

Future Glory

Who among us cannot wait to go to heaven! From our Second Reading today, Paul says that the glory awaiting us in heaven is something that “is about to be revealed to us,” (Rom. 8:18). As such, it lies off in the future. It is, to a great extent, an unknown quantity to Paul and us. We can’t know or comprehend it fully. And it can’t be adequately described for us, because we have no experience with anything like it. Paul doesn’t attempt to describe it either. Rather, he gives us a feel for the greatness and glory of heaven by showing the keen anticipation and eager expectation it causes not only in the children of God but in all creation, animate and inanimate alike. He says, “*The creation is waiting with eager expectation to see the revealing of God’s children,*” (8:19).

There are a number of difficulties that confront us here. We are dealing with prophecy - Paul is speaking of things coming in the future. The broad outline is clear, but the details are still lacking.

A second factor is that Paul here is using a figure of speech called personification. He ascribes personal qualities and characteristics, such as thinking and feeling, to things other than people. Creation “*waiting with eager expectation*” (v. 19); creation “*has been groaning*” (v. 22). How creation does this and how Paul knows about it are not revealed to us. A mitigating factor in all this is that we really don’t need to have answers to these questions. Nor is Paul’s main purpose here to give us a detailed description of creation’s “attitude” during its career in a sin-stained world. The apostle’s emphasis becomes clear in verse 23, where the believer’s anticipation of glory becomes the real focus of attention, “*as we wait eagerly for our adoption as His children, for the redemption of our bodies.*”

Paul tells us that creation is waiting “*for the revealing of God’s children,*” (v.19). In the everyday world, it is impossible to tell with certainty who is a child of God. True, open idolatry and rank godlessness may make it fairly clear that some are not on the road to salvation. But there are many honourable and upstanding people of whom no such determination can be made. Who is and who is not among “God’s children” will become public knowledge only on judgment day. Then Jesus will formally separate the sheep from the goats.

Paul says creation is eagerly awaiting judgment day, when the believers will be identified, because that day correlates closely with its own release from “futility.” The apostle writes, “²⁰ *For this created world has been subjected to futility, not by its own choice, but because of the One who subjected it; in hope,* ²¹ *because the created world itself will also be freed from its slavery to decay, in order to have the glorious freedom of the children of God.*”

Creation is described as being frustrated because its original goodness and bounty became diminished by man’s fall into sin. Ever since that time, there has been a constant deterioration. Creation is in “*slavery to decay.*” A further frustration is that creation really didn’t have this coming, as we might say. The downturn didn’t happen to creation “*by its own choice.*” No, it was God’s will to curse the earth and have it produce thorns and thistles. In this way it became hard to work and as such served as a constant reminder to Adam and his descendants of the seriousness of their sin (see

Genesis 3:17–19).

But now Paul gives us a little glimpse into what the future holds for creation. He says it was subjected to its present state of frustration “*in hope,* ²¹ *because the created world itself will also be freed from its slavery to decay, in order to have the glorious freedom of the children of God.*”

Scripture speaks clearly about a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness will dwell (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1-4). It does not, however, settle for us with certainty whether the new heaven and new earth will be made of new material or whether the existing world will be recycled and restored. Paul’s way of speaking here inclines one toward thinking in terms of restoration. Passages such as 2 Peter 3:10-13 allow more room for the thought of the present world being destroyed and replaced with another. The point is interesting but not essential for us to know. Nor is it Paul’s main emphasis here, as we see when he now turns to the real focus of attention, namely, the lot of believers.

Without going into any additional details, Paul asserts that the whole creation has been groaning in eager anticipation for things to be set right on judgment day. When he continues with “*Not only so, ...*” he is using a shortened expression for the fuller statement: Not only does creation groan in this way, “*but we ourselves also.*” Paul has now come to the point that he wishes the Roman Christians to focus on, namely, patient endurance under suffering as they wait for God’s great day.

The first step in building up their fortitude for waiting patiently for their inheritance is to call attention to what they have already received. He does that by referring to them as people “*who have the firstfruits of the Spirit,*” (v. 23). In Old Testament times, God commanded His people to offer the first of the harvest to Him (Exodus 23:19; Deuteronomy 26:1–11). For the believers to cheerfully offer the first of the crop to the Lord implied their trust and confidence that God would be giving them more later on. As such, the “firstfruits” came to be looked at as a pledge, a token, God’s down payment, assuring that God would give them the rest of the harvest also.

Paul uses that picture when he speaks of the Holy Spirit as being God’s firstfruit. God’s sending the Holy Spirit into their hearts is God’s down payment assuring them that He will also give them the rest of what He has promised.

What the Romans were eagerly waiting for, and what God had promised to give them, was their “*adoption as His children.*” This is the same term Paul used previously in verse 15, but with a different meaning. There it meant being taken into God’s family, becoming His sons and heirs. Here Paul is talking of the full realisation of what God had promised in making them sons and heirs. Hence Paul defines what “adoption as sons” means here by adding “*the redemption of our bodies,*” (v. 23). That redemption will take place in the final resurrection when believers are raised with glorified bodies to live with God forever. That glorious hope is to strengthen the Roman Christians, and us, who groan inwardly in eager anticipation of God’s great day.

The fact that we live in hope for a fulfillment of God's promises that we don't see yet during our lifetimes shouldn't surprise us. Hope is, after all, an integral part of God's plan of salvation. Faith alone saves, but faith, which is essentially trust and confidence in God's promises, also gives us a basis for sure, confident hope.