



**LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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Waiting with Eager Longing Romans 8:17-23

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Sometimes you have to stand back and look at the big picture when you want to find your way. Think of going to a strange town and getting lost going from street to street and intersection to intersection. I think of when I first started working in Bellingham and was always getting lost. What's now Bellingham was originally five separate small towns, each laid out on its own street grid, none of which matched up, but they all grew together around the bay and the city gradually grew up around those cores—and then when they built Interstate 5 they cut it all in half, leaving only a handful of thoroughfares connecting the halves. I've got a good sense of direction and I don't often bother with maps, but I eventually had to break down and buy one so that I wasn't perpetually getting lost. A map lets you get above things so that you can see the lay of the land. The big picture helps you get your bearings.

The same thing happens with the Bible. It starts when we're children. We read books full of disconnected "Bible stories". We end up knowing Adam and Abraham and Moses and Jesus, but we struggle to know how their stories are related and part of the bigger story. As adults the most common approach to reading the Bible—when we read it!—is the cover-to-cover, Genesis-to-Revelation approach. Don't misunderstand; any type of Bible reading is good Bible reading, but the order the books of the Bible are arranged in isn't chronological and doesn't do much to help us see the "big picture". Even Bible scholars and theologians aren't immune from missing the big picture. They're often so focused on the

individual trees that it becomes easy to inadvertently forget the shape of the forest.

I say this because our Epistle from Romans 8 this morning is one those wonderful, short passages that bring us back to the big picture of the Good News, of God's redemption and renewal of humanity and of his entire Creation. But even here we might miss it. Many Christians reading through Romans miss the big picture here because they aren't expecting Paul's language of God subjecting his Creation to futility and bondage and of that Creation waiting in with eager longing. And yet our Epistle this morning is St. Paul leading us right to the climax of his letter to the Romans. It's the hill from which we can see the lay of the land, where we've come from, where we're going, and how it all fits together.

We don't have time this morning to get into the details of Paul's line of reasoning in the first half of Romans, but what he does in those chapters is to work his way through the story of Israel and all her ups and downs—and for Israel things were mostly "down". And now in Chapter 8 he begins talking about the life in the flesh versus life in the Spirit and the law of sin and death versus the law of the Spirit. This is where, in verse 11, he famously writes that if the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead lives in us, the One who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to our mortal bodies—if we are in Christ Jesus we live in hope of the same resurrection he has experienced. But even more than that, Paul goes on to write, through our union with Jesus we are children and heirs of God, fellow heirs with Christ—that means *sharing in Jesus' inheritance*. But what is that? Paul writes in verse 17 that it means to suffer with him so that we can be glorified with him. The Christian life—life with Jesus—for Paul means two things: suffering and glory. Suffering is a given as we long for glory.

What does that mean? What does Paul mean by "glory"? And what about suffering? Most Christians living through the last two thousand years have understood that suffering is part of our calling as we follow Jesus. Jesus promised it. The New Testament writers talk about it often—and most of them faced it themselves and were martyred for proclaiming the lordship of Jesus. Many of our brothers and sisters today are persecuted for their faith in various parts of the world. And yet in the West—probably in part because we haven't faced persecution for such a long time—many Christians have no place for suffering in their theology. Many even go so far as to say that if you're experiencing suffering—sickness, poverty, rejection or anything else negative—it's due to a lack of faith. But that's just the opposite of what Jesus taught and it's just the opposite of what Paul teaches here. The inheritance we share with Jesus is one of suffering that leads to glory. What this means is at the centre of our Epistle and Paul goes on in verse 18:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Paul says, "For I consider..." That doesn't mean this is his opinion. Paul uses the same Greek word several times as he builds his argument in Romans. Other translations say "I reckon". The sense of it is, "This is how I work it out". Knowing the Scriptures, knowing Jesus, working under the Spirit's inspiration, this is the only conclusion he can reach. He's been building this argument for eight chapters in Romans and here he reaches the inevitable conclusion: those who will be glorified will first face suffering, *but* that this suffering can't begin to compare with the glory to be revealed.

Think about what a powerful statement that was when Paul wrote this. When he writes that word

“suffering” most of us probably read into that whatever our own trials and tribulations are. That’s fine. But what did Paul have in mind? Later in the chapter, in verses 35-36 he writes that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ—*nothing*—and then he goes on to detail the sorts of suffering that he and other Christians were facing—things people might think mean that God doesn’t love them, things they might think show a lack of faith, things that might separate them from Jesus. Here’s his list: hardship or distress, persecution or famine, nakedness or peril or sword. And he quotes from Psalm 44: “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted sheep to be slaughtered.” These things are far worse than the sorts of suffering any of us are likely to face. And as horrible as this suffering was, none of it could compare with the glory to be revealed—no amount of suffering could make the glory not worth it.

But what is the glory Paul’s writing about? Our translation says that this glory is to be revealed “to us”, but that makes it sound like we’re going to be spectators to this glory. What Paul writes in Greek has the sense of this glory revealed *towards* us or *into* us. It’s a sense of this glory being bestowed on us as a gift—and this makes perfect sense when we remember what Paul said before: that if we are in Christ, then we will share in his inheritance—we will *participate* in his inheritance.

And what’s the inheritance? Well, who is Jesus? He is Lord. His glory is revealed or it’s unveiled in his glorious and sovereign rule of Creation and Paul is saying here that the glory we wait for with eager longing, the glory that is the basis for our hope as Christians is not glory in the sense many people often think. We often think of “glory” as a place or a state of being. When a Christian dies we often hear people say that he or she has gone on or been promoted

to “glory”. Brothers and Sisters, “glory” isn’t going to heaven when you die. As Jesus’ glory is his sovereign rule over Creation, so the glory to be revealed in us is our participation, our sharing in the sovereign and saving rule of Jesus. And this is why he says what he does in verse 19:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

If our hope, if our glory—as it is so often wrongly portrayed—was for the destruction of this world and an eternity of disembodied existence in heaven with God, then the Creation would have no reason to eagerly long for that glory to be revealed. What Paul describes here is the opposite: God’s Creation is waiting for the great day when its true rulers are revealed, the sons of God, and when it will be delivered from corruption. Look at verses 20-22:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

This is where we need to stand back and look at the big picture. Everything Paul’s saying here is dependent on that. It’s the big picture the Bible gives of us of God’s Creation, from beginning to end. We read in Genesis that God created and that everything was good. We even read there that when he created human beings he looked at his handiwork and declared us not just “good”, but “very good”. But we look around us now and have to wonder what happened. War is always ranging somewhere, there’s violence everywhere, there’s greed and corruption everywhere.

Justice is in short supply and so are the basic things that people need to survive—maybe not in our part of the world, but for billions of others. And yet even if we don’t pay attention to the big evils that play out on the international scene—or even on the local scene, for that matter—we only have to look at the struggles that we have ourselves and that we share with our family and friends to keep away from sin and to do good. Hate is easy; love is hard. Paul knew it. The Roman Christians knew it. We know it.

Paul tells the story of Creation in the book of Romans, but he tells it as Israel’s story. We don’t have time to run through the whole book this morning obviously, but Paul’s point is that the whole Creation is enslaved in the same sort of way that Israel was in Egypt. And right there we get a glimmer of hope. Remember, when Israel went down to Egypt—we read about that in the story of Jacob and Joseph—it was all according to the Lord’s plan. The Lord arranged for Joseph to become a slave in Egypt so that through him he could rescue his people. Egypt started out good for Israel. When things turned around under a new king who enslaved Israel, it wasn’t because the Lord had ceased to be good and it wasn’t because the Lord was no longer in control. No. We learn later that the Lord allowed the Israelites to become slaves in Egypt so that he could then manifest his glorious sovereignty to everyone—to Israel in rescuing her and to the Egyptians by showing his power over her false gods and over her mighty horses and chariots. In the Exodus, the Lord marked Israel forever as the people he had freed from slavery, people to whom he had given a new life. That became their national identity, celebrated every year in the Passover.

In all of that Paul is working up to his point here. As the Lord allowed Israel to fall into bondage to Egypt, so he

has allowed his good Creation to be subjected to death and decay. We may look around and wonder if things are hopeless. Every time one war ends and we see peace break out another war begins somewhere else. We work hard to lift this group out of poverty, but then that group over there falls into it. We cure one disease only to have two new ones crop up. Isaiah wrote about a day when the lion would lie down with the lamb and we look around us and wonder if that's ever going to happen.

And Paul assures us: Yes, it's for real. This is God's promise. No matter how bad things are, this is still his good Creation and he has promised to put everything to rights. Even as he cast Adam and Eve from the garden he was promising them that he would one day overcome sin and restore everything to the way it should be. Genesis shows things going from bad to worse. It shows us humanity losing even the very knowledge of God and sinking into paganism and idolatry. But then it tells us how God came to Abraham and established a covenant with him. The Lord promised that through Abraham and his family he would restore not only humanity, but all of Creation and here Paul reminds us what that means, what it looks like and why the Creation itself would long for it to happen.

Again, we need the big picture—we need to remember where things started. In Genesis we read that the Lord created human beings to be his image bearers. Theologians have argued for two thousand years over what exactly that means, but in the last century, as we've been able to read the Old Testament in light of other Jewish and Ancient Near Eastern literature that's been unearthed we've realised that the language of Genesis is temple language. Israel's pagan neighbours built great stone temples and then places images of their gods in them. Those images represented the gods' rule or sovereignty over the land and

people. And Genesis uses the same languages and imagery, except that in Genesis it's the Lord himself who builds his own temple—the cosmos—and instead of placing an image of himself carved in stone or gold in it, he creates human beings, to live in his presence in the temple, but also to rule his creation justly and wisely—to have dominion and to subdue Creation in the Lord's name. That's what it meant for humanity to bear God's image: to be his stewards, the priests of his temple. But then we chose to rebel. As Paul writes in Romans 1, we chose to worship the Creation instead of the Creator. We subjected the Lord's good creation to corruption.

Now, in light of that, it should make sense that Creation is longing for the day when our inheritance is revealed. That's the day when Creation will be set free from the corruption we brought on it. That's the day when we, Creation's stewards will be restored and renewed and put back in charge, reigning with Jesus. Again, think back to Israel. He chose and called her, he rescued her, he made her his people, he sent her to the nations to bring healing and restoration. But she rebelled and she rejected her mission. And yet the Lord didn't give up and he didn't change his plan to redeem his Creation through Israel. He simply sent a faithful Israelite—he sent Jesus. And Jesus not only redeemed Israel by dying in her place, he established a new Israel in his own person, a new people to be a light to the nations—this time equipped by the Holy Spirit.

This is what Paul is getting at in verse 23. It's not just the Creation that groans in eager longing:

And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

The Lord hasn't given up on his Creation any more than he gave up on

Israel. Creation is eagerly waiting for its rightful stewards to be set right. On that great day the Lord will make all things new and restore his redeemed people to their rightful place as good, wise, and just rulers of Creation—as the faithful priests of his temple. This is what it means for our glory to be revealed. The big picture, the story of redemption, reminds us that this was how it was supposed to be from the beginning. And so we groan and we wait eagerly too. We live in the mess we've made here in the world. We live with sin and with sickness and with death, and yet we live in hope, knowing that what God has begun in Jesus he will one day complete.

And we can hope because our God has given us the firstfruits of his new creation. He's given a down payment on what he has promised. The present age and its rulers have been decisively defeated by Jesus at the cross and the empty tomb and God's new age has been inaugurated. Jesus is Lord. He truly is God's King. He's given us his Spirit—Paul describes the Spirit here as the firstfruits—and that's because we live in the overlap between these two ages, these two kingdoms. The Jews brought the firstfruits of the harvest—usually sheaves of grain harvested at the very beginning of the season—as offerings to God. They offered them in good years and even in bad years in faith that God would provide the rest of the harvest. And so the Spirit is the sign of hope for us. The life he gives to us here and now is a reminder that encourages our faith and hope in the resurrection and the new creation to come. We groan and we sigh, we wait longingly in eager expectation, but our hope is certain because God is faithful and keeps his promises. The prophet Habakkuk wrote that one day the glory of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. Brothers and Sisters, when that seems impossible, we only need remember the cross of Jesus, his

empty tomb, and his gift of the Holy Spirit.

But our faith is not a complacent faith. We haven't been redeemed by Jesus and given the gift of the Spirit so that we can retreat into a sort of personal holiness or private piety while we wait for Jesus to return. Not at all. Jesus has inaugurated this new age in his resurrection and somehow someday the making new that began in his resurrection will encompass all of Creation and you and I are called, in the power of the Spirit, to embody that renewing work here and now. How is Habakkuk's prophecy going to be fulfilled? How does the knowledge of the glory of the Lord spread to cover the earth? Brothers and Sisters, that's *our* mission. We're called to proclaim to the world the Good News that Jesus is Lord and that his kingdom is here and now. Our mission is to call the world to repentance and faith. But don't forget: We are also called to *live out* repentance and faith in our lives in such a way that we lift the veil on the kingdom and that we give a glimpse to the world of what heaven on earth looks like. So far as we are able to do so today, we are called to exercise the good dominion that was given to Adam—we are called to be stewards of God's temple, of his Creation. Jesus has led the way for us here, the second Adam. In his earthly ministry he made his Father's new creation known in practical ways to the people around him and so should we. In a world full of sin we should be visible in seeking after holiness. In a world full of war and injustice, we should be visible and at the forefront working for peace and justice. In a world full of hurting and sickness, we should be seeking to make the healing ministry of Jesus known. In a world full of anger and hate, we should be working for forgiveness and reconciliation.

If you're like me you might get discouraged thinking about the mission Jesus has given us. When I think of these things I think of things

that we as Christians can do to bring Jesus and his glory to the world in "big" ways. I think of Christians—and there are so often so few of us—working on the big international scene or I think of missionaries going to far off countries. And then I get discouraged. That's far away. It's bigger than me. But Friends, never forget that for every St. Paul or St. Peter, there were thousands of ordinary saints manifesting Jesus in their ordinary lives, proclaiming the Good News, and building the kingdom right where they were. We fulfil Jesus' calling to us as we raise covenant children to walk with him in faith and to live the values of his kingdom. We fulfil Jesus' calling when we work for peace and reconciliation with our neighbours, in our workplaces, and in our schools. We fulfil Jesus' calling when we forgive as we have been forgiven. We fulfil Jesus' calling when we love the hard-to-love people around us, knowing that we ourselves are hard-to-love too, but that Jesus loved us enough to die for us. We fulfil Jesus' calling when we sacrifice ourselves, our rights, our prerogatives, our time, and our treasure in order to make Jesus and his love known. In *everything* we do, we should be seeking to give the world signs and foretastes of God's new creation.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, as we asked earlier in the collect we ask again for grace that to pass through the trials of this life without losing the things of eternal importance. Remind us that the suffering we experience cannot begin to compare with the glory to be revealed to us. Remind us always of the suffering that Jesus endured for our sake that in love and gratitude we might suffer too for the sake of making him known. And as we think of Jesus' death and resurrection and as we live the life given by your Spirit, fill us with hope and faith, knowing that the glory inaugurated in us today will one day be fully accomplished in our own

resurrection and the restoration of all your Creation. Amen.