

Paul knew what it was to suffer, and whether or not he knew much of the actual situation in Rome, he would have assumed that Christians there faced challenges similar to those elsewhere. This was no theoretical topic. He is addressing something that is intensely real in the lives of fellow Christians, and mindful of their struggles, he seeks to strengthen what they believe. Like any good pastoral leader and teacher, he wants to help them connect what they believe with the realities of their everyday lives.

The theme of suffering emerges at the beginning of chapter 5 as Paul describes the consequences of justification. The discussion runs like this: We have been set right with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (4:25); therefore, we are at peace with God (5:1), but that also means that we have confidence in our hope for the future (5:2). But there's more: our status in God's grace ('God's undeserved kindness on which we take our stand' [CEV]) means that we can maintain that confidence in the face of suffering and adversity. Indeed, God's grace is so powerful that even things that work against our confidence and hope only serve to strengthen it, since those who know God's grace also know 'that suffering produces endurance' (5:3), which creates character, which in turn reinforces hope (5:4), and that hope 'does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (5:5).

Paul will develop these themes in chapter 8, culminating in a magnificent hymn to God's love in Christ. The certainty of God's love, poured into our hearts by the Spirit, is the foundation for Christian hope, and it is why this hope never disappoints. Joseph Fitzmyer points out, what is at issue here 'is not "our love of God," ... but "God's love for us."¹

Paul's approach to suffering is bound up with hope, so let's be clear about what he understands by hope. In his understanding there are two characteristics. For us there is normally an element of risk to hope. If I say, 'I hope to come to this seminar', I mean, 'I wish to come, and probably think there's a good chance that I'll come, but I can't be certain that I'll get there.' In contrast, Paul's view of hope contains a very high element of security and certainty. That's the first characteristic. The second is rooted in the reliability of God and God's promises. Hope is not grounded on a calculation of probabilities, anymore than it is a form of wishful thinking. Hope is grounded in who God is, and such hope 'does not disappoint' because God is who God is, and that is what provides confidence in facing the future. In Romans 4:18, Paul gives the example of Abraham, and says that, 'Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations"...' He means that Abraham's believing in hope had, as John Ziesler expresses it:

a strongly forward thrust, because he could rely on God's continuing to be the faithful God he had already been. There was no need for doubt about the outcome (though of course this is a somewhat idealised picture of Abraham, who in the Genesis story did not exhibit such consistent confidence in God).²

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *Spiritual Exercises Based on Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Manilla: Paulist Press, 1998), p. 82

² John Ziesler, *Paul's letter to the Romans - Trinity Press International New Testament Commentaries* (London: SCM, 2005), p. 132

What we hope for takes different emphasises and expressions within the Pauline body of writing. In Romans it is hope for sharing the glory of God (5:2), and later in chapter 8 it will include the redemption of our bodies (8:24). In other letters he will speak of it as our hope of righteousness (Galatians 5:5); for life after death and being with Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:13,17); for salvation (1 Thessalonians 5:8); for eternal life (Titus 1:2; 3:7); for the return of Christ (Titus 2:13), but it always points to the one reality in the future; to our ultimate destiny.

Let's turn then to the second half of Romans 8, where Paul expands on what he says in 5:1-5. In the first half of chapter 8 he describes the new life we know as Christians; a life empowered by the Spirit; a life that leads us to share in the risen life of Christ. We are the children of God, free to call God "Abba! Father!" 'and if children of God, then heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.' This is our destiny, though there is a consequence to our inheritance: suffering. 'We will suffer with Christ so that we may also be glorified with him'(8:17). We ought to be willing to suffer with Christ because what lies ahead of us, our future glory, far outweighs any present suffering we may experience, however intense that may be. In Paul's mind, there is no comparison between present adversity and what is to come. The glory that lies ahead of us is so much greater.

Paul opens this section with a statement that may sound strange to some: 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us' (8:18). This isn't exactly what a client-centred counsellor would say and I wonder how many of us would take that as our first response to suffering. On first reading it might seem that Paul is down playing the affect of suffering on our lives, but what he is doing is acknowledging that suffering is a given in life, and in particular Christian life, and is seeking to put our sufferings and hardships in proper perspective. Paul wants us to realise that, though suffering must be endured as part of the human experience, it is insignificant in *comparison* to the glory awaiting us.

Paul can make this bold assertion because of his view of the divine plan of salvation, which involves not just humans, but all creation. He's going to take us out of our highly individualised perception of life, which tends to be rooted in the present, and paint a scene that encompasses all that is and shall be. It is an extraordinary view of creation, extending far beyond the limits of our present experience. It's cosmic in its scope, involving not only humans, but all that is, animate and inanimate: 'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God' (8:19). The Greek, as one commentator puts it, describes the attitude of a person scanning the horizon with head thrust forward eagerly searching the distance for the first signs of the dawn break of glory.³ Tom Wright offers a vivid translation: 'Creation itself is on tiptoe with expectation.'⁴ There's no sense of a weary, defeated waiting. Life, while tough at times, is full of throbbing expectation and all of creation is in this state of eager expectation. Why is it so eager? Because presently it is 'subjected to futility' by the will of God 'in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (8:20-21).

What do we make of this picture of God subjecting creation to futility and then rescuing it? All of creation experiences this sense of frustration and bondage: 'change and decay in all around I see.'⁵ That's how things are, but it's not how the Creator intended it, though the Creator allowed it to be. Paul is drawing on Genesis 3, where God describes the aftermath of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, which includes the cursing of the earth itself (3:17-18). No longer will the earth spontaneously bring forth food, but rather thorns and thistles. Creation itself will suffer from the sin of Adam, and that in its turn is a further part of Adam's punishment. Adam chose to sin and bore the

³ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, (Edinburgh: The St Andrew Press, 1966) p.119

⁴ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone - Romans Part 1* (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 150

⁵ H.F. Lyte in the hymn 'Abide with me...'

consequence, but the rest of creation unwittingly became involved, and now it waits, along with humankind, to be liberated from the frustration and futility of death and decay.

If, by the way, this picture of creation's suffering for human perversity strikes us as fanciful, then we might consider what we have done by way of abusing the world about us: polluting the air and water; the thoughtless exploitation of natural resources; the consequences of global warming. Perhaps Paul's view has at its core a hard reality.

Paul doesn't divide the created order into independent, disconnected sections. What happens in one area will have repercussions on all. He could no more think of humans apart from their environment than he could conceive of them apart from their bodies. Therefore, sin and salvation affect not only the bodies of humans but also their environment. However, if human sin negatively affects the physical world, then salvation from human sin will affect it positively. The ultimate destiny of the world about us, is not annihilation but transformation. Chrysostom summed it up:

Paul means by this that the creation became corruptible. Why and for what reason?

Because of you, O man! ... The creation suffered badly because of you, and it became corruptible, but it has not been irreparably damaged. For it will become incorruptible once again for our sake. This is the meaning of in *hope*.⁶

Human sin may have smashed the cosmos back to chaos, but God will not let sin have the last word, anymore than God will allow death to have the final word. Creation, though knowing corruption and futility, has a glorious destiny. It shall be put back on track by God. This was a familiar picture to Jews of the day. Isaiah, for example, speaks of God creating 'new heavens and a new earth' (65:17 & 66:22), and that thinking made it possible for Paul to conceive of frustrated creation liberated by Christ from its 'perishability and putrefaction.'⁷ God will make all things new. Of course, Paul is amplifying the Genesis story. He understands it in the light of Christ's redeeming work and reads into it a message of hope. The good news is that the consequence of Adam's disobedience will also be set right by God in the final transformation. No longer will creation punish and work against humankind. Along with humans, it will ultimately be transformed and renewed, regaining its original goodness.

This picture of the future is so much greater than many imagine. The hope for a restored, redeemed creation, challenges the popular perception of salvation which can be highly individualistic and self-centred. It's not uncommon for Christians talk of their future hope as a 'me and Jesus' thing: it's about my personal relationship to God and the hope of glory concerns me going to be with God after this life. Contrast that rather egocentric hope to one that is nothing less than cosmic. 'The story begins with the creation of all things, and it reaches finally to "all things" made new.'⁸ Without negating the personal dimension, Paul is expanding our vision and placing our hope into a mega context in which *all* creation is striving to attain ultimate glory and liberty. Ziesler puts it nicely: 'Not only the man and the woman, but the garden itself will enjoy restoration, a restoration that will match the 'glorious liberty of the children of God.'⁹

A recreated order doesn't come painlessly to birth; the confusion and struggles that we witness and in which we share, is the travail out of which a new, transformed world will come. This is our present state; a time of tension; of waiting and longing for what shall be. Paul describes this with

⁶ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans 1*, quoted in Charles H. Talbert, *Romans - Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2002), p. 214

⁷ Fitzmyer, *Spiritual Exercises Based on Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 138

⁸ Allen Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying - Learning from Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), p. 265

⁹ Ziesler, *Paul's letter to the Romans*, p. 221

the image of childbirth: a mother in labour groaning and yearning for that moment of deliverance, longing for the delivery of her child (8:22).

At this point he elaborates on the nature of what we shall receive as part of our glorious destiny; telling us that it will include 'the redemption of our bodies' (8:23). He speaks about this in greater detail in 1 Corinthians: 'This perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality. (15:53)' It would be tempting to launch into a dissertation on the nature of resurrection, but I shall be restrained and simply say that Paul is affirming that our redemption somehow involves the whole person. Our transformation is not along the lines of a Neo-platonic release from the physical, but a transformation of our total embodiment. Paul does not spurn the physical in favour of the 'spiritual.' All that God made is good. The vision is of humans as wholes together with their physical environment totally liberated to realise their ultimate glory and destiny.

For the moment we live in the present, which is so often hard and painful, and yet before us is the promise of a glorious future. No wonder we groan and sigh, but then Paul gives us this striking analysis of Christian hope: 'Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience' (8:24, 25). The hope we have is more than a matter of persuading ourselves that things will surely be better in the future. Our hope is sure because we've already been given a foretaste of its fulfilment. We have received a first instalment of our destiny; what Paul calls 'the first fruits of the Spirit.(8:23)' The Spirit is a foretaste of what will come in due course. He goes on (8:26-27) to develop the role of the Spirit, and says that it helps us in our weakness, helping us to pray; interceding 'with sighs too deep for words'. Paul Achtemeier contends that the Spirit is a foretaste of our glorious destiny because the transformation that will occur will involve, 'the restoration of communication between God and his creation.' He continues:

Such communication as we now have with God through his Spirit is a foretaste of the final consummation. Furthermore, such communication now takes the form of prayer, so it is in prayer that the Spirit provides us that foretaste. Without the Spirit, we are at a loss to know how to communicate with God. That is the legacy of human rebellion and sin.¹⁰

Throughout this discussion Paul's underlying belief is that we can have confidence in our future with God because the future is in God's hands, not ours. If it depended on us, we could expect more of the same botching of human chances with which history is replete. Only because God has taken control of our future, is our future redemption secure.

'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose' (8:28). Here is one of those verses which are sometimes misused in pastoral situations, suggesting a Pollyanna unwillingness to acknowledge suffering even when it slaps us in the face. 'Those who love God' is Paul's definition of the Christian. That phrase doesn't mean that everything will be okay because we love God; that we can place our confidence in our love of God and thus be assured that everything will work out fine. The reason that all things work for good is to be found in God, and God alone. We are in God's hands; in the hands of the God who sent the Son for us and raised him from the dead, and therefore all things will ultimately be resolved in good. Achtemeier is quite right to say that:

Apart from confidence in such a God, heaven knows we would have no reason for optimism about human fate. Left to our own devices, we humans will again snatch evil from the jaws of goodness. No, our confidence is sure precisely because our future is not in our hands....

¹⁰ Paul Achtemeier, *Romans - Interpretation - A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 143

It lies in God's hands. Redemption is the powerful act of a loving God ... and part of that love is not to allow us to botch it up.¹¹

That, I suggest, is the point when Paul uses the words 'predestined' and 'foreknew' (8:29-30). Predestination, as used here, is good news because it focuses on the belief that God knows the destination to which creation will be brought, namely redemption, renewal and restoration, and that destiny is firmly set in God's purposes. As Paul has already stated, 'creation will be set free from its bondage and decay' (8:21). Come what may, that is where God is taking us and all creation. Our ultimate destiny does not rest in our hands but in those of an all-powerful and loving God, whose purpose is the redemptive transformation of all creation.

Christian hope is based on the promise of the glory that lies before us. It's not some sort of 'pie in the sky.' It is grounded in the sure promises of God and it is those promises that underlie the hope which inform Paul's understanding of predestination.¹² The fact that he speaks of predestination in conjunction with hope, and not judgement, is important for understanding why Paul is so confident and not fearful. He knows that our future is in God's hands, and that is the basis for his confidence and joy, rather than of fear and pain.

The future gives meaning and purpose to the present and the past, and Paul's grand vision of the future glory is what leads to hope. Christian hope realises God's ability to redeem the future from an unpromising, inadequate, even chaotic present. To put this in a context that we might identify with, take the example of the call of Moses (Exodus 3:1 - 4:17). If anything is clear in that story, it's Moses' dismal self-assessment. Repeatedly he self-negates, denying his value to God's future plans for the people. For every task God has for Moses in the redemptive future of Israel, Moses has a reason why he couldn't possibly be a part of it. Yet it's precisely that Moses who became the instrument by which God brought to reality the future redemption of Israel. However dismal and confusing present possibilities may appear for God's glorious plans in the future, God can nevertheless use them to accomplish the divine restorative purposes.

Now we come to one of Paul's most eloquent passages of Christian comfort and assurance, one that is quoted at least five times in our funeral liturgies. A series of rhetorical questions are posed to a defendant (the Christian), and each time Paul answers in terms of what God has already done in Christ. 'If God is for us, who is against us?' (8:31) God is on our side, and no one can undo that relationship. Any forces marshalled against us are nothing; they cannot prevail. The prosecutor has no case against us. 'He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?' (8:32) The demonstration that God is on our side is the gift of Jesus. God has given us the best: 'his own Son.' If God was willing to give us that, is there anything God would withhold from us? The answer is a resounding 'No!'

'Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (8:34, 35)' The only ones who have the power to accuse or condemn us are God or the Son, and they are the very ones who protect us. Therefore, we have nothing to fear. Whatever happens to us that we might construe as God's rejection; be it tribulation or anxiety, persecution or famine, poverty or war, has lost its power to mean that, because God is on our side.

This repudiates the belief that suffering is evidence of God's disfavour or rejection of us. Banished is the notion that when things go badly, it means that God has deserted us. It's not uncommon for

¹¹ Achtemeier, *Romans*, p, 144

¹² I am indebted to Achtemeier for this perspective; see *Romans*, pp. 144-145

some Christians to assume that, since God is meant to be in control, when tragedy befalls, it speaks of God's rejection or punishment of the afflicted. That theology emerged post the Canterbury earthquakes, but as this passage makes clear, it's not a legitimate conclusion to draw. Certainly, God continues to exercise judgement. Furthermore, until the final transformation of all creation, the kind of things mentioned back in verse 35 (hardship, suffering, persecution, etc.) will continue, and more, but that doesn't mean God has abandoned us. Christ's resurrection from the grave demonstrates that suffering and affliction do not have the last word; nor does death. Our destiny lies irremovably in God's hands.

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (8:38-39)

There is no dimension of reality, no time, no space, no experience that we can undergo, that has the power to frustrate God's care and love for us, not even death. God has known us from the first and set us on the path of a destiny surrounded by divine love. Achtemeier summarizes it well:

Armed with that knowledge, we can face the future with hope and confidence, knowing that the Lord of creation is a lord of love and that he is for, not against, us. There, laid bare, is the basis our Christian confidence: the surety of grace.¹³

It is love of God that illuminates the darkness of suffering and gives meaning and purpose to the Christian's life on earth. John Donne said that one of the best symbols of God is a circle, for a circle is endless; 'whom God loves, he loves to the end; and not only to the end, to their death, but to his end, and his end is, that he might love them still.'¹⁴

To possess such a hope does not debar us from lament; it doesn't not negate the need to grieve; it does not deny the pain and heartache that adversity and suffering causes. As one writer says:

The spine of lament is hope: not the vacuous optimism that, 'things will get better,' which in the short run is usually a lie, but the deep and irrepressible conviction, in the teeth of present evidence, that God has not severed the umbilical cord that has always bound us to the Lord.¹⁵

Paul's affirmation is that our hope is based on God's power and undying love, demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Its scope is cosmic without ceasing to be personal, and that leaves me wondering: how does that hope, calling us to stand on tiptoe, eager and expectant, shape my life and yours? How is that hope displayed in our living; in actions and words that reflect God's future and makes it somehow real in our present? I wonder...

¹³ Achtemeier, *Romans*, p, 150

¹⁴ 'Sermon on The Nativity – Preached Christmas Day, 1624' in Alford, Henry, *The Works of John Donne* (London: John W. Parker, 1839), p. 27

¹⁵ C. Clifton Black, 'The Persistence of the Wounds' in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew and Public Square*, quoted by Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying* p. 268