

1-1-2012

Listening for the Apocalypse: Romans 8.18-30

Ronald R. Cox
ronald.cox@pepperdine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>

Recommended Citation

Cox, Ronald R. (2012) "Listening for the Apocalypse: Romans 8.18-30," *Leaven*: Vol. 20: Iss. 4, Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol20/iss4/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

Listening for the Apocalypse: Romans 8.18–30

RONALD R. COX

Introduction

I confess to a weakness when it comes to zombie movies (and now TV shows). It's a double-sided weakness in that I am fascinated with zombies while at the same time I am quite frightened by them. A while back I came upon a compromise that allowed me to watch this admittedly macabre and somewhat suspect material and manage my fear at the same time: using my laptop to watch the DVD, I turn down the sound whenever I suspect a scary scene is coming (i.e., one that involves zombies—so usually most of the film). For some reason, not being able to hear the zombies as they “unexpectedly” stumble into view and drag themselves, with ghastly groans, toward their next victim makes the experience more endurable.

The setting of zombie films is usually after an apocalypse, with a remnant of humanity trying to survive in spite of the hordes of the ravenous undead. Inevitably, the greatest weakness of the remnant, which usually leads to the loss of several if not nearly all of them, is not the zombies but their own very humanity. Their fear, their self-centeredness, their pride all contribute to their undoing, even if the zombies ultimately “benefit” by such things. We might learn a lot about human nature, at least as the filmmakers conceive it, by watching such films.¹ Though again, I am only confessing, not advocating.

Zombie Films and Romans 8.18–30

What do zombie films have to do with Romans 8.18–30? Not much, except perhaps the apocalyptic setting, the rising from the dead and the sound of groaning. And the fact that most of us tend to mute the disturbing sounds of the apocalypse, tuning out the groaning that arises from suffering as a way to manage how we feel about the ensuing end of the world. But I have gotten ahead of myself. Let's step back and look at this passage, meant to encourage believers, before we consider why we can't hear what Paul is talking about.

Romans 8.1–17 describe how by the power of God's Spirit we are swept up into the resurrection life of Christ, vivified in such a way that we no longer live in a fleshly fashion, in enmity toward God; rather, we are freed by God's Spirit to enjoy life, peace and righteousness as God's children. Paul's words perorate: “When we cry ‘Abba! Father’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8.15–17). Paul has shown that God, through the Spirit by which he raised Jesus from death, has already rescued us, granting us the status and clout of being divine progeny. Yet he also sets for his readers a conundrum—that as the Son suffered so the children of God must suffer with him; the path to glory lies through that suffering. The next thirteen verses, the focus of this study, tackle this relationship between suffering and glory.

Romans 8.18–30 has an introduction (v. 18) and then three sections that reflect three levels of apocalyptic anticipation: creation in verses 19–22, the human in verses 23–25, and the Spirit in verses 26–27. Verses 28–30

1. For a helpful spiritual analysis of contemporary zombie films, see Kim Paffenroth, *The Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth* (Baylor, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006).

conclude the passage by celebrating the assurance of God’s providence. Together, these verses put the tension between the present and the apocalypse in its proper perspective, as well as set up the transition to Paul’s discussion of how the Israelites fit into God’s plan (Rom 9–11). The transition, verses 31–39, provides the counterpoise to verse 28 (“all things work together for those who love God”) with a stunningly inspiring affirmation that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 39).

Where zombie movies and the rest of popular culture perceive the apocalypse as something to be feared, a horrendous upturning of our present comfortable life, Romans 8.18 offers the exact opposite perspective. Paul considers “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” The term “revealed” translates the Greek term *apokaluptō*, from which we get our English word “apocalypse” (cf. Rev 1.1, where “revelation” translates the Greek *apokalupsis*). An apocalypse is an unveiling, and Jewish literature of the time used this language to describe how God would put an end to the corruption and evil of the present age, establishing his long-expected kingdom. The theme of God’s unveiling a new and glorious age was of such encouragement to beleaguered Jews living under a series of oppressors, as well as wrestling with the failings of their own nation, that it spawned a distinctive literary genre (while biblical examples are rare, namely Daniel [esp. chaps. 7–12] and Revelation, there are a number of non-biblical Jewish apocalypses, such as 1 Enoch [quoted in Jude 14–15], 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch).² But the belief that this present age was enthralled to sin and demonic forces, that God’s holy ones will be the ones who remain faithful to his covenant in spite of persecution, and that God will end the dominion of Satan and establish his reign where the righteous would receive justice and the wicked ultimate punishment was not confined to apocalyptic literature. In fact, Paul himself appears very much to have adhered to this view (there are many examples, but see Gal 1.4, 1 Thess 4.13–5.11, Titus 2.11–14), though the apostle modified it significantly to reflect his conviction that Jesus’s death and resurrection began the new age.

Paul’s Task

The task Paul has in Romans 8 is to communicate to his Gentile audience that they now occupy the same position as the faithful Jews in the apocalyptic scenario. They are themselves now also the holy ones who must endure suffering as they await the glory to be revealed. And suffering is not optional but is a necessary concomitant with their adoption as God’s children and being made joint heirs with Christ: “we suffer with him [Jesus] so that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8.18). Apocalyptic thinking seeks to explain the suffering, or at least to contextualize it, by showing that it is not meaningless but has a place in God’s plan. Similarly, in our passage, Paul explains how suffering signifies forthcoming glory, even as he affirms that the latter will far exceed any of the former.

In Romans 8.19–27, Paul inculcates the readers into the apocalyptic worldview by getting them to view their world apocalyptically. He begins with the widest perspective, that of the “whole creation” (vv. 19–22). Again noting that Romans 8 takes an inverse perspective to modern understandings of “apocalyptic,” it is the present creation that is ambling about purposelessly and disintegrating with decay. Creation was originally purposeful and vibrant but consigned, against its will, into its current condition as a result of human sin. Surely Paul is alluding to Genesis 3 (as he has been doing since chap. 5), in particular to where creation is “subjected to futility” and put in “bondage to decay” as a result of humanity’s transgression (see Gen 3.16–19). Yet the world languishes under this burden “in hope.” Humanity had not been immediately destroyed nor had human sin resulted in the world’s outright termination; rather, the environment adapted (with divine assistance) to sin, so that even if by a different and far more circuitous route, it still inclines toward paradise.

Creation’s achievement of that goal, like its subjection to futility and decay, is bound up with the human enterprise. Hence, it “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” because then creation too “will be set free... and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8.19, 21). Human destiny and the destiny of creation have always been intertwined. It is worth observing that Paul’s line of

2. For a primer on Jewish apocalyptic literature (that includes a discussion of Early Christian apocalypticism as well) see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

reasoning precludes us from continuing along with the myth that we are somehow distinct from nature and that our heavenly fate is somehow divorced from the fate of the universe. The present age of humankind is adept at fabricating a synthetic environment and erroneously presuming it, and not nature, is our real home. Even when we do attend to nature, it is usually as an alien sphere (regardless whether it evokes our awe, provides our resources, or even requires our protection). But “this world’s not my home” does not cohere with what Paul is saying here. Human interconnection with creation (humans are creatures after all) is a relationship that extends from beginning through the end, from bondage to freedom, from suffering to glory.

Creation and humanity’s shared condition and shared fate are not the only ways Paul communicates their interconnectivity. Notice also his use of personification: creation “waits with eager longing” and creation was subjected to futility “not of its own will.” This language heightens the sense in Romans 8 that creation is not an abstract setting or inanimate prop, but a full-fledged participant in salvation history. And personification provides the force behind Paul’s effort to contextualize suffering within a larger purpose when he writes, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now” (8.22). The allusion to childbirth overrides the aforementioned futility and decay so that creation’s suffering, though not minimized or explained away, is viewed as part of a purposeful and life-rendering process. Paul tunes his audience to creation’s purposeful agony with the term “groaning,” the Greek root for which is *stenazō*, a term signifying the sound people make involuntarily when encountering difficult circumstances. Its use here in conjunction with the image of labor in childbirth can only serve to create a sympathetic awareness in Paul’s readers of the cosmic drama unfolding round about them, as well as the promise that such drama holds for the future of both creation in general and humanity in particular.

Paul refocuses in verses 23–25 onto his readers themselves, but he does so in a way that preserves their awareness that they are involved in the same apocalyptic drama as creation, even if they are center stage. They are waiting for the same thing as creation; verse 19’s “revealing of the children of God” is the believers’ “adoption, the redemption of our bodies” in verse 23. Even as this claim highlights humanity’s greater role (their glory is what creation is waiting for), it also preserves the continuity between the two with the phrase “redemption of our bodies.” This refers back Romans 8.1–17 and to the fulfillment of the process already undertaken by the Spirit that raised Christ from the dead. So Romans 8.11, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.” In contrast to the sentiments of the ancient world generally as well as to current zombie stories, the human body is not a hopeless hindrance that must be dispensed with; rather, it is even a prospective beneficiary of glory. As Paul argues in both 1 and 2 Corinthians, Jesus’ resurrection ensures that our corporeal bodies, however transformed, will be resurrected. We may be new creations but we will somehow still be creatures, albeit glorified ones.³

But like creation, humanity is not there yet. And the difficulty of the process they are in is made audible in their own “groaning” (verse 23), translating the same Greek root that expressed the purposeful suffering of creation. But this groaning is “inward” (literally, “in ourselves”), the existential utterance that escapes from deep within believers as they, knowing themselves in the light of Christ, bear the burden of what they are not yet but will someday be. Such groaning may arise from their struggle with sin, or from the social dissociation they feel as a result of leaving their pagan life, or the weight of their mortality, or perhaps all three and more as well. But in further camaraderie with creation, it is the sound of suffering within the context of future glory, the reminder that their suffering is also like a woman’s in labor, real and undiluted pain, that will still give way to life.

The parallel between believers and creation hits a curious twist when we come to verse 24. Where creation was “subjected to futility...in hope” (v. 20), believers have been “saved in hope” (v. 24). Between subjection and salvation we find Jesus Christ, the righteous human whose death undoes the curse and whose resurrection makes available the promise of glory (the argument of Rom 5.12–21). Yet while believers are on

3. For more on the relationship between Romans 8 and 1 and 2 Corinthians, see Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul’s Rhetoric in its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 291–92.

this side of the Christ-event they are not yet on his side of glory. Their inheritance is secured but has not yet been given, not fully anyway (the Spirit is the “first fruits,” v. 23). So, they must wait with creation in eager expectation. Which brings us back to Paul’s interpretation of suffering; rather than contradict their hope, it is a reminder that they have yet to achieve what they cannot see but what is surely coming.

To this point in his argument, Paul has established the symmetry and cohesion between creation and believers in regards to both experience and expectation. The repetition of groaning has highlighted the toll that waiting for the revelation of the children of God takes on believers as much as on the world. Hence, Paul has done much to show that the suffering of believers is not in vain nor is it limited only to them; the groaning of believers resonates with that of creation to communicate that the unfolding plan of God continues in a scope that encompasses both the individual and the universal.

Comparing Paul with Contemporary Apocalyptic

One might detect a salient and disturbing parallel between Paul’s apocalyptic thinking and the contemporary apocalyptic of popular culture. In most zombie stories, for instance, much is made of the isolation felt by the remnant that fight to survive the numerically superior undead; having no place to turn but to themselves to overcome their circumstances, the survivors sometimes attain to tragic heroism but more often succumb to their own weakness. While in Romans 8 believers perhaps find solace in the suffering of each other and in creation, they may just as likely be overwhelmed to discover that the suffering they feel within themselves is a universal phenomenon. What is more, believers appear to wait in isolation, themselves over against the powers of the age that accentuate and abuse their suffering (Paul will refer explicitly to such powers in Rom 8.38–39).

It is at this point that Paul shifts focus yet again, and in verses 26–27 he brings into view where God stands vis-à-vis the suffering of this world and of those in it destined for adoption as his children. God is not detached, watching with scientific curiosity from afar as the clock ticks toward the end. Rather, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (v. 26). Paul does not pass over the believers’ inadequacy; they are weak and ignorant of how they should pray. But it is precisely in their inability to contend with suffering and with waiting where the Spirit ministers to them. And the Spirit’s involvement is by no means clinical; rather, the Spirit’s intercessions take the form of inexpressible sighs, literally “wordless groaning”—with the Greek *stenagmoi* being a nominal cognate of the root *stenazō*, “to groan,” that occurs in verses 22 and 23.

This revelation should transform how we understand the suffering we’ve been speaking of and the groaning it produces. It is not just that the suffering takes place in the context of eager expectation of glory and it is not just that believers hear the suffering of creation and sympathize with it because of their own suffering. The association between prayer and groaning in verse 26 suggests that the groaning is somehow directed toward God; it is the hopeful yet inarticulate call to him out of futility and decay. And now to discover the Spirit also groans makes clear that God not only hears and knows of the suffering but is present in the midst of it, even somehow participating in it alongside his children and even with the whole world. Jesus had of course suffered, and we already discussed how believers share in his sufferings. But God’s involvement is not a one-time occurrence but an ongoing investment. And God’s role is in no way a passive one; verse 27 says he searches the hearts of believers and knows the mind of the Spirit as it intercedes for us. On this side of glory believers are already, by God’s own actions through his Spirit, caught up in the heavenly communion of the Father, Son and Spirit.

When the groaning of creation and of believers, a recognition of universal suffering, converges with the groaning of God’s Spirit, it prevents us from considering any area of life, no matter how frustrating or painful, outside the purpose of God, since no area escapes his awareness or his commiseration. So Paul can boldly state, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (v. 28). These ubiquitous groans, grounded in real pain and dis-ease, are not hopeless and senseless sounds but, because of God’s sharing in them, are the reverberations of a plan coming to fruition. This fruition, that is, glory, is what creation “waits with eager longing for” (v. 19) and what believers hope in and “wait for with patience” (v. 25).

But this is where God's perspective is substantively different. While by his Spirit God groans alongside his children, he does not share their hope and does not eagerly long for their glory. Romans 8.29–30 explains: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified" (NRSV, modified). God has no need of hope since, from his perspective, his will is already accomplished—therefore the use of such definitive language ("foreknew," "predestined," "called," "justified," "glorified"). As Jewish apocalyptic literature generally does, Paul here uses the language of divine determinism to communicate that what from our perspective is a process with an expected but unachieved goal is from God's an accomplished fact. The difference between Paul and Jewish apocalypses, as we said earlier, is Jesus; in his death and resurrection we are given a view of how God sees things, the assurance that God's victory is already in hand. This is the ultimate reason why we can view suffering as not an end in itself but within the context of the divine plan. Our hope for glory rests in the past event of Jesus' resurrection and the eternal reality of the God who groans with us expressed therein.

Conclusion

Romans 8.18–30 brings Paul's readers into the experience of an apocalyptic worldview. Just as apocalyptic was an alien perspective for the non-Jewish Roman Christians of Paul's day, it remains so for us who read it now. Scholars and ministers can argue whether it is important to know about Second Temple apocalyptic literature to appreciate Paul's message. It is at least important that we find some way to get past our own preconceived notions about suffering to attend to what Paul is teaching us here. In short, the end of the world is a good thing, since the world is where futility and decay prevail. But the end of the world is not the end of creation, but its fulfillment. This is an important message today since, while Christians have long known that the world's end is where believers receive their heavenly reward, the same Christians have not always understood their interconnectivity with creation extends even to that reward. It is not acceptable to divorce ourselves from creation (and, again, by creation we should mean all of it, including all humanity as well as all natural spheres) since our fate and creation are inextricably linked. When we are aware of this, we are also enabled to attend to the groaning of creation, which resonates with the groaning within us. We must not mute this groaning and deny the suffering that brings it about; to do so is a denial of our humanity, of our own creatureliness. We also must not mute that groaning because it is an important link not just with creation and with each other but also with God. By acknowledging suffering in the world and in ourselves we are not giving in to futility and decay; we are waiting patiently in hope. This is because we believe that God meets us in this suffering, that through it we cry out to God (even when we cannot hear ourselves) and that he joins us in it by his Spirit and brings us through it to himself. The groaning we hear is our reminder that the apocalypse isn't here yet; but it is coming.

RONALD R. COX TEACHES NEW TESTAMENT AT PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY IN MALIBU, CALIFORNIA (RONALD.COX@PEPPERDINE.EDU).

