

## Romans 8:18-39

### *The Hope and Certainty in the New Life of the Justified Sinner*

#### A. Notes on the Text

##### **Verse 18**

Not all suffering will be changed into glory, only the suffering of believers. Suffering means: not only what happens to them for the sake of Christ, but also all suffering as a result of sin.

*The believers will escape from their burden as a book emerges from the press, the beautiful craftsmanship of the binder, who has pressed it ever so hard to shape it and form it. They will then radiate the glory of Christ.*

(A. Van Veldhuizen)<sup>1</sup>

##### **Verse 19**

"In eager expectation": look forward to, with uplifted head. The glory of God's children will be fully revealed when Christ returns.

"The creation": all of nature apart from man. This nature is portrayed as a person who is able to groan (see also vv. 20-22)

##### **Verse 20**

God has subjected the creation to frustration ("futility", RSV) (Genesis 3:17-19. See the book of Ecclesiastes on futility).

Nevertheless, the hope of glory remained. "In hope": the subjection was accompanied by hope. God gave the promise of deliverance at the same time (Genesis 3:15; see Glossary #14.)

##### **Verse 21**

"Liberated": set free from sin and its consequences to serve God in glory.

##### **Verse 22**

The groaning of creation is like that of a woman in labour (see Matthew 24:8 and Mark 13:8). This groaning is not in vain! "The whole creation": in all its parts and regions; therefore, everything and everyone in creation.

"Right up to the present time": from the fall into sin till Christ's return.

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<sup>1</sup> Ed. Note: Quote is from *Paulus en zijn brief aan de Romeinen* (1918).

**Verse 23**

The believers have the Spirit of God, as first fruits of the harvest (Numbers 15:20; Deuteronomy 18:4). It does not mean that the believers have part only of the Spirit of God, but rather that the Spirit has been given to them as first fruits and as a pledge of the full glory that is to come.

The groaning is for the full revelation of sonship, which ultimately means a new body in the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15). It does not mean that we are still expecting our adoption as sons and we groan and long for it. For we have sonship already (8:14-17). Therefore, the correct translation is: "we groan inwardly about our adoption as sons, expecting (or: because we expect) the redemption of our bodies." The redemption of our bodies (receiving a new glorified body in the resurrection) also belongs to the gifts of sonship. A different punctuation in the Greek text affords a better translation.

**Verse 24**

This means that we are saved with an eye to the hoped-for good (glory). The conclusion is simply that we do not yet have this glory.

**Verse 25**

"If" means: "since we, indeed, are hoping for..."

**Verses 26, 27**

Our distress can so confuse and bewilder us that we are perplexed and speechless, so that we do not know how to pray properly (as we ought). Then the Spirit prays for us. "Weakness" is revealed in our perplexity and speechlessness (see further Main Thoughts, 2).

**Verse 28**

Everything, not only the beautiful but also the difficult things, works for the good of the believer. Note carefully that it does not say that they may work for good; or that they sometimes, once in a while, work for good. Rather, they *always* work for good, even if we cannot always see it, because God the Father governs them all (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 26-28; Belgic Confession, Article 13).

**Verses 29, 30**

These verses describe the "golden chain of salvation." Both ends of it reach into eternity.

It begins with God's purpose (v. 28). He had a mind to redeem a lost people. This purpose took form in God's "foreknowledge," the election (out of the lost masses of mankind) of the great multitude which no man can number (Revelation 7:9). Forthwith, he determined that the predestined be conformed to the image of Christ. Then he calls them to himself through the preaching of the gospel. When those who are called come, they are justified (set free from guilt and punishment,

with a claim to eternal life). This finally leads to glory. In this chain of salvation not a link is missing! Together, the links form a short but complete doctrine of the faith.

The Greek (*aorist*) tense which is used indicates that these are facts that have happened (foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified), but also that these facts still exist today and will eventually exist in perfection. Let me give two examples from the chain:

- (a) God has once foreknown us (elected), and he keeps on doing that;
- (b) in Christ God has given us the first glory, will give us much more, and he will give us the eternal glory. In our earthly salvation the heavenly glorification has already commenced (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Therefore, it is not correct to read the verbs in the present tense: he "calls," "predestines," etc. Besides, it says "*foreknew*" and "*predestined*," which means that God's purpose, election, and the destination occurred before we were born. They are "from eternity".

"The likeness of his Son": the image of the humiliated Christ is suffering and obedience (Philippians 2:5-8; Heidelberg Catechism, A. 37) and the image of the exalted Christ is glory (see Hebrews 2:7,9). In this instance the latter is referred to (1 John 3:2).

"Firstborn": Christ is also called this elsewhere (see Matthew 1:25, Luke 2:7, Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:6; Revelation 1:5). In Hebrews 12:23 the believers are called firstborn. The meaning is different in each case. Here it means: Christ as man and mediator is the first of all church members. He is their Head, because he has made those church members into brothers by his work (Hebrews 2:10-15).

### **Verse 31**

The questions in vv. 31-35 are rhetorical. For instance, in verse 33: "Who will bring any charge?" Reply: no one! Verse 35: "Who shall separate us?" Reply: no one! "What, then, shall we say in response to this?" Reply: if God is for us, i.e. since God is for us.

### **Verse 32**

If God gave us the dearest and greatest, his Son, he will certainly not deny us the lesser things (all we need in trouble and grief, but also the whole world for an inheritance!).

### **Verse 33**

Paul refers to the last judgment.

### **Verse 34**

This verse gives the reason why no one can bring any charge against God's elect or condemn them (v. 33): Christ has died for us, and was raised, and he is now in

heaven as our Advocate. On the basis of his mediating work he pleads our acquittal before the Father.

### **Verse 36**

Paul quotes Psalm 44:22. In this Psalm we hear about the oppression, humiliation, persecution and rejection of God's church, even though it has not departed from the Lord (vv. 17- 21).

"Sheep to be slaughtered": the subject of a booklet of songs dedicated to the martyrs of the 16th century.

### **Verse 37**

"More than conquerors": super conquerors, complete conquerors in Christ.

### **Verses 38, 39**

"Angels", "demons" and "powers": this refers to fallen angels, all kinds of satanic powers and principalities, which are out to destroy both the world and the church.

"Height nor depth": evil powers in the air and in the abyss. (For "principalities" cf. 1 Corinthians 15:24-26; Ephesians 1:21ff.; 3:10; 6:11,12; Colossians 1:16; 2:15).

## **B. Main Thoughts**

1. In this part, the central point is that the Spirit of Christ gives the resurrected Christ to the justified sinner. In consequence, a struggle develops between the Spirit and the (sinful) flesh, between life and death. But the justified sinner hopes in complete redemption and perfect glory. The new life confers Christian hope. Therefore, we should not say that hope gives life, but that Life gives hope! This is the main thought of 8:18-30. And 8:31-39 adds that this hope is not some foolhardy, risky business, but is firmly based in the rocklike certainty that God's Word and promises are eternally steadfast and so will truly be fulfilled.
2. In vv. 18ff. Paul elaborates on what is said briefly in v. 17: through suffering to glory. That was the way first of all for the Head of the believers (Matthew 9:2-13: without suffering Christ could not come into glory; see also Luke 24:26: Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 2:9, 10; 1 Peter 1:11; 4:13; 5:1,9,10).

Paul hears everything groan for the promised redemption from sin and its consequences: the whole creation (vv. 19ff.); the believers (vv. 23ff.); even the Spirit of God (vv. 26ff.). The apostle quotes briefly from the book of Ecclesiastes, which speaks in a stirring way about the futility, the vanity of life. "There is movement, but there is no progress." (D. Holwerda) There is struggle and toil, but no lasting result. Also believers groan under this. Paul

knows what it is to suffer as a believer (1 Corinthians 4:9-13; 15:30-32; 2 Corinthians 11:23-29).

Things can become so terribly difficult for a believer that in his confusion and bewilderment he no longer knows how to pray. Then the Spirit takes over for him and intercedes for him with the Father "with groans that words cannot express." It is not possible to put into human words what the Spirit says to the Father ("inexpressible" for man, cf. 2 Corinthians 12:4). The Spirit then says to God what is in the heart of the believer, for he "searches" their hearts (v. 27). An advocate stands before an accuser. In the Scriptures we read that Satan kept coming before the Lord with accusations against God's people (see Job 1 and 2, Zechariah 3:1). After Christ's ascension, he could no longer do so (Revelation 12:7ff). The accuser made room for the advocate, the Spirit. Christ, too, is called advocate, intercessor (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25). Christ and the Spirit together intercede with the Father on behalf of the believer for forgiveness of sin, for protection in all need and for the fulfillment of all promises in glory.

We see a progression in the groaning: the world groans (vv. 18-22), the believers groan (vv. 23-25), and the Spirit groans (vv. 26,27). In that way, the longing for salvation rises up before God.

3. For there is *hope!* (See Glossary #14.) It is hope in the coming glory, when all suffering will be finished, all results of sin will have been done away with, and glory will illuminate all things. (See Glossary #6.) That glory is ample compensation for the suffering of this time.
4. That is why the *certainty* about redemption and glorification is so great (vv. 31-39). Nothing can separate us, believers, from God's love in Christ any more. God has adopted us for time and eternity in that love. Love knows itself responsible for others, if need be unto death. So Christ has loved us unto death. This mighty song of praise ends as a song of jubilation.

It is sometimes said: "Paul is one of the great in God's church. That is why he can sing with absolute certainty. But not every one of God's children can do that." The question is first: who is great and who is insignificant in the kingdom of God? The answer is probably to be found in what the New Testament calls "great" faith (Matthew 8:10; 15:28) and "little" faith (Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; Luke 12:28). A "little" faith is that of the broken line ( \_ \_ \_ ) trust in the Lord is time and again broken by moments of doubt and unbelief. A "great" faith is that of the solid, unbroken line ( \_\_\_\_\_ ); trust in the Lord is solid and lasting. The latter speaks in Romans 8:31ff.

That also informs us how we reach this certainty. Since the age of the Reformation (the sixteenth century) we differ fundamentally from mysticism on this point. The Scriptural position is stated in Lord's Day 7: believing God's

promises, accepting as true all that God has promised in the way of forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and complete salvation. This sure knowledge (certainty) is based on God's own Word. Doubts and temptations may occur, but they can be conquered, not by self-examination, "by searching one's own heart" (Alice Nahon), or by comparing oneself to lists of characteristics of the new life (the proximate reformation of the eighteenth century), but by rejecting those attacks:

*For this I know, that God is at my side.  
In Him, whose word I praise, I do confide;  
He heard my voice when in my fears I cried.  
The LORD is my Defender.  
In God I trust, to Him my praise I render.  
I do not fear, I trust His mercies tender.  
My foes shall see when He appears in splendour.  
Why fear then human pride?*

Psalm 56:4<sup>2</sup>

Scripture does not teach us to rummage in our own hearts and souls, but to seek life outside of ourselves, in Christ Jesus, (Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper). Paul does not say: faith plus certainty. For faith has its own certainty. Faith IS certainty.

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<sup>2</sup> Ed. Note: Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter.