

Living in the In-Between Times **ROMANS 8:18-25**

When the Allied forces landed in Normandy in June 1944 and gained a beachhead, it was the beginning of the end of that theatre of war. The result of the war was not in doubt from that point. Though this didn't mean there was to be no struggle, no suffering, no setbacks before the victory was accomplished. The result of the war was decided. The result of individual battles was yet to be determined.

Putting this into a more spiritual framework we may argue that God has established a beachhead here on earth when he came in the person of Jesus. He accomplished victory on the cross, finally showing the evil one who was boss. By Jesus' resurrection, he showed who truly ruled the world. He promises that one day the final victory celebrations will be had, but also tells us that before that time there is still a campaign to be fought.

This is the wider backdrop to the whole of ROMANS 8 which I focus on over these few weeks. We have a taste of heaven. We live in between the comings of Jesus. He has come once to inaugurate his rule and will come again to consummate it. Let's see what vv.18-25 tell us about living in this present age whilst anticipating the new age to come.

v.18 sums up Paul's perspective. Whatever may be happening to us now, there is no comparison with what is to come for those who belong to God by trust in Jesus. We don't deny our present sufferings. Christian hope and faith isn't denial or pretence. But we put our suffering into context. What we endure now is as nothing compared to what awaits when God's rule is finally established. At times we feel we have no future or no hope, that the pain or the confusion or the sorrow will last forever. It will not. One day it will not even be a memory. All we experience here is transient though very real. Our present difficulties are real but are not the final or greatest reality.

vv.19-22 speak of the parallel experience in creation itself. When human beings went wrong, the whole world was bent out of shape as well. When a train travelling at speed derails, the carriage that has derailed drags the other carriages with it. So when we decided to live independently of our maker, we dragged the created world down with us. We are not as we ought to be but nor is creation.

But this parallelism works in its favour too. When human beings become who they ought to be, then the created world resumes its perfect shape. When we get right, so too does nature. This happens (v.19) when the children of God are revealed. Meaning when we assume our true destiny as perfected children of God; when we are like that perfect human being, Jesus. V.19 uses an expression which sees creation as straining its neck, getting on tiptoe to see when humanity is restored to its true nature. For then, the groaning will cease. Till then, the natural world does groan, but as v.22 reminds us, they are like the groans of labour pains which should have a wonderful outcome.

And let's think about what this outcome will be. So often we develop an adversarial attitude toward the created world. This world is not our home, we are merely passing through. One day it will be wiped out and good riddance to it. But that is not what Paul is saying here. Our world is not to be destroyed but renovated. Just as we have a future so does it. Our destinies are somehow linked.

When it comes to reflecting on the nature of the after life, the new heavens and the new earth, we must beware of too much dogmatic speculation. But there is a clear hint here that what we term heaven will be very much like this earth with all the bad removed and all the good intensified. After all, God made a good world, and we might expect life forever with him to somehow be like it. We do heaven a disservice if we over spiritualise it. We will have new bodies in heaven but they will be bodies. We will have new networks of relationships in heaven but they will be recognisable relationships. Of course we don't over materialise it either.

It might be true to say that all that is truly good and delightful on the earth will be continued in the new earth. But continued forever. All our pleasures in this life are essentially passing though very real. They are foretastes, hints of what is to come. If we are worried that the after life will somehow not allow us to enjoy the pleasures we enjoy now, we can stop worrying. For one thing, who says we won't enjoy such pleasures in heaven? And in any case, if our earthly pleasures do not continue then something better will take their place. After all, our pleasures here are shadows of the perfect pleasures to come. C.S. Lewis once said that our life on earth is the Shadowlands. The reality is yet to come.

So take care to treasure our world, to embrace the godly pleasures it has for us. Take care to make our world a better place. For it, like us, has a future. And let's now look at our own future from vv.23-25. Like the created world, we groan. Paul says we groan as we await adoption. Here we get an idea of the in between world in which we live. For vv.14-17 tell us we are already adopted children of God through Jesus. Both are true. On the one hand, we belong in God's family and have the privilege of calling him dearest father. On the other hand, we still can't enjoy all the benefits of adoption. We are his children but not his perfected children.

In v.23 we also see that we await the redemption of our bodies. That is, we are still in our old bodies. We are a new creation but the old creation is still with us. Our salvation is both now and not yet. Paul gives us the background to this when he reminds us that we have the firstfruits of the Spirit. The phrase tells us that the Spirit of God is like an ongoing reminder to us that one day we will have it all but that today we have not got it all. The Spirit is the one who in a sense sets up the tension we live in. He is our foretaste of heaven. But because we still live in our mortal bodies and sin is still present (though it no longer determines our destiny), we haven't got all of heaven yet.

In various traditions of the Christian church we tackle this tension differently. Some want to claim much more of heavenly realities now. They believe many more should be healed and converted.

They believe the many blessings of heaven can be enjoyed more than we are presently doing. Why limp along in some sort of impoverished and weakened condition when there is so much more to be had?

Others tend to go to the opposite extreme. We must simply patiently wait for victories. Life is hard but one day we will get to heaven where things will be indescribably better. Or more cynically, let's not expect too much. Blessed are those who expect little for they shall never be disappointed!

In our in between world we have to preserve a balance. Seek all the blessings of heaven God is prepared to give you. Don't just grit your teeth and mutter between them how suffering is good for the soul. But don't storm into God's presence and demand he fix things up here and now to suit you. It is so often easier to live in the extremes rather than embrace the tension that expresses biblical reality. Use this in between concept to help you grasp why sometimes things go well and sometimes things go badly. Why we win some and we lose some.

The key to living in this tension is summed up in vv.24-25 where Paul tells us to live in hope. The essence of hope is positive confidence. Nothing vague about it as in our own common usage. And yet the essence of hope is future oriented. That which we hope for we have not yet got. That which we hope for we will one day surely have. And the essence of hoping is waiting. Let Lew Smedes describe it: "we wait in the darkness for a flame we cannot light; we wait in fear for a happy ending we cannot write; we wait for a not yet that feels like a not ever; waiting is the hardest work of hope.

But our waiting is also confident waiting. The battles we fight are part of a war that has been won. The life stories we live out are part of a much larger story which has the one true happy ever after ending.