

Romans 8: The Groaning Creation

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Abstract

In Romans 8 Paul speaks of how the created order “groans” under human sin and awaits the return of Jesus. Though Paul is speaking in symbolic language about the end of time; nonetheless, we can learn from his way of speaking about nature. He has a high view of the natural order and believes that it will participate in the cosmic renewal at the end of time. We should share his respect and engage in better stewardship of the natural order and realize that it does indeed “groan” under modern human abuse.

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Romans 8:19-22

(19) For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; (20) for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope (21) 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. (22) We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;

These passages have puzzled commentators for years. In the greater context of the chapter in which this passage is found Paul seems to be talking about the return of Jesus and the beginning of the new glorious age. But he does not specifically say that, which has led some to wonder if he is talking about a transformation that is to occur in this world before the end of time. Given how he speaks of the grand nature of that future transformation, it probably is more likely that he is talking about the coming of Jesus. If so, what does it mean that nature shares in the glories of the coming age?

Commentators oft have observed that his language is typical of the apocalyptic language of that age, that is, discourse which speaks of a dramatic cosmic arrival of the great messianic age with violent upheavals in the world and in the greater cosmic order of the universe. Sometimes this new cosmic age brings the end of time and the beginning of an afterlife, at other times it is a radical transformation of life in this world which continues on a new and higher level of existence. Paul elsewhere uses such language and it certainly sounds as though he is speaking apocalyptically in this passage (Harrisville 129-130; Stott 241; Tobin 290; Jewett 520). The idea of cosmic redemption is also found in Colossians 1:15-20 and Ephesians 1:9-10 with the same type of imagery (Harrisville 129).

Scholarly discussion also focuses upon what Paul means by “creation” or *ktisis* in the Greek. Does it refer to: 1) all people, 2) unbelievers, 3) believers, 4) angels, 5) sub-human nature, 5) sub-human creation with angels, 6) unbelievers and nature, or 8) all nature and all humanity (Cranfield 1975: 411; 1985: 194; Witherington 222). Some would exclude humanity since they are not subject to futility not of their own will, for they are probably the perpetrators of this subjugation by virtue of their sin (Murray 302; Morris 321; Jewett 513). Thus, most scholars suggest that Paul is talking about nature or the created order (Witherington 223).

Paul sees a bond between humanity and the creation (Nygren 831 Byrne 250). Like others in the ancient world, he views the earth as a living organism, often personified as a female, and similar personification can be found in Psalms 96 and 98 (Stott 238; Jewett 512). Paul appears to be rooted in the language of the Old Testament and extra biblical literature, for many eschatological passages speak of creation sharing in the new world order of the coming age (Isaiah 11:4-9; 43:19-21; 55:12-13; 65:17, 25; 66:22; Ezekiel 45:4-8; 51:4-15; 4 Ezra 8:51-54; 2 Baruch 29:1-8; Sibylline Oracle 3:777-795). But Paul may be unique in the ancient world in that he feels the pain of creation (Morris 318).

It has also been noted that Paul may be reacting against Latin religious and political propaganda which spoke of the golden age as having come with the reign of Caesar Augustus. Virgil, the propagandist for Augustus, spoke of a golden age for people and nature that would produce agricultural plenty without human toil in the *Fourth Eclogue* 11-41 and the *Aeniad* 6.789-794. Paul indirectly denies that it came in the past with Augustus, but that it would arrive soon with the coming of Jesus (Jewett 509-517)

Does Paul speak in general terms about a physical created order in which simply people will live? Or does Paul mean that we will have a new natural order created for us that includes animals and plants as we now have them in this world? Does Paul mean that the actual animals that lived in this world with us will be restored, that is, will we have our own personal pets back? All of these options have been suggested.

In seminary I had a brilliant New Testament professor, Walter Bartling, for a course entitled “Romans 1-8.” Yes, we had two separate courses on Romans. He said he felt that the text implied the second option above: there would be animals and plants, but not the specific animals we had on earth. Then he paused and said, “except for Buster.” He paused again. “Buster was a bull dog I used to own . . . best dog a person could ever desire. If Buster isn’t there, I don’t want to go.” He said it in jest, of course, but he touched upon some significant issues. Of course, we all would want those special pets we had on earth, because the point would be that we would wish to have a special relationship with animals in that new world. The second issue is, of course, that we simply do not know what Paul was talking about, what he meant specifically. Paul really speaks very quickly here and then moves on.

We read the text and we have questions: 1) What does it mean that creation waits with eager longing? Does it wait under the oppression of human sin? What phenomena is he describing in our world with this longing and oppression? 2) What does the “revealing of the children of God” mean? Are we the children of God, and if so, what does “revealing” describe? Paul does not use that language elsewhere. 3) Does “subjected to futility” mean the violent change from animal vegetarianism, which Gen 1:29-30 seems to imply existed at the beginning, to carnivorous behavior that some animals exhibit? In the new age will all animals be vegetarians? That’s what I was taught as a small child. Yes, lions will eat salads. Or does it mean that all life is subject to death and decay? Either way, it is difficult for us to conceive of such phenomena. The claws and the teeth of carnivores could never have been used for eating vegetables, and the process of plant and animal growth essentially entails eventual death and decay. 4) Does “who subjected it” refer to God or to humanity by virtue of our sin? 5) What does it mean that this subjection was done “in hope”? Is that the hope for the coming of the new age? 6) What is that subjection? Is it the violence in the animal realm? Is it death and decay in the animal realm? That was the opinion for the theologians in the early church (Horrell: 65-71). 7) What does “bondage to decay” mean? In general, commentators do not know (D. Moo: 29). We suppose that being set free from decay means that the animals will not grow old and die. 8) What is the “freedom of the glory of the children of God”? 9) How does nature groan? Does it suffer under human exploitation? Certainly that happened in the ancient world as well as the modern era. 10) How does nature exhibit labor pains? What are those labor pains? 11) Was Paul on drugs when he wrote this? 12) Was Paul speaking in very general terms without actually thinking out the implications of what he was saying? There are a lot of questions here that we cannot answer, although we pretend that we know the answers to some of them.

One may certainly speak of nature “groaning” today under the weight of human exploitation, even if that was not the idea foremost in the apostle’s mind. The disappearance of species, the destruction of rainforests, the warming of our planet, the incredible pollution of air and water, the overuse and destruction of croplands, to mention only a few ways in which we humans force nature to “groan,” certainly make this image a poignant one for us today. One of the best descriptions of this “groaning” of nature was uttered by Sigve Tonstad in his analysis of this Pauline text,

Perhaps we hear the wail of nature nowhere more piercingly than in the agonized squealing of pigs, turkey, and chickens that lead the line of victims of modern factory farming in the Western world. These animals, in descending order, are the most abused animals of our time. They testify, each in their own distinctive voice, that the relationship between human and nonhuman creation fractured by the Fall has in our time become unhinged and intolerable (Tonstad: 147).

Ultimately, all the commentators say that this passage indicates that God's saving purposes extend not only to humanity but also to the entire created order, animals and plants. Then they provide only "brief discussion" because they do not know what to say considering Paul's dramatic but vague language (Horrell: 77). Perhaps, Paul is speaking this way because he views the fate of humanity intertwined with the rest of life in the world. Perhaps, he is rhapsodically speaking in vague terms without real concrete images of the particulars of what will happen. I suspect that to be the case. But what is important is that Paul views the destiny of humanity intertwined and interconnected with the rest of life on this planet, even though he is certainly not an ecologist. Paul is certainly personifying creation, giving it a human appearance, especially with the attribution of "groaning," and this is a very high view of the created order (J. Moo and White: 105).

If creation is waiting with eager longing and groaning in anticipation of the new age or the coming of Christ, does that imply that the salvific activity of Jesus on the cross and the empty tomb was done not only for humanity but also for the created order, for all the creatures in the cosmos? Steven Bouma-Prediger says it splendidly,

"Indeed, if Jesus did not die for white-tailed deer, redheaded woodpeckers, blue whales, and green Belizean rain forests, then he did not die for you and me. Jesus comes to save not just us but the whole world" (Steven Bouma-Prediger: 116).

Biblical commentators have observed that Colossians 1:15-20, which may or may not have been written by Paul, speaks of the reconciliation of all things. In Col 1:20 we read, "and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." That seems to say that all creatures were reconciled to God by the death of Jesus (Balabanski: 151-59; Horrell, Hunt, Southgate: 89-115). Salvation is for the animals, too. If we assume that Paul wrote these words, it provides a good argument that in the book of Romans Paul implies that the salvific work of Jesus applies to the entire created order, and all animals.

In the new age the ground will no longer bring forth thorns and thistles. "No longer will creation punish and work against human beings. Itself the victim for something it was not responsible . . . creation will finally, with the transformation of reality, regain its original goodness" (Achteimeier: 142).

Paul Achteimeier astutely observed in 1985 that lest we think of Paul's imagery of the earth suffering for human sinfulness is too mythological, consider "what humankind has done by way of the pollution of air and water and the thoughtless exploitation of the natural resources of the world in which we live" (Achteimeier: 143). It may be difficult for us to understand what Paul may have had in mind when he spoke of the natural order being subject to human sinfulness, but we can look around us and see it very vividly today. Human greed and thoughtlessness has wreaked havoc upon the natural order at every level. We have polluted the air with fossil fuel burning, we have polluted the oceans with garbage (especially plastics), we have ruined the soil with mismanagement and war, and we have cut down the forests that supply us with oxygen. Nature suffers horrifically at the hands of humans. The simple numbers should astound us. Since 1970 wild vertebrate populations have declined by 60%, insect populations by 45%. Each year the world loses an acre of tropical rainforest the size of Costa Rica. As we encroach upon ecosystems on our planet we also expose ourselves to pathogens and new viruses. We have noted over 200 zoonotic pathogens that have gone from animals to people, including Ebola, SARS, and Covid-19 (Patrick: 167-168). The planet is groaning, even dying, under human sin.

There are other Pauline passages and additional New Testament passages that may also speak to the issue of cosmic transformation. A passage worth considering declares that Jesus died and rose for the sake of the entire created order. Colossians may have been written by Paul or perhaps a disciple of Paul. Within this letter there is a statement that seems to imply that Jesus died and rose for the sake of all creation. Col 1:20 reads,

. . . and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Commentators have often brought the discussion of this passage together with commentary on the verses in Romans 8. For both texts imply that Jesus redeems the whole created order, and they anticipate some form of future transformation (Moo: 36-40). What will be the nature of that transformation, we can only guess.

Another passage that sometimes receives attention is the brief reference during Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. In Mark 1:13 it says, "*and he was with the wild beasts.*" Though most commentators assume that these were dangerous wild animals threatening Jesus, comparable to Satan, who is mentioned in the same verse, a few commentators have put a positive spin on these words. They suggest that Jesus is with the wild animals in a peaceful fashion, anticipating a vision of the end time, when people will live with animals in peaceful, non-predatory, fashion. Imagery in Isa 11:6-8; 65:25 envisions such an age in the future when people will cohabitate with formerly predatory animals, and perhaps Mark 1:13 is briefly trying to say these passages are fulfilled with Jesus in the wilderness and also anticipate the end times. This Markan passage might also hearken to the paradise condition in Genesis 2-3 before the fall that Jesus seeks to restore. The passage is rather brief and ambiguous. At any rate, environmentalists also appeal to this Markan passage as a sign of ecological sensitivity on the part of the gospel writer.

Conservative Evangelical Protestants have looked to certain passages as a testimony that when Jesus returns, there will be a total destruction of this world and the creation of a new spiritual realm (heaven). Thus, conservative these Protestants often disdain any ecological movement as opposing the coming of Jesus and the final judgement that Jesus brings. Some Protestants even view environmental degradation as a positive sign of the imminent arrival of Jesus, so they applaud such developments as a sign of the endtime. Ecologically concerned conservative Protestants condemn such attitudes and fight an uphill battle to change the beliefs of their co-religionists. Many of their works have informed my research.

Ecologically minded Protestant Evangelicals often interpret New Testament passages concerning the destruction of the world that the endtime will supposedly bring as texts that really speak about the renewal or restoration of our present world. They then see a mandate for us to take care of the world that Jesus will bring to perfection.

A classic text used by Protestant Evangelicals who have millennialist beliefs which include a rapture of pious Christians seven years (or three and half years, depending on the millennialist scheme), point to 1 Thess 4:16-17 for vindication of their belief in a rapture. This model sees Christians escaping an evil world which will be destroyed by people just before Jesus comes to finish the destruction. The text reads,

(16) . . . and the dead in Christ will be raised first. (17) Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

One might notice that those who are raptured join together with those raised from the dead. This immediately contradicts the idea of a rapture some time before the final judgment day, when the dead are then raised from the dead. Verse 16 is not quoted by rapture advocates. But our point in this article is that this passage implies that an evil world is left behind to be destroyed. However, New Testament scholars point out that the language actually comes from a Graeco-Roman context in which people are said to go out and greet the emperor or notable official who is coming to their city. They meet with him and then parade back to their city together with him. Thus, the imagery in 1 Thess 4:17 seems to imply that Jesus and his followers will actually come back to this earth and live in a newly restored world (Bouma-Prediger: 69-70).

A non-Pauline text is 2 Pet 3:10,

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Older English translations rendered the word "disclosed" as "burned up," thus giving the impression of a total destruction. Modern scholarship perceives that the verb "disclosed" has the meaning of being "found," or better yet, "transformed." If so, this implies that our existing world will be transformed, not destroyed (Bouma-Prediger: 68-69; Moo: 31-35).

What does it mean that nature will be transformed in the light of all this human degradation in the modern era? Will this happen when Jesus comes? Or will this happen when some transformation of the human spirit occurs here in the historical dimension? Commentators cannot fathom this. I cannot speculate. But I am a pessimist. I do not see the human spirit changing and suddenly transforming the world into the glorious vision proclaimed by Paul. What I see is continued degradation of the human, a natural systems collapse, a significant human die off, and then the survivors attempting to come to grips with living in a world desolated by stupid human behavior and maybe rehabilitating some of the damage done to the environment. As Jonathan Moo and Robert White lamented, we are going to have to deal with the horrible results of global warming even if we “were able to hit the emergency stop button right now” (Moo and White: 71-72). Of course we will not hit the stop button now, so the results that we shall face will only become increasingly worse. I am afraid that I concur with one of my former Vanderbilt professors from the 1970’s, Sallie McFague, who opined in reference to ecological and economic issues in our world, “Do I feel confident that we will turn things around, that we will in fact begin to live within a different model at all levels of our existence. I do not” (McFague: 214-15). She then stated that all we can do is the little bit of teaching and proclaiming that is possible in our little corner of the world. With that I agree, also.

But maybe I am too pessimistic. Maybe there is hope for humanity.

Author’s Bio

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