“***Groaning for Redemption***” by S. Finlan, for The First Church, July 19, 2020

**Romans 8:14–25, 29**

14For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ 16it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. . . .

21The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. . .

29For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.

Paul’s message is a panoply of hope and of yearning. Let’s start with the hope. He affirms that all who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. In his congregations, evidently, it was common to cry out “Abba, Father!” during worship, recalling the Aramaic in which Jesus himself probably prayed. Paul affirms that this saying represents God’s Spirit agreeing with people’s individual spirits, that they are the children of God. We are not to slide back into slavery to our fears; rather we are to accept the joy of being children of God, which is empowering. We are to embrace the promise that we will be resurrected, following in the way of our Savior, who was the firstborn of those to be resurrected. He is saying don’t hide your God-light under a bushel. We cannot let the events of the world push us into a corner, surrounded by fear. We should be guided by the light of peace and of the joy of knowing ourselves to be children of God.

Then we come to the part of Paul’s message that is a heartbreaking, *excruciating* hope, a yearning for a future that hasn’t come yet. Some of what he says is unexpected, such as “the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. . . The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay. . . The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains” (8:19, 21–22), implying that nature itself is eagerly awaiting a revelation and liberation. The thing specifically awaited is spelled out in verse 23; it is the redemption of our bodies. In Paul’s writing this refers to a believer’s reception of a new, spiritual body in the afterlife. This is what is meant by “being conformed to the image of his Son” (8:29). How does that affect the created world, though? That is not at all clear.

It might be that Paul is taking very literally the several prophecies in Isaiah that speak of a transformed world, of the wolf lying down with the lamb, of the snake not biting (Isa 11:6–8), of streams breaking forth in the desert (Isa 35:6; see 43:20). Is he envisioning a change in the natural world at the time that Christ returns? Even though Christ’s return is not explicitly mentioned here, the phrase “the glory about to be revealed to us” (8:18) is probably referring to Christ’s return. He is envisioning a transformation of the world and connecting it, in time, with believer transformation, their receipt of new bodies in the next world.

For Paul, corruption and decay are features of the fallen creation, material creation as well as humanity. He speaks of creation groaning and suffering, and then being freed. He envisions the new age transforming the physical world, not just the human world. He may be thinking of the promise in Isaiah, “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth” (65:17). Paul speaks of the Spirit within believers as the firstfruits (8:23). In an agricultural society, the full harvest follows shortly after the offering of the firstfruits. Firstfruits are offered just before the full harvest is brought in. Although he does not spell it out, it is likely that he sees the new age—the harvest—coming with Christ’s imminent return (1 Thess 4:16–17). He sees the period of groaning and waiting as coming to an end soon, after which the world will be transformed, the glory will be revealed, and believers who have died will be receiving their new bodies.

Nearly two thousand years have passed now, and Jesus has not returned. So it is probably advisable for us to separate some of the things that Paul placed close together in his anticipation. He placed the redemption of our future bodies very close to the transformation of the world. Probably they should be considered separately. Our own pathway to God will proceed, even if Jesus does not return any time soon. Jesus will return when the time is right. Our transformation will happen before the world’s transformation.

Jesus did promise to return some day, and he will keep that promise! One thing he said is “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8). I think the implied answer to this is “yes.” I know many Christians have expected that it will happen during a time of tribulation, but I think it will happen when there is more faith on earth, more *readiness* to recognize and receive Jesus than there is now. I could be wrong, of course, because no one—not even the angels—knows the time or date. Meanwhile, I do not expect any kind of instantaneous transformation in the material world, no cessation of the danger of wolves and snakes, no miraculous end to physical decay, in *my* lifetime. Both the beauty and the danger of Mother Nature and her seasons will continue.

So what do I take to heart, for myself, from this passage? I take in the promise of our receiving new bodies in the next life. I hold on to the wonderful phrase, “the revealing of the children of God” (8:19), for I anticipate a transformation of humanity when more people think of themselves as children of God. I try to adhere to the admonition to not fall back into fear, but rather to embrace being a beloved child of God. Here is a great worship exercise. Imagine yourself to be a little child of three or four, holding your arms open for your mom or dad to pick you up. Imagine God picking you up and holding you, *understanding* you, like a loving parent. I encourage you to practice this exercise of worship.

I also share some of the intense emotion that I find in this passage. I too look forward to the next phase of my existence, even while I am very grateful to be able to continue in *this* phase of my life. There is so much to appreciate and to learn here! I take to heart the statement that the Spirit bears witness with my individual spirit that I am a child of God (8:16), even now, before the redemption of my body. The love of God affirms me as an individual, not defined by my age or class or race, not defined by materiality at all.

Which parts of this very hope-filled passage speak to you? Being told that you are a child of God? The saying “in hope we are saved”? The promise that the sufferings of the present are not to be compared to the glory to be revealed (8:18)? Any one of these hopes would be worthy of a separate sermon. Paul says hope keeps us going, and we wait patiently (8:25). Then he goes on, later in this chapter, to say that nothing and no one, not even death itself, can separate us from the love of Christ (8:35). This energetic passage culminates the first half of the letter to the Romans. Salvation and hope are the issue throughout. The Spirit speaks to us of our sonship or daughtership, affirming our experience of salvation, and giving us a foretaste of what it will be like to have a spiritual body. In faith and in hope we are saved. Hope sustains us, foretelling that we will be conformed to the image of Jesus, meaning we will receive spiritual bodies (1 Cor 15:44), and will grow spiritually, forever.