Creation Renewed and Patient Hope
A reflection on Romans 8. 18 – 25 by Tom Wright.

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"v18. This is how I work it out. The sufferings we go through in the present time are not worth putting in the scale alongside the glory that is going to be unveiled for us. 19. Yes: creation itself is on tiptoe with expectation, eagerly awaiting the moment when God’s children will be revealed. 20. Creation, you see, was subjected to pointless futility, not of its own volition, but because of the one who placed it in this subjection, in the hope (21) that creation itself would be freed from its slavery to decay, to enjoy the freedom that comes when God’s children are glorified.

v22. Let me explain. We know that the entire creation is groaning together, and going through labour pains together, up until the present time. 23. Not only so: we too, we who have the first fruits of the spirit’s life within us, are groaning within ourselves, as we eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our body. 24. We were saved, you see, in hope. But hope isn’t hope if you can see it! Who hopes for what they can see? 25. But if we hope for what we don’t see, we wait for it eagerly - but also patiently.”

I walked through the wood several times before I realized what the signpost meant.

The wood was thick, with paths leading this way and that. I knew some of them quite well, and had my favourites among them. There was the one that led round by the lake, another that took you to a splendid little clearing where you would usually see rabbits and squirrels. There was another one that let past some ancient oak trees, of the sort that I imagine would have witnessed battles hundred of years ago.

But there was another path which I had never taken. It looked a bit overgrown and I couldn’t see where it would go. Because on most of my walks I’m in a hurry to get exercise and then get back to work, I never bothered with it. Nor did I give a second thought to a small post which stood, almost hidden behind bushes, just beside the start of the path. It had what looked like the letter V at the top, a foot or two from the ground. For all I knew, it was just a mark cut in the wood. It didn’t necessarily mean anything.

Until one day I came to the place, and someone had cleared the bushes enough to reveal three other letters, and an arrow pointing along the path. The other letters, downwards from the V, were I, E, and W. A view? What sort of a view? Intrigued, I took the path for the first time.
To begin with, it was as I’d expected: overgrown (I obviously wasn’t the only one who’d ignored it), with brambles and thorns in the way. It was muddy underfoot, as well; I wished I’d had my thicker boots on. But then it turned sharply through the trees and began to climb quite steeply. I was out of breath in a few minutes, but after a brief pause I kept going, getting more excited. Suddenly, instead of think trees all around me, I saw clear sky emerging. Then I was out of the trees and onto a slab of rock. I scrambled up it and stood there calling myself names for never finding the spot before.

It was indeed a view. I was looking down not only on the whole large wood but also on the little town beyond it. I could see other hills in the distance, and smoke rising from villages in between. Half the county seemed to lie there before me. And I might never have known.

Romans 8.18-25 is like that view. From this point we can see, in astonishing clarity, the whole plan of salvation for all of God’s creation. Once you’ve glimpsed this view, you will never forget it. And yet most readers of Romans, for many years and for many traditions, have hurried on by. They have been busy with theories of individual justification and salvation. They have been eager for moral lessons, for a fresh experience of the spirit (or a fresh theology to back up the experience they’ve had). They have been on their way to the great questions about Israel and the Gentiles, which do indeed preoccupy a good deal of Romans, not least the next few chapters.

And the signpost which might have told them to turn this way and walk up this path has been covered in bushes and brambles. The language of creation on tiptoe with expectation in not what they expect. The strange idea of God subjecting creation to futility and slavery, and of creation then being rescued, simply isn’t what people wanted to hear, or knew how to interpret when they did. The old King James translation probably didn’t help either, by saying ‘creature’ when today’s word would be ‘creation’, giving the average reader the puzzle of wondering which ‘creature’ Paul was talking about. So the path to the viewpoint has been covered over with thorns and thistles. ‘Strange apocalyptic ideas’, people have said, and hurried on to safer ground. But this is the place to visit. From the top of this hill you can see for ever.

After all, if you were Paul, writing a carefully crafted letter like Romans, would you build up all this time to such a pitch of excitement and then, with the end of this train of thought nearly in sight, allow yourself to ramble on about irrelevancies for a couple of paragraphs? Of course not. This passage is near the climax of the chapter which it itself the climax of the letter so far. Of course it’s central. Of course it’s vital to his thinking. The fact the he doesn’t say anything quite like this elsewhere is neither here nor there. A good deal of Romans is like that.

He begins where the previous paragraph left off, with the promise that the present suffering, though often intense, will be far outweighed by ‘the glory that is going to be unveiled for us.’ Note, unveiled for us. Not ‘in us’, as though glorification were after all simply us looking pleased with ourselves. Not ‘to us’, as though we were going to be spectators of ‘glory’ like people watching a fireworks display. The point of ‘glory’ is that it means glorious, sovereign rule, sharing the Messiah’s saving rule over the whole world. And that is what the whole creation is waiting for. It is waiting for us, for you
and me, for all God’s children, to be revealed. Then, at last, creation will see its true rulers, and will know that the time has come for it to be rescued from corruption.

To understand this, we need to grasp the big biblical story of creation. When we look at the world of creation as it is in the present, we see a world in the same condition as the children of Israel were in when they were enslaved in Egypt. Just as God allowed the Israelites to go down into Egypt, so that in bringing them out he could define them for ever as the freedom-from-slavery people, so God has allowed creation to be subjected to its present round of summer and winter, growth and decay, birth and death. It’s beautiful, yes, but it always ends in tears or at least a shrug of the shoulders. If you happen to live at the sharp end of the corruption of creation – on an earthquake fault line, for instance, or by an active volcano – you may sense the awe of that futile power. Creation can sometimes appear like a caged buffalo: all that energy, and it’s not achieving anything. And, thinking of wild animals, what about that promise of the wolf and the lamb lying down together? Is that just a dream?

No, says Paul, it isn’t a dream. It’s a promise. All these things are signs that the world as it is, though still God’s good creation, and pregnant with his power and glory (1.20), is not at present the way it should be. God’s ‘covenant faithfulness’ was always about his commitment that, through the promises to Abraham, he would one day put the whole world to rights. Now at last we see what this meant. The human race was put in charge of creation (as so often, Paul has Genesis 1 – 3) not far from his mind). When humans rebelled and worshipped parts of creation instead of God himself (1.21-23), creation fell into disrepair. God allowed this state of slavery to continue, not because the creation wanted to be like that but because he was determined eventually to put the world back to rights, according to the original plan (just as, when Israel let him down, he didn’t change the plan, but sent at last a faithful Israelite). The plan had called for human beings to take their place under God and over the world, worshipping the creator and exercising glorious stewardship over the world. The creation isn’t waiting to share the freedom of God’s children, as some translations imply. It is waiting to benefit wonderfully when God’s children are glorified. It is waiting - on tiptoe with expectation, in fact - for the particular freedom it will enjoy when God gives to his children that glory, that wise rule and stewardship, which was always intended for those who bear God’s glorious image.

This perspective on the whole created order has all kinds of implications, from the way we think about the ultimate future for the world and ourselves (the end of the story is not a disembodied ‘heaven’ but a whole new world) to our present anticipation of that final responsibility for God’s world. This is a positive, world-affirming view, without any of the risks associated with pantheism (idolatry, and the lack of any critique of evil). There are many avenues here we might like to explore.

But Paul moves at once to consider the present position of God’s children in the light of this future. We are, he says, longing for the time when we ourselves will be fully and finally redeemed, when, that is, we will receive our promised resurrection bodies. We groan and sigh, if we know what we are about, as we experience the tension between the glorious promise and the present reality. This tension is encapsulated in the fact that the spirit is already at work within us, but has not yet completed the task of our full renewal. We have the ‘first fruits’ of the spirit’s life; Paul uses the harvesting image of early sheaves offered to God as a sign of the great crop still to come. We are left with a
striking analysis of Christian hope, hope that, like faith, is not seen (or it wouldn’t be hope at all), but hope that is certain none the less. Groaning and waiting, eager but patient: that is the characteristic Christian stance.

Paul’s larger picture locates this groaning on the map of all creation. At the centre of this remarkable passage is one of his most vivid images of hope: that of birth-pangs. The whole creation is in labour, longing for God’s new world to be born. The church is called to share that pain and that hope. The church is not to be apart from the pain of the world; it is to be in prayer at precisely the place where the world is in pain. That is part of our calling, our high but strange role within God’s purposes for new creation.