

Title: Light of the World

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Text: Romans 8:18-21

A New Calculus

Christians in Rome:

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It had been only about 25 years since the news of the resurrection of a crucified messiah named Jesus of Nazareth first rocked Jerusalem, resulting in the birth of the Church. Jewish pilgrims from Rome had been present less than two months later at the Feast of Pentecost, along with fellow Jews from all over the known world. While there, some of them had believed in Peter's proclamation that Jesus had been raised from the dead and was now King of the world.

These new believers went home to Rome, the capital of the empire and home to the emperor and his court. Within a few short years the entire Jewish community in Rome was divided over the Good News about the resurrected Messiah.

A community in crisis:

Being Jewish in Rome, after all, wasn't an easy thing in the best of circumstances! The Jews were numerous enough and influential enough to have negotiated substantial privileges from the emperor, exempting them from pagan practices and granting them permission to observe the Sabbath. Nonetheless, they were seen as an existential threat to Roman culture. Seneca complained:

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"...the customs of this accursed race have gained such influence that they are now received throughout the world. The vanquished have given laws to their victors" (De Superstitione, as cited in Dunn, Romans, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 1, p. li)

The new faith in Jesus only made things more unstable for this Jewish community. It became increasingly divided over faith in Jesus as Messiah, so much so that the emperor Claudius withdrew their right of assembly in A.D. 41, just 11 years after Pentecost. In A.D. 49 he took much more drastic action. The Roman historian Suetonius writes that Claudius:

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"...expelled Jews from Rome because of their constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus." (Claudius 25.4, as cited in Dunn)

After Claudius died in A.D. 54, the Jewish population returned to Rome. For Jewish Christians this meant going back to churches that had become entirely Gentile in their absence. Now, these little communities of believers had to find a way forward – as Jewish and Gentile believers together in an uncertain and dangerous world.

A New Calculus:

Paul offers this Christian community a whole new way of understanding the uncertainty and suffering that they are experiencing. You might think of it as a "new calculus," a new way of "doing the math." He writes:

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Romans 8:18 NIV

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

The word 'consider' carries with it the idea of making a calculation, or computing something. Paul is saying that because of the resurrection of Jesus and the arrival of the Holy Spirit, our "present sufferings" must be re-evaluated. No longer are they the final reality – the sum of the equation. They are utterly *unequal* to the glory of God that will be revealed in us. Suffering will still be part of our existence; but it will always be followed by the < sign.

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Suffering < coming Glory!

Creation's Exodus

What Creation knows:

So how does Paul come up with this new calculus?

He begins by going all the way back to the Beginning: the creation of all reality.

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Romans 8:19 NIV

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

When Paul talks about creation waiting in “eager expectation,” he is saying that the whole created order is “straining forward for an eagerly (or anxiously) awaited event.” (Dunn, p. 469) Think about what it’s like to be 6 years old on Christmas Eve! The tree is all decorated. The packages are accumulating under the tree. Mom and dad are walking around with knowing smiles. Something absolutely amazing is just about to happen. And you are coming out of your skin with excitement. That’s eager expectation.

Paul has already told the Romans that the entire Creation points to the Creator:

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Romans 1:20 NIV

For since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

Creation *knows* something: It knows that it is God’s handiwork. And Creation can’t wait for God’s rule to be re-established in God’s world!

Creation’s Exodus:

But in order for that to happen, Creation itself needs its own Exodus. Paul goes on to say:

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Romans 8:20-21 NIV

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

Creation – the world we live in – is enslaved; it is trapped in the prison of futility. Creation is looking for its own Moses who will answer the call of God and set it free. N. T. Wright explains:

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The whole creation – sun, moon, sea, sky, birds, animals, plants – is longing for the time when God’s people will be revealed as God’s glorious human agents, set in authority over the world. (Wright, Romans, p. 596)

Creation’s Calculus:

Can it be that the rest of God’s creation knows something that we need to learn? Could it be that Creation not only knows God has something too wonderful to imagine in store for it, but also that you and I are the key to that journey into God’s Paradise?

Hard wired into the deep fabric of the world is this radical calculus: The suffering of the world < the glory of God’s New Creation. And what makes this calculation work is the fact that you and I are made in God’s image and given the task of reflecting Him into the dark places of this world.

Light of the World

Freedom and Glory:

But in order for Creation to experience the freedom from futility and corruption, you and I must be transformed. Paul writes that Creation is hoping for a freedom that comes about when at last human beings are restored to their God-given glory and splendor.

And what is that glory? It has been described as

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"...the splendid reign over the world for which the human race was designed from the beginning, and the splendid form of existence that will be

appropriate for that role – lost through sin, but regained through the Messiah in his resurrection.” (Wright, p. 595)

Think of it – do the radical calculus that Creation has already discovered. You and I are God’s change agents. Right here in a suffering world, we begin the work of New Creation.

Light and Darkness:

For instance, think of what it’s like to drive down a dark, lonely road. Turn off your headlights and you are lost in total darkness. But turn on the lights and suddenly everything is clear. What made the difference? The only thing different is that the two headlights are doing what they were intended to do. They shine.

And when they shine, they light up the world around them. Pavement, trees, road signs, animals, everything suddenly becomes visible.

This is Paul’s point when he says that Creation will experience its long-awaited freedom when we receive our long-lost glory.

Light of the World:

Jesus put it this way:

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Matthew 5:14-16 NIV

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

This is Creation language: the first thing that God created when He made the Universe was Light. The first thing that God makes in His New Creation is Light. But this time that Light is present in you and me! *We are the light of the world.*

And when we shine in this dark, chaotic world, we bring glory and splendor to our Father in heaven. Our glory is a reflection of His glory.

And what does the light actually look like? Jesus calls it “your good deeds.” We do the work of God’s New Creation. We unleash love and forgiveness; we make peace where there’s strife; we show kindness and self-control. We let Jesus live His new life in us.

As Paul told the Christians in Ephesus:

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Ephesians 5:8-10 NIV

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.

Creation waits for God’s glory to shine. Why make it wait any longer?

Thanksgiving week:

**Note: we have a Thanksgiving Service this week on
Wednesday, 7:00 P.M.**