

PROLOGUE TO PRISON

Paul's Epistle to the ROMANS

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Chapter 15 -

HISTORY'S PAINFUL WAITING

Romans 8:18-25

Here is one of the most timely passages in Romans, so relevant to the present world situation. It is an exciting glimpse into Paul's philosophy of history; one of his definite insights into the Biblical view of history. It is important for us today in the light of the world's confusion and convulsion to know that GOD rules, that what is happening is the fulfillment of His purpose in history.

Paul begins, **"I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."** Think of three words in conjunction with this passage: suffering, longing and glory. The suffering about which Paul speaks is not that which is commonly identified as suffering: difficulties in life, tragedies, reverses, illness, crippling, diseases. These are implicit in what he is saying, but he is thinking about a suffering which is more basic, which he refers to later as **"the bondage of corruption,"** to which the whole creation is subject. Because of man's sin in the Garden, the whole created universe, all that is in the universe, has been cursed. You will find this in the 17th verse of the 3rd chapter of Genesis, **"Unto Adam he said, Because thou hast harkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree... cursed is the ground for thy sake; In sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life."** The whole created universe is suffering because of man's first disobedience.

What is the nature of this suffering? It is emptiness, futility, frustration. It is exquisitely demonstrated by history's dilemma in this modern, sophisticated, progressive mid-twentieth century with its accumulated knowledge and experience of the ages and its stubbornly persistent compounded problems. Our libraries are filled with volumes written by experts on marriage and the home; daily papers carry columns dispensing free advice to husbands and wives; marriage clinics and counselors abound, and divorce increases. Alcoholic research by universities, church and social welfare agencies has given deep insights to the cause and cure of alcoholism; meanwhile in America alcoholics increase at the rate of fifty an hour, twelve hundred daily, seventy percent of them women.

It is an age of psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and psychosomatics; yet our mental hospitals are bursting with patients. There is never enough room for those needing

care, and mental illness is claiming more and more victims while millions of dollars are spent annually on tranquilizers and stimulants.

Giant advances have been made in child psychology and understanding; social workers specialize in juvenile problems; juvenile courts and agencies are dedicated to youth while every major city has its share of guidance counselors and youth leaders; in spite of which delinquency is increasing with alarming rapidity. Criminology has become a science as has the rehabilitation of the criminal; yet crime is increasing at a rate greater than the population explosion.

Modern developments in agricultural sciences and machinery have forced the curtailment of production; yet millions of humans go from the cradle to the grave without ever knowing the luxury of a full stomach. The peoples of the world long for peace; the United Nations rises out of the ruins of an abortive League of Nations; yet we have had two world wars in a quarter century and the only peace known today is a "truce of terror," and "immoral deadlock," a cold war. Humanity is in foment, boiling with desire for personal dignity, equality, freedom and independence; yet more than one-third of the world's population languishes under government paternalism and tyranny. With all our alliances and the discussion negotiation and pontification about one world and a united mankind, the world is tragically disunited; two Germanies, two Chinas, two Koreas, two Viet Nams, more than fifty new independent nations since 1945; and increasing tension and rift within both the Communistic bloc and the free world.

In science and technology we have progressed beyond our wildest dreams; yet the consummate product of this progress constitutes a major threat to the survival of civilization. How smart are we anyway? We take one step forward, two steps backward, and label it progress. The more we know, the less capable we seem to be to manage our problems. This is the "futility" to which Paul is referring - a universal, perennial frustration. In the words of the wisest man in Israel, "**Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.**" From this "**bondage**" the whole universe craves release.

Consider the limitations time and space impose upon us, the creeping limitations of old age, the great universal enemy - death; the dis-peace of the world, the lack of freedom, the slavery, the bondage, the perennial helplessness of man to achieve the kind of world he dreams about. This is the universal suffering of which personal suffering is a symptom. From this, Paul declares the human race and inanimate matter as well (the whole created universe) are longing to be delivered. How we long for it! Medical science is doing all that it can to eliminate disease. We are doing all that we can to sustain and prolong life.

How we resent old age. Some people will not even admit it, clinging to the illusion that if they pretend it is not and try to cover it up, its effects will be neutralized. Far better, incidentally, to approach old age in the spirit of the Word of GOD, "**The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day!**" With what zeal we labor to resist this decay which is inevitable in our bodies; nevertheless we grow more weary, less able to do what we would. Wrinkles appear, the temples grey, the head begins to bald, and we stop growing except in the middle. Thus are the frustrating limitations to which the whole universe is subject and which we long to over? come.

Often flying in a jet across America, after an hour or two with the trip half over, I leave my seat to stretch, look at my watch and wonder if we are ever going to get there. Then I think to myself,

how was it ever possible to do business when people had to travel by train? How could anything ever be accomplished? How did they ever manage to live? The symptom is showing, you see. That which is a luxury soon becomes a necessity and a new luxury demands our interest. That which we thought we could get along without suddenly is necessary, and then it is never enough. In our boredom we need something more. This is a manifestation of the longing to be delivered from bondage to decay and corruption. Never is enough!

A friend of mine said this recently in a testimony, "There is something worse than wanting a thing and not having the means to get it, and that is having the means and not wanting anything," whereby he pictured the sheer monotony of a life that has everything and yet is not satisfied. Well, nothing satisfies this side of the grave because we were made for eternity. Nothing satisfies completely in this life because we have an infinite appetite. Nothing satisfies but GOD and His plan. The whole universe languishes, painfully waiting, absorbed, for that is the strength of the world, literally absorbed with persistent expectation, like a woman in childbirth, for the day when the sons of GOD shall be revealed.

Paul says that not only does the whole created universe long to be delivered from this bondage to corruption and decay, but so do we who have "**the firstfruits of the Spirit.**" Having been born of GOD because JESUS CHRIST dwells in our hearts and having an intimation of that which is eternal, we long for it. Or we ought to long for it. I suppose that this is one of the major tragedies in the church of JESUS CHRIST today? - we have learned somehow to be sub-Christian in the things which give us satisfaction in life; we don't really long as we ought for the return of JESUS CHRIST and "**the redemption of our body**" and "**the glory which shall be revealed in us.**"

Recently I received from a medical doctor in Washington a letter which was quite complimentary about our daily broadcasts. But he qualified his compliment by saying something like this: "There is one suggestion I should like to make; this medieval idea of CHRIST being sacrificed on the Cross doesn't help your broadcast. It isn't acceptable to modern man." This is not an uncommon attitude toward the crucifixion of JESUS CHRIST, and this attitude is reflected not only toward His death, but toward this whole matter of life after death. Implicit in what that man said is the belief that everything that is important is this side of the grave. Perhaps we believe in life after death, but it is some very vague and ethereal thing that is not too important.

Most of us live as though what we get and what we do, and what we enjoy before being laid away in the grave are primary. Will you allow me to ask, what difference there is between this view and the Communistic view of life? Some of the details may be different, but the goals are identical; and in our so-called Christian world, we operate on the basis - get while the getting is good, all you can because we have three score years and ten, if lucky, maybe four score. The day comes so soon when one grows less efficient, and the body will not produce as it did, and it is not able to enjoy as much as it had; therefore, get all one can now as quickly as possible.

One student of the Bible suggests that the word "glory" means the fulfillment of purpose:

- The glory of a violin is to produce music;
- The glory of government is to preserve the rights of man;
- The glory of the sun is to shine and provide heat;

- The glory of the flower is beauty and fragrance;
- The glory of a tree is to bear fruit, to give shade and beauty;
- The glory of anything is the fulfillment of its created purpose.

When Paul speaks of the glory of man, he is referring to something more than incandescence; he is talking about purpose, the very purpose for which man was created. He is talking about the meaning of life, the meaning of history. The glory of Christianity is the return of JESUS CHRIST! We await that cataclysmic moment in history when the Son of GOD returns to earth; the graves are opened, and the bodies of those who have been laid away will be raised, new, incorruptible, immortal bodies; when that generation of Christians still alive upon the earth at His coming will be changed instantaneous! Yet their bodies no longer corruptible or mortal! This is consummation for the Christian, but because we have lost this vision, because we do not yearn for this moment for which the whole created universe longs, we are so often victimized by our circumstances.

A dear friend, reared in the Christian faith by a godly mother and father, upon attending university, lost his faith. One night he stood up in a Bible conference where others were testifying to the reality of CHRIST in their lives; and he said, "I have to be honest with you. I have been raised in the Church, but I have become intellectually convinced that GOD does not exist. I no longer believe the Bible; I no longer believe in JESUS CHRIST or the Church. I have become an atheist. Subsequently while studying at Oxford, this same young man had an experience which brought all of his thinking to a crisis in his own life. Intellectually he was convinced there was no GOD but was unable to resist the conviction that without faith in GOD and immortality, life had no meaning. As a matter of fact, he intimated that the most logical impulse in his life in those days of atheism was to commit suicide; there was no reason for living. Often when putting the car away at night, he would literally talk himself out of remaining in the garage with the motor running. It seemed terribly logical.

One evening at Oxford, when his living group met for its monthly seminar, a student read a paper on Christian ethics. My friend was interested because implicit in the paper was the idea of an absolute ethic which suggested a GOD who imposed these ethics upon man. When the paper was read and a discussion ensued, he asked three questions of those present: "First, do you believe in GOD and in JESUS CHRIST; secondly, do you believe in life after death; and thirdly, do you believe that such a belief is necessary to give meaning to life?" Thirteen out of thirteen men said "no" to each of the three questions. My friend observed these men carefully for the next few days; again and again they demonstrated by their actions that the faith which they denied was indispensable to give meaning to their lives. As a result he wrote to Princeton Seminary admitting that he was an atheist but requesting permission to spend one year on the campus studying theology. His request was granted and the end of his first year, he returned to his church, stood up in another Bible conference testimony meeting and said that he had come back to faith in JESUS CHRIST. Today he is a preacher of the Gospel.

When you get right down to issues, life is meaning? less apart from that which lies on the other side of the grave; and even though we may have intellectually repudiated it, emotionally we live on this basis. We must! Immortality is more than just a deposit we leave for our posterity, more than a discovery or invention or good things we have added to make the world a better place in which to live, and for which we will be remembered. Immortality is infinitely more than this. The Apostle Paul insists that immortality is to live forever in a body that is incorruptible,

immortal and undefiled.

When GOD made man, the record declares, He formed him of the dust of the ground; that is, the body came first, and breathed into him and he became a living soul. In II Corinthians, chapter 5, Paul says, that which we really long for is to have immortal bodies. We do not desire to be incorporeal creatures, that is to be bodiless ghosts, or angels, roaming the universe, aimlessly drifting. Our desire is to have bodies that will perfectly serve the goals of our minds and hearts, goals which are always beyond us. The artist has never painted his perfect picture; the musician has never composed his perfect symphony; the pianist has never played his perfect concerto; the poet has never written the perfect poem; the author has never written the perfect story. Man has never achieved the perfect political, economic and social order.

Indeed, there is a curiosity about man which keeps him restless and dissatisfied. He wants to know more than just his community or his city or his state or his nation or the world. He wants to know what is on the other side of the moon. We may act very sophisticated about space; but when the news comes that some body has a picture and can report what is on the other side of the moon, we are interested. Of course, GOD has built this into us, and sin has frustrated this in us; so the whole creation groans for that moment when the Son of GOD returns, when the sons of GOD are revealed for what they are, when our bodies are raised from the grave, when the desert shall blossom as the rose, when the lion shall lie down with the lamb, when men shall beat their swords into plowshares and nations shall study war no more; when righteousness shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea; and there shall be peace without war or the threat of war or disease or death; when there shall be no tears and no pain.

This is the glory of Christianity, and this has been guaranteed to us by JESUS CHRIST. GOD help us to look forward to this. It is a legitimate hope, and Paul says we wait for it patiently; and when that moment comes, the whole created universe shares in the freedom of the sons of GOD.

~ end of chapter 15 ~

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