

Deliverance

Romans 8:12-25

¹² So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³ for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For 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!" ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and 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. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and 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. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

A popular saying says, "What you see is what you get." One of those wise sayings that occupy the space we call common sense, it is usually uttered as a way to ensure that expectations do not get out of hand. It is often a helpful vaccine against disappointment, the counsel of realism against the foolishness of fantasy.

Oddly enough, such out-of-hand expectations, disappointment with the way things are, and fantastic foolishness are appropriate to the life of faith Paul describes in chapter 8 of Romans. The children of God are heirs to a future beyond their sight. We have deliverance and redemption, but what we will get is *not* what we now see.

To look at what we see might be worthwhile before taking up what it is that we get, that promised deliverance. For Paul, what we see includes the

"sufferings of this present time" (v. 18). The sufferings of Paul's day could be enumerated best by a historian (i.e. misunderstanding, slander and persecution), but if what Paul proclaims has any relevance to us, it is good to attend to the "sufferings of *this* present time"—right now, right here. Where do we begin? With the travail of the creation, whose ice caps are melting due to the overheated consumption of self-centered and selfish human beings? With the last cries of species as they become extinct and disappear from the planet? By current estimates, up to one-fifth of all current living species will be extinct in thirty years. There is the volcano that is currently erupting in Hawaii. There is already a named storm in the Atlantic and it is not even June 1st.

There are so many dangers to the whole creation, but what of the human race? Service men and women are in Iraq and Afghanistan. There is the threat of nuclear war with Iran and North Korea, the kind that can injure the entire planet. Sharon Stone asks for donations to put food in backpacks for children who have no food on the weekends; and Jeff Bridges tells us children go to bed hungry each night. The number of children dying of malnutrition is staggering. The imagination reels at the picture of mothers and fathers unable to provide enough food to keep their children from withering away before their eyes. It is more than we can stand to see; when the images appear on our television screen, tablets or phones, we reach for the remote or change the app to make them go away.

We do not need to leave our own houses to see the suffering of the present time. Ralph Waldo Emerson said it well: "Every roof is agreeable to the eye until it is lifted; then we find tragedy and moaning women and hard-eyed husbands." Things that appear to be well so often have troubling currents underneath. The "me too movement" has exposed a whole world of

sexual harassment and abuse. Simply look at the people you know and recall the stories of abuse, chronic illness, loneliness, and despair, frequently spoken of only in hushed tones, if at all.

What we see, while surely not all bad, is bad enough. "The way things are" contains enough pain and suffering to make one "groan inwardly" (v. 23). Even if one is optimistic and sees the glass as half full, it is still a long way from a cup running over.

Paul speaks here of hope. Hope is rooted in an ability to see what one does not yet see. Hope is anticipating an inheritance that has not yet been received. As Paul puts it: "we are children of God, and if children, then heirs" (vv. 16-17). Hope for a "glory about to be revealed to us" (v. 18) does two important things.

First, it creates the sense of contrast between what is hoped for and the present state of affairs—what we get. This contrast causes disquietude. Disquietude expresses itself in groaning: expressing the pain of experiencing the negative, the way things are not supposed to be, but the way things in fact are. The one who hopes hurts. The one who hopes has a restless heart. The one who hopes sees what we get, what is in front of us, and is disappointed. They see possibilities of deliverance and things getting better.

Karl Marx warned that religion with its fantasies drugs those who suffer and perpetuates their plight. Marx, though, was only partially right. One who hopes does not necessarily escape the suffering of the present time. In fact, in some instances the one who hopes may be the only one with the courage to endure the suffering of the present. This may be what Paul meant when he said, "We wait for it with patience" (v. 25). Patience is not the same thing as acquiescence. Patience in this sense is not satisfied with the present, but lives toward a future promised by God.

Second, hope fuels an imagination for the way things ought to be, deliverance. Hope—hope for things that are not yet but are promised to us—empowers the one who hopes, us, to confront the evils of this age, knowing their way is not the final way. The one who hopes is inspired to work in the present for things to get better in the present. In fact, the word "inspired" literally means "to have the Spirit."

Although Paul said that "hope that is seen is not hope" (v. 24), he said that we "have the first fruits of the Spirit" (v. 23). It is important to hold these two together. If hope is only for something beyond our imagination, beyond our seeing, then it can easily become a flight of fantasy. In this sense it is "pie in the sky, by and by," and feeds the sort of escapism of which Marx spoke and against which the adage "What you see is what you get" warns.

Christian hope is not pie in the sky; it is hope rooted in what Paul calls "the first fruits of the Spirit" (v. 23). This metaphor of the first fruits means that in Christ we already have come to know the power of life over death. We already know deliverance. We already know freedom. We already know love. We have tasted the first fruits, and they have whetted our appetite for the final banquet. We do have out-of-hand expectations. Because we know the first fruits, we rejoice at the loving, the living, the deliverance, and the freedom. We hunger for more, and we cry out wherever love is absent, life is shortened, and freedom is taken away. The church of Jesus Christ is the community of sisters and brothers who live in anticipation of a new birth of freedom, a new day of loving, and an inheritance of life abundant, God's promised deliverance. **David M. Greenhaw**

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