

# The Teaching of Romans 8:18-23

Let's briefly reflect on the immediate context of our text, mainly verses 15-17 & 24-30.

LET'S READ VERSES 15-17.

Those to whom Paul wrote nearly 2000 years ago had received the Spirit of adoption in opposition to the spirit of bondage (v. 15), and this Spirit was their assurance that they, as joint-heirs with God's Son, were chosen by the Lord to be snatched out of the bondage of fearful slaves and into the liberty of beloved children ... children of God (cf. 2 Tim. 1:7, Rom. 8:38-39, & esp. Gal. 4:1-7).

So why were they suffering at this time if they had received the Spirit of adoption as children in contrast to the spirit of bondage as slaves? Because, as this entire section in Romans 8 teaches, they were in the midst of a period of transition/transformation; i.e. they had yet to receive the fullness of their inheritance, and their suffering was part of the new covenant probation stipulations for that magnificent and eternal inheritance, something in which they were actually to be overjoyed since, as verse 18 says, it was beyond compare.

Every letter Paul wrote, if not directly geared toward encouraging the suffering, at least had a percentage of it devoted to reassurance of the light at the end of their tunnel as being something which would far outshine any afflictions they endured (cf. 2 Cor. 4).

Paul wrote quite a bit about this to those in Philippi who were encouraged to do as he was doing and rejoice in distress, for, due to the reward of it all, he spoke of their suffering for Christ as being an honor (1:29, cf. 1:18, 2:18, 3:1, 4:4; and in 2:16 he spoke of how, as their example, he considered it a privilege to endure all things so that he could "rejoice in the day of Christ, not having run or labored in vain"). Now...

LET'S READ VERSES 24-30.

We see pretty clearly that they were still, at that time, in the period of hope (v. 24), a period through which—*due* to their hope—they could eagerly persevere (v. 25). Even though it was a time of "groanings which couldn't be uttered" (v. 26), they could have faith in the knowledge that the God who gave them this Spirit knew the mind of this Spirit that would/could relay their needs to their Father (v. 27), while they could rest in the assurance that God was working out all things for their eternal good (v. 28), for He was the Great Architect and Conductor of the entire plan for them to be conformed to the image of His Son and thus be justified and glorified (vv. 29-30), making them more than conquerors (v. 37) of any and all tribulation, distress, persecution, etc. (v. 35)! So now...

In the midst of all these wonderful/encouraging remarks concerning their transition from slaves of law (such as was perfectly experienced under the Old Covenant system) to children of grace under the New Covenant system, what did Paul say to them in explanation of what they were then experiencing? Finally, to our text passage...

LET'S READ VERSES 18-23.

LET'S FOCUS ATTENTION ON VERSE 18, most specifically the phrase "the / this present time."

The original word for "the present" could just as well be translated as "the current" or "the now" and so referred to the generation in which Paul was then living 2000 years ago.

There are two chief Greek words for "time": *chronos* refers to time in its general/ordinary sense, while *kairos* refers to something much more specific; *Trench's Synonyms of the NT* volume says that "'*Chronos* is the interval at which something is done; *kairos* is the time suitable for the action. Thus *chronos* can be *kairos*, but *kairos* is not *chronos*; *kairos* is the appropriateness of what is done occurring in *chronos*'" (p. 222).

The English word "time" in Romans 8:18 is from *kairos*, the specific term referring (according to Strong's) to "the set and proper time," i.e. the TIME that was PROPER for the fulfillment of prophecy as SET by the Great Architect. So interestingly...

*The Kingdom Interlinear Translation* of the Greek reads, "the now appointed time"; and the phrase "the now" emphasizes/modifies "the appointed time," as if to say in translation, "the appointed time which is now," thus referring only to the sufferings of a specific era, not the sufferings of all saints since Adam or even to us today.

Notice just how detailed Paul was in this one verse: {1} he wrote of "the appointed time" for the fulfillment of God's prophecies concerning the revelation of His glory or kingdom; {2} he emphasized that "appointed time" by his choice of the Greek word for "now"—in the mid AD 50s; and {3} he wrote of it as to be revealed *in them*, i.e. in their generation. So according to Paul here, when was the appointed time for the fulfillment of prophecy? Nearly 2000 years ago, in THAT generation. In fact...

Paul chose this same phrase two other times. Firstly in Romans 3:25-26: "God set forth His Son to be an atonement by His blood through faith to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed in order to demonstrate His righteousness in *the now appointed time* [i.e. in that/their generation of time], that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." And secondly in Romans 11:5: "In *the now appointed time*, there is a remnant...." And we'll need to come back to this verse later.

Another thing of interest concerning the phrase "the present time" in the initial portion of Romans 8:18 is that it's in contrast to the last portion of the verse, i.e. the time when God's glory would be revealed in them.

Firstly, what was meant by "the glory to be revealed in" them? Well, Paul went on in verse 21 to write of "the glorious liberty of the children of God" into which they would be "delivered," a punctiliar action in their future; i.e., they were already God's children in one sense (v. 16), but the completion of His work related to the process of their becoming His legally/forever established—thus glorified—children was yet to be accomplished. In verse 23 Paul referred to this glorification as "the adoption, redemption of [their] body."

Secondly, how far into the future of those folks would this glorification transpire? Well, by the language Paul employed here, it was obviously expected by him to occur within his/their lifetime. What language? Specifically the Greek term *mello* that he chose in verse 18: "the glory which is *about to* be revealed in us." We don't have time to go into an in-depth study of this term, so allow me to just say here that in eight lexicons I consulted, every lexicographer used the phrase "about to" either as their definition or within their definition; in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* it says that *mello* "refers to what is about to be, i.e. on the point of occurring or immediately impending." And in seven different interlinears it's translated as "about to" 81% of the time, and one respected interlinear even translates it "about to" in EVERY single NT case! {If you'd like a lot more info on *mello*, email me at tedenton64@hotmail.com.} So...

Verse 18 paraphrased says, "I consider that the sufferings of the appointed time—now—aren't worthy to be compared with the glory which is about to be revealed in us." OK...

LET'S FOCUS ATTENTION ON VERSE 19, most specifically on the term "creature" or "creation."

We don't have time to consider the numerous interpretations of this word; I'll leave it up to you to dig up all the bizarre explanations which have been conjured up in order to support misguided presuppositions, such as what I formerly believed and taught, viz. that it has reference to the entirety of our existence here, including plants, animals, humans, and even the very planet itself with its grounds and waters. Ya know...

It amazes me how some of the same folks who preach against taking a passage figuratively when it can be understood literally will force this passage to be figurative. How can it be interpreted literally, you ask? Well, let's just get a big picture of the general context, then hone in on our text.

Throughout Romans Paul dealt with the theme of new covenant grace vs old covenant law: like bookends he emphasized salvation by grace as opposed to (the) law (1:16-17 and 16:25-26). After his thesis statement in chapter 1, we find him in chapter 2 jumping right into talking mainly negatively about law, THE Law being the epitome of law in general; according to the concordance, Paul used the word "law" without the definite article 9 times and with the definite article 61 times coming to a total of 70 times in 7.5 chapters (i.e. from the beginning of Romans up to our text), and he wrote of the positive things only grace in contradistinction to law could provide (e.g. salvation, justification, righteousness, etc.) around the same number of times (i.e. 70). So...

In Romans, at least up to chapter 8, we see not only difference between what the covenants offered them, but also their transitional struggle of leaving behind an old mode of life for a new mode of life; and this was spoken of as living according to or by the flesh (i.e. with a carnal way of thinking, spoken of 20 times in the first 7.5 chapters) versus living by or according to the Spirit (i.e. with a godly way of thinking, which is emphasized 30 times in the first 7.5 chapters). So...

By the time Paul gets to the chapter 8 (which, btw, concludes the first major section of Romans), he had the minds of his readers really hungering for his solution to his rhetorical question in 7:24: "O wretched man that I am! Who [or what] will deliver me from this body of death?" So, as we'll continue to consider, in 8:18-23, he answered the problem of their groanings for them. So, you ask...

What's the "creation" of 8:19-22? It's God's own creation of His Old Covenant law-system with its people, Israel; however, in *this* context I'm convinced Paul had special reference to the *faithful-to-Him* of Israel, i.e. His continuous remnant from one generation to the next, finally ending with the one in which Paul lived (Rom. 11:5); this means that he was primarily focused on the sufferings of God's true people from beginning to end, from Adam/Abel to Peter/Paul, as it were, from the First Adam to the Last Adam who was about to come for them (Rom. 5:14).

For passages that speak about national Israel as being the people God created (i.e. set aside) for Himself, just check out Isaiah 43:1 & 7 and Psalm 100:3 (as well as numerous others I'm sure we could find throughout the Hebrew Scriptures). Just verses later in the Psalms (viz. 102:18), David prophesied of God's new people who were "yet to be created." Then later we find the Greek Scriptures speaking of those who accepted God's Son as Messiah as being His created (chosen and set aside) people in Ephesians 2:10 & 15 and 4:24. Following that...

We find Hebrews 9:11 saying that "Christ came as High Priest of the good things about to come with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of *this creation*." What "creation"? "This" creation—the creation of all things related to national Israel and her old tabernacle/temple service of the context in this chapter. In fact, consider Hebrews 9 relative to Romans 8 for a moment:

Just as Hebrews 9 tells us about how that *that* "present-time," "still-standing" creation (i.e. the temple with its zealots, vv. 8-9) was facing its doom in the "about-to-arrive" "perfect tabernacle" at "the time of reformation" (vv. 10-11), so Romans 8 tells us about how that *that* "present-time" (v. 18), "groaning" (vv. 22-23), and "eagerly-expectant" creation (vv. 19 & 23) was facing its "about-to-arrive" (v. 18) "redemption" (v. 23). Wow! There are just too many parallels to Romans 8 like Hebrews 9 to deny this position. Now...

Let's focus momentarily on "the revealing of the children of God" in Romans 8:19.

A little bit ago, when talking about the revelation of glory which was about to take place in that (first) generation of God's New Covenant people, I said that Paul explained what he meant by that when he went on to write in verse 21 about "the glorious liberty of the children of God" and "the adoption and redemption of their [plural] body [singular]." Now here, at the end of verse 19...

We also see another parallel phrase for all of this, viz. "the revealing of the children of God." What did it mean to "reveal" His children? Well, as mentioned at the outset...

This passage clearly indicates that all of this was the transitional phase of God's plan between leaving His old creation (the old heavens & earth) and moving into His new creation (the new heavens & earth); another way to say this is that He was abandoning in His wake the Old Covenant body of His people which had fulfilled its purpose and was moving into the brand New Covenant body of His people. So...

It's no wonder that there was the great strife between these two groups as they were, in essence, vying for the Father's love. But, as Revelation indicates, though old Israel would seem to be winning out since they were far greater in number, God Himself was about to *clearly* demonstrate which group, national Israel or Christians, were His chosen people: Daniel 7:22 prophesied of this very event, saying that, in this event, "judgment" would be "made in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time" would then be "for the saints to possess the kingdom." When? When "the Ancient of Days [Jesus Christ] came" or, in this case, returned. In the coming of Christ during the events surrounding AD 70, all Israel knew and bowed the knee in defeat with the realization that this sect of Christians were indeed the/God's chosen ones. Now...

LET'S MOVE ON TO VERSES 20-21.

With the position that "the creation" in this context refers primarily to the faithful remnant of each successive generation of God's Old Covenant people, it isn't difficult to see how being "subjected to futility, not willing, but because of God who subjected them in hope" makes perfect sense; i.e., for God to work out His plan for man's redemption as He did, He had to break some eggs, so to speak: His beloved remnant had to endure living under the law of sin/death as well as often suffering persecution even to the point of death (thus the "groanings" of vv. 22, 23, & 26), all a part of their being details in the Lord's big picture. So...

The "bondage of corruption" in verse 21 refers to the decomposing the Old Covenant body of death that Paul brought up in 7:24 when he asked, "Who shall deliver me from this body of death"—this body that is dying, taking, of course, its members right along with it (8:11)? If one didn't want to be in that mortal (which means "dying") body of Moses when it actually died, he/she had to die TO it (Rom. 7:4), thereby coming to life in the body of Christ.

LET'S BRIEFLY CONSIDER VERSE 22.

Notice here that Paul chose to employ the word "together," implying that more than a single entity was groaning, thus supporting even more the idea of the creation being comprised of the various remnants down through Old Covenant history (cf. Rev. 6:9-11). So...

Paul spoke of God's faithful remnant as a whole here having had to experience the labor pangs of the process and fulfillment of God's redemptive plan; and, very fittingly, of course, since we've discussed how this rough transitional period would come to its end ca. the events of AD 70, we shouldn't consider it strange that Jesus, in His Olivet Discourse about the fall of Jerusalem, spoke of the things leading up to it as the pangs of birth in Matthew 24:8.

Also in verse 22 Paul wrote of how all the suffering of God's faithful through the ages lasted all the way up "until now," i.e. up until that generation, the generation about whom he went on to write in the last verse of our text, verse 23. So...

## LET'S HEAD TOWARD THE END OF THIS STUDY BY CONSIDERING VERSE 23.

Here Paul moved from speaking about the successive remnants of God's people in Israel's history to the members of the last of those remnants—the one of his generation, the last generation of God's temporary Old Covenant people as they were transitioning into His permanent New Covenant people. So...

What did Paul mean by "firstfruits of the Spirit"? Well...

Firstly, we need to say a couple things about "firstfruit(s)."

Much like even still today in our English language, whether we read "fruit" or "fruits" in the Bible, we simply cannot be dogmatic about whether or not the speaker/writer had single or multiple things in mind if he didn't specify. For two quick examples, in Matthew 3:8 and Luke 3:8 we have the same statement made by John the Baptist, yet in the Greek the term for "fruit" or "fruits" (depending on your version) is singular in Matthew while it's plural in Luke. And in Matthew 7:16-20 we have Jesus using the term "fruit" or "fruits" seven times, switching between the singular Greek term and the plural Greek term. It's just one of those language anomalies about which we must simply acknowledge exists and not create a theology out of it. Most of the time by far, as here in verse 23, the writer had multiple things in mind yet in a collective sense.

To the Hebrews, the term "firstfruit(s)" could refer either to "that which was especially presented/dedicated to God from whom all blessings flow" (cf. James 1:17-18) or, as here in Romans 8:23, to "the first taste of that which was about to come at harvest-time." See, in James the people themselves *were* the firstfruits, while here the people *possessed* the firstfruits. So...

Secondly, what did it mean for Paul to say that the Christians of his day *possessed* the firstfruit of the Spirit? Well, the answer I believe is found in the promised/prophesied purpose of the Spirit.

According to Ezekiel 37, the Spirit, as with any spirit (which, btw, may be translated "breath") was given for the purpose of providing LIFE to the ... might I say? ... SPIRIT-ually dead, i.e. to those truly desiring yet lacking the immortality of God. Paul wrote of this in Ephesians 1:13b-14, telling them that "the Holy Spirit of promise" was "the guarantee of [their] inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession." And when was that finished work of redemptive life to be realized? Jesus, in Luke 21:28, said it would be at the demise of all things related to national Israel. See...

These first-generation Christians, the foundation upon whom we're built (with Jesus being the chief cornerstone, of course), were, as James said, the firstfruits who were simultaneously, in that time of transition, *tasting* the life that was being breathed into the dead body under the law of sin and death; they were tasting the glory which was *about to be* revealed in the true children of God (vv. 18-19), tasting the fulfillment of their hope (vv. 20 & 24-25), tasting the glorious liberty on the horizon (v. 21), and tasting the redemption of that old body of death in which they resided (v. 23 & 7:24).

## SO IN SUMMARY...

As he spoke of in various other passages (e.g. 2 Cor. 3—5), Paul was encouraging them in reference to their difficult time of transitioning from their old covenant mode of existence to their new covenant mode of existence. They, being the chosen generation to see the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning man's redemption, were themselves, being transformed from one stage of glory (the Moses-stage) into another stage of glory (the Christ-stage). So...

They should hang in there, for their transformation was about to culminate in its finished product at the time of the harvest, resurrecting that old dead body into the new living body.