

Romans 8:12-25

All Our Present Sufferings

Last week we spoke of “family” as a way of viewing and understanding the spiritual life. I got a little ahead of the lectionary readings because in Romans 8, it is in today’s text that Paul makes the family connection by writing, “The Spirit himself testifies that we are God’s children. Now if we are God’s children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.”

Also last week there was a focus on the story of Jacob and Esau, and Esau became the example of someone who “despised the birthright,” he did not accept his inheritance. He did not appreciate his place in the family.

This week’s epistle reading continues with Romans 8 and the OT continues in Genesis with the story in chapter 28 of Jacob and the blessed dream at Bethel. Once again we find that the story in Genesis can help us to understand the message in Romans.

The Dream

Jacob had not only swindled Esau’s birthright but stolen the blessing from Isaac, which aroused Esau’s anger so much that Jacob was forced to leave home or be killed. On the first night of his exile he laid down

with a stone for a pillow and dreamed this beautiful dream,

“He saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said, ‘I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham, and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples of the earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised . . .’”

One can clearly see that this is not the dream of a swindler, and liar and a cheat. But it is also not a dream that can be confined to the life of just one person. It points to the grand vision of the bible, a vision of God and humanity, and it speaks of grace to someone who deserved condemnation, and hope for all human generations, then, now and forever.

Paul’s Grand Vision

In Romans Paul also sets forth a grand vision for all the world. He writes that the creation waits in eager

expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. He says that all creation has been subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it . . . in hope, that the creation would be liberated from its bondage to decay, and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

He goes on to acknowledge that the eager waiting for the fulfillment of this vision is hard and frustrating, like being in the throes of a childbirth that manages to linger.

These stories in Genesis can be seen as applying only to the descendants of Jacob, who became of course, the namesake of Israel. But if we do this, we miss the point of the bible. These stories are paradigms for every human being in every age of the judgment and mercy of God and the conviction that mercy triumphs over judgment and all the promises are on the way to being kept.

All Our Present Sufferings

It is in the context of this hope that we live our lives. Paul begins his paragraph with a sentence so powerful and astounding that it is perhaps rivaled only by other high points in scripture like when Jacob dreamed the breathtaking dream, or when Moses took off his shoes because the muck and mud on which he was standing

was holy ground, or when Isaiah the prophet wrote of those who wait upon the Lord that they will rise up on wings like eagles, or when Jesus hung on the cross and prayed, “Forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.”

“I consider that all our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that is about to be revealed in us.”

I must admit that, personally, my sufferings have not been that great. I have known some rejection and failure, and I am in the middle of aging, but nothing that compares with combat or extreme poverty or terminal illness, and I have not experienced the decline and fall of my civilization.

Yet as a member of the human race, and because when part suffers the whole suffers with it, I can imagine the sufferings of my neighbors, which become mine in a way that weighs me down with the world’s burdens, burdens too much to bear but that require an unhealthy denial to ignore.

Our sufferings are breathtaking in their magnitude and scope. One wonders how Paul could say that they are not worth comparing with the future glory about to be revealed in us.

Yet that is exactly what Paul does say, because he, more than most, caught a glimpse of that glory. The trick is not to minimize the suffering in the world, but to catch such a vision of the future glory, a glory that makes the suffering seem small.

The Future Glory

When we speak of the glory, care must be given and humility must be applied because we see through a glass darkly, only a reflection as in a mirror. One is reminded of Plato's vision of a fire in a cave casting a shadow on the wall and all we can see is the shadow. When it comes to heaven, we are in the realm of that which we do not know.

There are some ideas, however, that are helpful and are well within the limits of our constraints, so that we can speak with confidence. The glory is one of great beauty, and promise, bringing comfort in the time of crisis, confidence when everything is in doubt, and perseverance in the wilderness.

The glory is rest, peace, and encouragement in the midst of the most difficult and overwhelming of hardships; even death itself is no match.

The glory is merciful, involving this concept of the forgiveness of sins making reconciliation possible. The

glory is an accumulation of goodness so good that, in the words of one novelist, "all the death there ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup."

The Response

The response is faith, characterized by humility and gratitude.

The response is praise and wonder and awe. The response is a commitment to high moral and ethical standards, to justice, and to a wholehearted doing of God's will.

The response is the love of neighbor without qualification and the observance of the golden rule; a kind of playful competition to outdo one another in the performance of good deeds.

The response is joy beyond the confines of the imagination, and faith, that produces mercy and compassion towards others. The response is undefeatable hope.

And when we are too weak for these affirmations, we help each other, and the Spirit helps us, interceding for us according to God's will providing strength for the journey ahead.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)