

The Whole Creation Has Been Groaning

BY HARRY ALAN HAHNE

In mysterious apocalyptic language, the Apostle Paul describes the corruption of nature and expresses the cosmic scope of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. What does it mean for us to participate now in God’s redemptive activity that extends to the natural world?

One of the most profound New Testament expressions of God’s plan for the natural world is in Romans 8:19-23. It powerfully depicts the apocalyptic expectation that at the end of history God will reverse the damage from the Fall not only to humanity, but even to nature itself.

There is a popular misperception that apocalypses are world-denying and pessimistic about nature. For the average person, the word “apocalypse” brings to mind the end of the world. It is true that most early Jewish and Christian apocalypses have a dualistic or two age view of history. Apocalypses view the present age or world as corrupted by sin and in sharp contrast with the future perfect world or age of glory and righteousness.¹ Nevertheless, unlike Gnostic writings, biblical apocalypses – such as Daniel, Isaiah 24-27, 65-66, and Revelation – and most early Jewish apocalypses view the present material world as damaged by sin, but not fallen or inherently evil. Furthermore, they look forward not to the eventual destruction of the material world, but to its eschatological perfection and liberation from the damage caused by sin.

From roughly 200 B.C. to 100 A.D., many Jewish writers used apocalypses to express their struggle with the problem of evil and the expectation that

God would dramatically intervene to make things right at the end of history. They often express an ecological concern for nature by stressing that the natural world was created by God and is under God's control. The sins of humans and fallen angels have defiled the earth and caused some aspects of nature not to operate as God originally intended. God holds humans and fallen angels accountable for their sins against the earth and animals. Nature is a victim of human and angelic sin and cries out in suffering, and in the coming new age, the natural world will be redeemed and transformed to a state of great glory.²

In Romans 8:19-23 the Apostle Paul reflects an apocalyptic perspective similar to this stream of Jewish apocalypses. He looks forward to the permanent eschatological transformation of creation when Christ returns. The damage that the Fall caused to nature will be reversed and nature will be perfected, so that it shares in the glory of the resurrected children of God. Although this passage is part of a letter rather than an apocalypse (like the book of Revelation), nevertheless the worldview, the theology, and many expressions are very similar to those in Jewish apocalypses from the same period.³ It is one of the clearest expressions of what J. C. Beker calls Paul's expectation of "the apocalyptic triumph of God." This apocalyptic perspective emphasizes "the hope in the dawning victory of God and the imminent redemption of the created order, which he has inaugurated in Christ."⁴

PAUL'S APOCALYPTIC VIEW OF NATURE

Paul develops two major themes: the present corruption of nature is a result of the Fall of Adam and Eve, and the eschatological redemption of nature will free it from corruption and transform it to freedom and glory. These themes are common in Jewish apocalypses from the same period. John Collins notes that "the underlying problem of all the apocalypses [is that] this world is out of joint, one must look beyond it for a solution." He also observes that most Jewish apocalypses have an eschatological hope that God will intervene to remove evil and radically transform the whole cosmos into a perfect new world.⁵

The pivotal interpretive question in Romans 8:19-23 is the meaning of the Greek word translated "creation" (*ktisis*).⁶ Although in some contexts this word can refer to all that is created or an individual creature, in this passage it more narrowly means nature. Even though verse 22 refers to "the whole creation," several aspects of the created order are incompatible with what Paul says about creation in this passage: *angels* have not been subjected to futility or decay due to their sin or human sin (vv. 20-21), *demons* will not be redeemed (v. 21) and they do not eagerly await the revealing of the children of God when Christ returns (v. 19), *heaven* has not been subjected to futility or decay (vv. 20-21), and *unbelievers* do not eagerly await the revealing of the children of God (v. 19), nor will all be delivered from the consequences of sin (v. 21). Some interpreters suggest that Christians are in view,

since verses 17-18 mention the suffering and glory of Christians. However, even though *ktisis* occasionally refers to believers (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15), Paul distinguishes believers from “the creation” in this passage: “Not only the creation, but we ourselves [i.e. believers]...groan inwardly” (v. 23). When angels, demons, heaven, unbelievers, and Christians are excluded from the meaning of *ktisis*, the part of creation that remains is the subhuman material creation or nature.⁷

Paul vividly depicts the present suffering of nature due to the Fall. “The creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it” (v. 20). As a result, creation is in “bondage to decay” (v. 20) and “has been groaning in labor pains until now” (v. 22). Although the natural world is not itself fallen or disobedient to God, Adam’s sin brought the created order into bondage to death, decay, corruption, and futility (vv. 20-21). The background for this passage is Genesis 3:17-19, which describes the curse on the ground due to the original human sin.⁸ When God pronounced the curse after the Fall, God subjected creation to futility and simultaneously gave hope of its eventual redemption through a descendant of Eve (v. 20, “in hope”; cf. Genesis 3:15). The Greek word translated “was subjected” (*hupotassō*) suggests an authoritative action, in this case the curse that God pronounced after Adam fell.⁹ Whereas in Romans 5:12-19, Paul says that Adam’s Fall brought sin and death to humanity, in Romans 8:20-22 he extends the impact of the Fall to the natural world. Thus, nature is not now in the condition it originally was when it was created.

The reason Adam’s sin affected nature is that God gave humanity dominion over nature (Genesis 1:26-28). Since Adam was accountable to God to rule the earth and to tend the garden as a vice-regent under God, his sin affected the natural world for which he was responsible.¹⁰ Thus, nature became frustrated in its purposes and can no longer be all it was created to be.

Yet Paul describes this suffering of the natural

world in the context of great eschatological hope for both believers and nature: “The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now” (v. 22). The suffering of creation is like birth pangs leading to a glorious new world, rather than the death pangs of a dying creation. Throughout Scripture the metaphor of birth pangs points to an intense and prolonged pain that leads to a joyous and positive outcome. This bipolar metaphor

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combines extended, intense pain with a better state of affairs in the future. Creation eagerly awaits “the revealing of the children of God” (v. 19), because at that time the natural world will be “set free from its slavery to corruption” (v. 21, NASB)¹¹ and will be transformed to share in “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (v. 21).

Thus, the redemption that Christ brings will have cosmic consequences. At the Second Coming of Christ when God’s people are resurrected and glorified (vv. 19, 23; cf. 29-30), the natural order will be restored to its proper operation, so that it fulfills the purpose for which it was created. This passage strongly suggests that God will transform the existing creation, rather than create a brand new world from scratch. When Paul says “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay” (v. 21), the phrase “the creation itself” could be translated more literally as “this creation.” The resurrection of the bodies of believers is part of this perfection of nature, for which both the material creation and believers “wait eagerly” (vv. 19, 23; cf. Philippians 3:21).¹² Paul’s vision for redemption has a cosmic scope and is not limited merely to the salvation of individual humans or even to the Church as the new community of redeemed humanity.

Romans 8:19-22 personifies nature in order to more vividly describe the impact of sin on nature and the future redemption of creation. The Old Testament and Jewish apocalypses also frequently describe various aspects of nature with emotions, intellect, and will.¹³ For example, the apocalypse in Isaiah 24-27 similarly personifies the suffering of nature due to human sin. “The earth mourns and withers, the world fades and withers.... The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant” (Isaiah 24:4-5, NASB). Just as Isaiah poetically describes how the land suffered when Israel broke the old covenant, Paul uses personification to graphically depict how human sin causes nature to suffer. Even though the descriptions of nature are figurative in Romans 8:19-22, its suffering due to human sin should not be minimized. The present suffering of creation is very real and God will bring this suffering to an end when Christ returns.

PARTICIPATING IN GOD’S PLAN FOR NATURE

The concepts in Romans 8:19-23 have profound implications for ecological ethics and a Christian worldview concerning nature. Although the Apostle Paul does not work out all of these implications, they are the logical fruit of adopting the view of nature in this passage. Let me suggest some ways that we can apply these implications to our lives and participate in God’s plan for nature.

Scripture says that disciples of the Lord Jesus have the mind of Christ through God’s indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:16) and ought to be growing more like their heavenly Father (Matthew 5:45). Therefore, they ought to love the things that God loves. When God created the earth, plants,

animals, and other aspects of the material creation, God declared them “good.” Although the Fall of humanity damaged creation so it does not function completely as originally designed, God did not thereafter declare nature or material things to be evil. Romans 8:20 depicts nature as the victim of human sin. The creation was subjected to futility “not of its own will,” but due to the divine curse on the ground after Adam and Eve fell. This perspective is quite the opposite of the world-denying Gnostic view of nature that sees matter as inherently evil.

Passages such as 1 John 2:15-17 do not contradict Paul’s view of nature: “Do not love the world or the things in the world” for “the world and its desire are passing away.” In this context, “world” refers not to the material creation, but to the system of values and desires in opposition to God, such as “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life” (1 John 2:16, NASB).¹⁴ These sinful values and drives are not inherent in being material, but are due to the fallenness of humanity. The fact that matter is not inherently evil is shown by the fact that God became incarnate in physical flesh without defiling himself (1 John 4:2). Jesus was resurrected in a real, but glorified physical body (Luke 24:39; John 20:27), and one day believers will be resurrected in perfect material bodies (Romans 8:23; 1 Corinthians 15:42).

Since God plans to redeem the damaged material creation (Romans 8:19, 21) and not simply dispose of it at the end of the age, God’s redeemed children ought to show a strong concern for the care of nature. Nature “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (v. 19), because when believers are glorified and freed from sin, they will assume their proper relationship to the rest of creation so that nature itself will share in that glory (v. 21). Even though God will instantly transform nature when Christ returns, that does not mean Christians should just wait for God to do the work when Christ returns. Sanctification

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means that God gradually transforms believers so they begin acting now as they will act when they are glorified. Even though God will perfect the character of Christians when Jesus returns, they should begin living righteous lives now through God’s transforming power (Philippians 2:12). “When he [i.e. Christ] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (1 John

3:2b-3). God's plan for what believers will be in the future in glory is the moral pattern for how they ought to live in this world today.

The original task God gave the first humans was to care for creation. God gave humanity "dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28b, cf. 26). Dominion over and care of nature is a major aspect of what it means that humans were created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-30). God delegated to Adam and Eve the task of tending the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15). The two Hebrew verbs in this verse depict a balanced view of the human relationship with nature. First, Adam was to "till" (NRSV) or "cultivate" (NASB) the Garden of Eden. This suggests making changes, organizing and managing the natural world for the benefit of humanity, not simply keeping all of nature in its raw, wild state. This implies that it is legitimate to use nature for the good of humanity. But Adam was also to "keep" the garden. The Hebrew verb *shamar* means to "guard," "keep watch over," and "protect" like a watchman.¹⁵ This suggests that part of the human dominion over the earth is to make sure that the natural world does not suffer harm. At the least, this means that humans should not cause harm to nature. It also suggests a basis for maintaining at least some of nature in its wild form for its own sake, rather than using everything for human benefit. As a whole, the human race has done a pretty good job of fulfilling the first task of managing the earth for its own benefit. But humanity has done a much less effective job of protecting and caring for the earth, which was the second part of the creation care mandate. The human dominion over the earth does not provide an excuse for the abuse of the earth.¹⁶ Quite the contrary, humanity has been given a stewardship of the earth, which means God entrusted its care to the human race. Thus, God will hold people accountable for their interaction with and management of the natural world.

This has profound implications for the behavior of Christians as individuals, business leaders, and citizens of society. Negatively, this means that Christians should not act in ways that contribute to the decay of nature and increase its groaning. This includes avoiding such behaviors as polluting the air, water and earth, squandering limited natural resources, and abusing animals. It also suggests that there is a place for a society to have legislation to restrain the selfish actions of fallen human nature that result in environmental harm. Positively, it means that Christians should act in ways that anticipate the new creation. Far from avoiding involvement in the environmental movement, Christians should be leaders in it. Christians have even a stronger motivation and ideological foundation for an ecological ethic and active environmental care than people operating from secular or non-Judeo-Christian religious presuppositions. Christians should not care for the earth merely from enlightened self-interest that is only concerned for how it affects their quality of life and that of their children (an anthropocentric

approach to ecological ethics). Neither should they care for the earth because they see humans as merely a part of nature (the view of evolutionary science and many religions). Rather Christians should see their responsibility to care for the earth as a stewardship given by God, which obedience to the Lord Jesus demands (a theocentric approach).¹⁷

Paul's teachings in this passage also imply that human beings have solidarity with nature. Both believers and nature groan together as they long to be set free from the consequences of sin (Romans 8:22-23). This solidarity is an inescapable consequence of the dominion God gave humans over nature. Thus, when human beings sin, the natural world for which humans have responsibility is negatively impacted. When Adam and Eve fell, God cursed the ground, with the result that weeds now grow, the earth has less fecundity, and women experience pain in childbirth (Genesis 3:16-19). Although Romans 8:20 and Genesis 3 focus on the results of that first act of human sin, other human sins throughout history also harm nature. For example, habits of selfish and unbridled consumption directly and indirectly harm the environment and diminish the finite resources of the planet God entrusted to the care of humanity. Nature continues to groan because of the short sighted and selfish acts of the human race.

The solidarity of humanity with nature also stems from the fact that humans have material bodies (cf. Genesis 2:7a: "then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground"). People groan along with nature, because their physical bodies are in "bondage to decay" even as is the rest of the material creation (Romans 8:21, 23). This physical dimension is an essential part of what it means to be human. Humans are not only spiritual beings—they are embodied spirits. Thus, the redemption of Christians will not be complete until their physical bodies are redeemed, which will occur at Christ's return when they are resurrected in perfect, incorruptible, and glorious physical bodies (Roman 8:21, 23; Philippians 3:21; Revelation 20:5-6). The eternal destiny of God's redeemed people is to dwell in perfect resurrected

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bodies in a perfected earth, full of glory and freed from bondage to decay (Romans 8:21; Revelation 21-22), not as disembodied spirits floating about in some immaterial emptiness (2 Corinthians 5:1-4). If God so cares about human physical bodies that one day God will redeem and perfect them, then this suggests that Christians should glorify God by taking care of their bodies during this life. The human body is so sacred that it is a temple for

the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). "You were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body," Paul concludes (1 Corinthians 6:20). This does not mean Christians should embrace the cult of the perfect body image so popular in Western society. But a person who does not care for his or her body dishonors the stewardship of the body entrusted by God and hence defiles God's temple. Stewardship of the body includes such actions as eating healthy foods, exercising (1 Corinthians 9:27), and avoiding sexual immorality, which harms both body and spirit (1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

Romans 8:19-23 suggests that the Western church needs to broaden its understanding of redemption in Christ. God's plan for redemption is not just for individual human souls or even the corporate redemption of a new community, although these are both essential aspects of redemption. The apocalyptic worldview stresses that God plans to restore the whole creation to its proper operation, which was lost when the first humans disobeyed God. "Through him [i.e. Christ] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:20). Since God's plan for redemption is cosmic, as believers grow more like Christ, their actions should have a positive impact not only on other people but also on the whole of God's creation. God's priority is on human redemption, but since humanity is God's agent in caring for nature, when humanity is restored to a right relationship with God, the rest of creation will also be restored to God's intended operation.

NOTES

1 A defining feature of apocalypses is a three-fold dualism – *cosmic* (heaven and earth), *temporal* (this age and the age to come), and *social* (sons of light and sons of darkness) – according to Wayne A. Meeks, "Social Functions of Apocalyptic Language in Pauline Christianity," in David Hellholm, ed., *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, second edition (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr, 1989), 687-705.

2 For a detailed discussion of the Jewish apocalyptic view of nature, see Harry Alan Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Nature in Romans 8.19-22 and Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, Library of New Testament Studies, no. 336 (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 35-168.

3 Recent apocalyptic researchers distinguish between "apocalypse" as a literary genre and "apocalyptic eschatology" as a religious perspective. "When we use the term apocalyptic," James Barr writes, "we generally have in mind content and point of view rather than simply form: we think of a set of ideas and attitudes, which find typical expression in the apocalypse form more strictly so called but which are also found over a much wider range of literature." James Barr, "Jewish Apocalyptic in Recent Scholarly Study," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 58 (1975): 18.

4 J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980), ix; cf. 363-366.

5 John J. Collins, "The Jewish Apocalypses," *Semeia* 14 (1979), 27-28. Jewish apocalypses frequently say that the sin of angels and humans, including the Fall of Adam, corrupted or defiled nature, resulting in cosmic aberrations (e.g. 1 Enoch 10:7-8; 4 Ezra 7:11-15; 9:19-20; Jubilees 4:28; 23:12-15; Apocalypse of Moses 11:3). They also expect God to reverse this

cosmic damage at the end of history and to transform the natural world into great glory (1 Enoch 45:4-5; 4 Ezra 8:53-54; 2 Baruch 29:1-8; 32:1-6). For hundreds of additional examples, see Hahne, *Corruption*, 35-168.

6 Depending on context, *ktisis* can mean: everything created by God (Colossians 1:15); an individual creature, either humans and animals (Romans 1:25), or any created thing (Romans 8:39; Hebrews 4:13); humankind collectively (Mark 16:15); humans transformed by God through the new birth, which is like a second creation (2 Corinthians 5:17); "the act of creation" (Romans 1:20); or, an authoritative institution or government (1 Peter 2:13).

7 Numerous commentators take this position, including Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, no. 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 506; Douglas Moo, *Romans 1-8*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1991), 551; and James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, no. 38A (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), 469. For further evidence that *ktisis* here refers to nature, see Hahne, *Corruption*, 176-181.

8 John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 330.

9 C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. and T. Clark, 1975), 413.

10 G. W. H. Lampe, "The New Testament Doctrine of *Ktisis*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17 (1964): 458.

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12 Philippians 3:21 suggests that the resurrection bodies of believers will be transformed, glorified, and perfected versions of their present bodies (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:42).

13 Examples include a cry of pain and sorrow due to sin (Genesis 4:11; Isaiah 24:4, 7; Jeremiah 4:28 and 12:4); suffering due to human sin (Genesis 3:17; Isaiah 24:4-7; 33:9; Jeremiah 4:4, 11, 26-28); joy (Psalms 65:12-13; 98:4, 7-9; Isaiah 14:7-8; 1 Enoch 7:6; 9:2; 87:1; 88:2; 4 Ezra 6:14-16; 7:55-56; 8:2-3; 10:9; 11:46; 12:43; Apocalypse of Moses 29:14), particularly when the righteous are in the messianic kingdom (Isaiah 55:12); fear about eschatological disasters (1 Enoch 1:6; 4 Ezra 6:14-16); consciousness, intellectual understanding (Isaiah 1:2); hope for eschatological deliverance (4 Ezra 11:46); and obedience to God (1 Enoch 5:2-3; 75:2; 101:6-7; 2 Baruch 21:4; 48:8-10, 46). See Hahne, *Corruption*, 165-168.

14 The meaning of the Greek word *kosmos* ("world") depends on the context. Common meanings include: humanity (John 3:16); people in opposition to God (John 16:20); all rational beings including angels (1 Corinthians 4:9); the system of sinful values hostile to God (1 John 2:15-17; 2 Peter 2:20); the material universe (John 17:5); and the earth (John 6:14).

15 William Lee Holladay, Ludwig Köhler, and Walter Baumgartner, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1971), 377.

16 This is how I would respond to Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" *Science* 155 (March 10, 1967), 1203-1207, who famously argues that the Western ecological crisis is a product of the Judeo-Christian tradition. While history shows many examples of Christians misinterpreting the human dominion over nature, this does not invalidate the biblical concept of dominion, when it is properly understood as a stewardship accountable to God. Just as the Fall corrupted relationships between people, it corrupted the human relationship with nature, resulting in acts of greed, self-centeredness, and shortsightedness toward nature. For more discussion of this point, see Russell A. Butkus, "The Stewardship of Creation," *The Moral Landscape of Creation*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 2 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian

Ethics at Baylor University, 2002), 17-23, and other articles in *The Moral Landscape of Creation* issue available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

17 For further discussion of the implications of understanding dominion as a stewardship entrusted to humanity by God, see Richard A. Young, *Healing the Earth: A Theocentric Perspective on Environmental Problems and Their Solutions* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1994) and R. J. Berry, ed., *Environmental Stewardship Critical Perspectives – Past and Present* (London, UK: T & T Clark, 2006).



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