

# IV Living in Repentant Hope

*Romans 8:18-24*

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

## *Introduction:*

Henry Vaughan was a devotional poet in the seventeenth century. And he wrote a poem about reading Scripture. It's called "The Book." What's interesting about this poem is what Vaughan sees when he opens the bible. Vaughan sees more than words on a page. He sees the pages themselves. At the time when Vaughan was writing, paper production was not as refined as it is today. If you looked closely, you could tell what your paper was made of. If the spring waters of the river ran muddy, the paper was discolored because of it. There were flecks and fibers embedded in the page. Strands of hair. Pieces of feather. A vegetable fiber. These would appear right next to the printed word. So, when Vaughan opened his bible he saw the world. He saw plants that the paper was made from, trees that contributed wood to the backing, animal skin that made the leather binding. Opening the bible, he saw the world.[1].

Most people, when they open the bible, read the words on the page and expect to be transported to another realm. Someplace far away from this world. They want to go from the

physical to the spiritual, from the body to the soul, from earth to heaven, from human to divine, from here to eternity. In each case, however, notice the journey. It is away from creation. Away from the place where God has put us. For Vaughan, it's different. Scripture brings him deeper into this world. Immersed in the word of God, he is brought into the world of God, a world that will be recreated some day.

Vaughan never tells you what page of the bible he is reading. If I had to choose one, I would choose Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8. The passage we have before us this morning. Because Paul does a very similar thing. Paul writes to the Roman Christians but he wants his words to open up for them the world. That's our goal in meditating on Paul's words today. We will consider God's word that we might be brought more deeply into the world where God has placed us. That we might live here. Awaiting a new creation. In repentant hope.

### *I. Paul Immerses Us in the World:*

If you were reading through the book of Romans, what Paul does here would surprise you. He has just proclaimed the good news of the gospel " "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). Christ Jesus has borne the punishment of our sin in the flesh and brought us, through baptism, into a life with him in the Spirit. Paul is now encouraging the Romans to live in the Spirit, to be led by the Spirit. All of this talk about the Spirit makes you think that we are leaving the body

behind. But then Paul turns the corner in these verses and immerses us deep within our bodies and locates us deep within the world.

We are not leaving the world or our bodies behind. No, we are living in the world, eagerly awaiting "the redemption of our bodies" (8:23). That's what Paul says. The "redemption of our bodies." And we are not the only ones awaiting this. Creation itself is longing for the day when we, as the children of God, will be revealed (8:19-20). Paul's words do not take us away from the world but more deeply into it. Into a life in the Spirit, not free of this world but free in this world. Longing for that day when this world and our bodies will finally be free from the effects of the fall into sin. You see, creation is *not* an after-effect of the fall. Creation, itself, is good. The fact that we have a body is *not* an after-effect of the fall. Having a body, itself, is good. And we live, in a fallen world, awaiting that day of the new creation. Where we will stand in our glorified bodies before God in God's world in "the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (8:21). This is a startling, amazing vision.

Have you ever been awakened to the world that you live in? It can be a simple thing that does it, but the effects are profound. You are walking down a recreational trail. You have your earbuds in. You are listening to music. You actually have different playlists that take you into different worlds. Today, you have chosen what your daughter calls "easy listening" as she rolls her eyes. You walk by someone cutting the grass. You turn up your tunes because you're having trouble hearing and then

suddenly the smell of that mown grass hits you. Fresh. Sweet. Sour with summer. Suddenly, you are taken out of your walk and your world of music and immersed in a place. A physical place. You see the trail, you hear the sounds of the mower, you feel the heat of summer, you smell the fresh mown grass. You are located, in your body, in the world, and you experience its rich sensations. It doesn't have to be mown grass that does this. It could be a flock of birds suddenly rising and turning in the air as if all on cue. The wonder of the world catches you off guard and beckons you to take out your earbuds and listen. Listen to the sounds of creation. Realize that God has placed you in his world.

That is what Paul is doing this morning. In this passage from Romans. He is asking us to take out our earbuds and listen, really listen to the world. And that's what this entire sermon series has been doing. It has been unfolding the words of Scripture that guide us in our care of creation. It is no accident that in our triptych, the woman's ear is facing the rest of the drawing. If she takes out her earbuds, she will hear. Hear the words of God that speak of creation and lead her deeper into the world.

## *II. Where We Hear the Groans of Creation:*

Unfortunately, when you do this, what you hear is not always pleasant. Paul writes, "For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of

God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now" (8:20-22). Creation has been "subjected to futility." It has been cursed by God. Cursed by God because of our sin. Remember after the fall in the Garden of Eden, God does not curse his creatures, Adam and Eve. Instead, he curses the ground. "Cursed is the ground because of you" (Gen. 3:17), God says. And creation has been groaning since that day. It produces thorns and thistles and it suffers from our living, our consuming, our abusing the earth.

If you take out your earbuds, you will hear the groans of creation. At first, when you immerse yourself in the wonder of creation, you are drawn into its praise. You fall in love with a creature. A laughing owl. You hear its distinctive shrieks. They tell you it is an unwary and gentle-natured bird. But, if you listen closely, the playlist changes. At first all you hear is silence. A cave that palaeontologists believe these owls inhabited continuously for ten thousand years is now empty. The owl goes extinct. You are no longer immersed in "easy listening." No, you suddenly overhear cries of pain. Creation is not flourishing but diminishing. To the steady beat of human domination.

Deforestation. Land degradation. Water scarcity. Air pollution. We are killing the land, the sea, the sky. And you can see the effects. In an average day, three plant or animal species go extinct. Three a day. That's one every 8 hours.[2]. Can you hear the sound of creation groaning? Awaiting the day God delivers her?

*III. Discover the Rule of Our Resurrected Lord:*

Why would Paul do this? Why would Paul ask us to take out our earbuds, only to pour the groans of a broken creation into our ears? Because Paul knows that, sometimes, there are some things you only see through tears.

Paul once saw the glory of Jesus. The resurrected Lord. But he saw it only through tears. He was on the Damascus road. Intent on persecuting Christians. He was confident. Sure. Working for the LORD. When Jesus struck him down. Suddenly, Paul heard a voice from heaven and realized that it was the LORD " Jesus " he was persecuting. Scales fell from his eyes. He rose, was baptized, and began to proclaim that Jesus is Lord. Lord of all creation. Sometimes, there are some things you only see through tears.

Consider Mary in the garden at the tomb after the crucifixion. You remember the story. Mary was the first person to see Jesus after his resurrection. But she didn't know it was Jesus. She was crying. She had come to the tomb and it looked like it had been broken into. Like they had taken her Lord away. "Woman, why are you weeping?" Jesus asked her. And John tells us "Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away" (John 20:15-16). "Supposing him to be the gardener." Mary can't see Jesus. She thinks he's a gardener. Until he calls her by name, "Mary," and then she cries out "Rabboni" and falls at his feet. The one she thought was a gardener actually is her Lord. Risen from the dead.

In one way, Mary was wrong. Jesus was not the gardener. He was her Savior, risen from the dead. But in another way, Mary was right. Sometimes, there are some things you only see through tears. Who was the one who was there when the world was created? Who took joy in creation? John tells you. "In the beginning was the word . . . all things were made through him" (John 1:1-3). It was Jesus. Think back to the book of Genesis. After creation, how did God visit his creatures? What would he do? He'd walk in the garden in the cool of the day and call out to them. Now, on the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, God was there, in the cool of the morning, in a garden of death, breathing life, walking in the world, calling out to his creatures, visiting them once again. "Mary." And Mary, hearing his voice, discovers Jesus, the true Gardener, at the dawn of his new creation.

That is what Paul is telling us in so many words. Jesus is the first fruits of a new creation. Yes, Jesus saved us. Saved us *from* sin. But Jesus also saved us *for* something. He saved us *for* a new creation. Paul tells us that we "were saved in hope." For Paul, the groans of creation are painful. They produce tears. But they are "the pains of childbirth" (8:22), because they point to something more. They point to that day when Christ returns to bring about a new creation. "Creation waits with eager longing," Paul says. It "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (8:22). "And not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved" (8:23-34). Notice Paul does *not* say the

redemption of our *souls* but the redemption of our *bodies*. This is the hope of a new creation: the hope of resurrected bodies . . . living gloriously . . . in a world that is free from its bondage to corruption. This is what Paul celebrates. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead as the first fruits of a new creation. He has ascended into heaven and he now rules over all things. He will return and bring about a new creation in which we will live with resurrected bodies in a new world.

#### *IV. And Live in Repentant Hope:*

Why is Paul sharing all of this? Because, for Paul, this vision changes how he lives in the world: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed" (8:18). That's what Paul says. He sees the suffering of this world " " he does not deny it - but he also knows of future glory. And thus he lives in repentant hope. That is the life Paul gives us. A life of repentant hope. Until Christ returns, this world will be broken. We will live in its broken beauty. But we will live there as children of God. In repentant hope.

This is not an easy life. It is so easy to get lost in the suffering. For some people, the ecological disasters of our world create anger. Anger at what humans have done. And that anger can turn extreme. There have been cases of people burning down buildings, bombing whaling ships, spiking trees to hinder the logging industry. The FBI actually has a term, eco-terrorism, to define these activities. For others, the groaning of creation



produces a different response. They are prone to despair. They see the polar ice caps melting, the wild fires burning, the drought and the flooding and the deforestation and they find that they are insignificant. Their efforts are too small and business interests are too great. Between them and the world they live in lies a vast network of industries. They can't control the consumption of the country or the profit of big business. And so, they grow weary, and anxious, and depressed, and give up. Perhaps you have begun to look more closely at the world because of this sermon series. Perhaps, the more you see, the more frustrated and helpless you've become. If so, listen to Paul.

Paul's words offer us a different way. Not anger. Not despair. But hope. Not blind hope. Not a falsely optimistic kind of hope. Not a "it will all work out in the end" kind of hope. But repentant hope. A hope that is aware of this world . . . and aware of God . . . and lives in that awareness. We hear the groaning of creation, we see the destruction of our world, and we come before God, repentant. Confessing our sin. We speak honestly about the world we live in and the lives we have led and we bring these before God in repentance. Yet, we speak in a repentant hope. Because God has given us Jesus Christ. Sometimes there are some things you only see truly through tears. When we come before God in repentance, he reveals his amazing love. God knows that we have not always been right and he reveals that this world will not always be wrong. Christ takes our sin and buries it in the grave. Then he rises again, the first fruits of God's promise to bring

about a new creation. He will turn this graveyard into a garden.

This Christ sends his Spirit into our hearts so that, now, we have the "first fruits of the Spirit," and live in repentant hope.

### *Conclusion:*

Consider, for a moment, the idea of first fruits.

First fruits are just a glimpse. Just the beginning of what will be a much larger harvest. After Israel left the wilderness, after they entered into the Promised Land, after they plowed and sowed and tended the wheat fields, when they first saw the beginning of the harvest, they would take the first sheaves of wheat and bring them before the Lord. It may not have been much but it was enough and it was beautiful. The first fruits of a harvest of life in the promised land. That's what we are. The first fruits of God's future work for the world.

There's an old preacher story about a girl and her grandfather walking along the beach after a storm. The shore is filled with scattered starfish cast up on the sand.<sup>[3]</sup> As the sun shines down, they are going to die. The girl reaches down and picks one up and throws it back into the sea. She bends down and picks up another and does the same thing. Her grandfather asks her, "Why do you do that?" He lifts up her eyes and points to the shore, "Can't you see all of the starfish along this shoreline. You will never be able to get to each one. Don't you see? It doesn't matter." She looks. She listens. She nods her head. But then, she bends down and picks up another starfish. She holds it in her hand and casts

it back into the sea. Only then does she look at her grandpa and, with a tear in her eye, she says, "It matters to that one." And suddenly he sees. In the meager efforts of a child, he sees the first fruits of a new creation.

Our efforts may be small. Some would say inconsequential. But that's what it's like to live in hope. "Hope that is seen is not hope," Paul says (8:24). This is just the beginning. The firstfruits. We conserve energy. We plant a community garden. We recycle one plastic bag.[4] "But what about the bigger picture?" people say. "Can't you see how pointless it is? Your effort? It doesn't really matter." "Oh no," we answer. "It does matter. It matters to God. He created this world. He redeemed this world. And he will return to bring about a new creation. Until that time, we live in this place, a place filled with broken beauty, and we do what matters . . . to him . . . to his world."

Throughout this series, we have begun to see the wonder of life in God's created world. God the Father has raised Jesus Christ from the dead as the Second Adam, ruling over all creation and Christ now invites us into his care for the world. There, we discover delight in the wonder of his creation. We lead lives of caring consumption. During the days of this series, you may have resolved to do something. It could be small. Some might even say that it was insignificant. But know this, it matters to God. It is the first fruits . . . the first fruits of what is to come. So go . . .

. live . . . blessed by God. Drawn deeper into God's word, go deeper into the world. Care for Christ's creation . . . living in repentant hope. Amen.

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[1] Henry Vaughan, "The Book" in *Silex II* in *Henry Vaughan: The Complete Poems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 310. The poem may be read on-line at <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-book-19/> (<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-book-19/>). Accessed August 15, 2013. For an ecocritical study of the poem, see Joshua Calhoun, "The Word Made Flax: Cheap Bibles, Textual Corruption, and the Poetics of Paper" in *PMLA* 126.2 (2011): 327-344.

[2] Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 29.

[3] For an image of what this might look like, see <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1234177/Thousands-starfish-carpet-Norfolk-beach-storm-throws-sea.html> (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1234177/Thousands-starfish-carpet-Norfolk-beach-storm-throws-sea.html>). Accessed August 15, 2013.

[4] If the congregation has been involved in any activities for the care of creation, the preacher may want to mention them at this point in the sermon.

