

Nov 20/22 – Leader’s Guide - Romans 8:28-39 “From Platitude to Purpose”

Romans 8:28 is one of the most beloved promises in the bible, a promise that at times is taken out of its context and applied in ways that it was never intended to be applied. It is imperative then that we hear the promise in its context. First **read Romans 8:17-27** and then answer the following question...

1. It seems Paul is inviting us to reflect. On the one hand we have creation, marred as it is by sin, death, injustice. On the other hand, we have the glory of new creation, shot through with the glory, beauty, goodness, and justice of the living God. In the gap between what is and what will be the follower of Jesus is invited to lament, grieve, and yearn for the glory of new creation. What would this kind of posture look like practically?

I don’t believe there is any “right” answer to this question, however there are some guideposts that might help to navigate the question.

1. *To grieve and lament rightly, to yearn for new creation you need to know what it is you are yearning for. This invites us to lay aside competing visions of what a “just” society would look like and instead mine the depths of the scriptures to explore what God’s desire for our world is.*
2. *There is the tendency to be global in this grieving. While there is ample evidence from international news that reveals that the world is not as it should be I think there is great wisdom in focussing on local realities, realities that you have some influence over.*
3. *Proper grieving will invite I believe action - a stepping into the gap – which sets up reflections on subsequent questions.*

Read Romans 8:28-39

2. (28) What is the “good” that is being promised here?

This is the good of new creation. Our ultimate destiny of having renewed bodies in a renewed cosmos, shot through with the glory, beauty, justice and goodness of the living God.

This is the good of our reflecting the very image of Jesus. Bearing the fruit of His Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control etc...

It would be I think in this question where how the promise is often heard may need to be addressed.

Very often this promise is seen as an articulation of a belief that God is working in and through the negative circumstances of our lives to bring about our personal individual good. As Christians we often give much time over to trying to figure out how circumstances are being used by God for our good. We place great faith in our narratives around this for they help make sense of our world. Letting go of this reading for an alternative one can be difficult and may not happen in this reflection. If you have a member or members of your group who cannot enter into it perhaps ask them to a thought experiment. If you took this promise with the alternative reading Tim presented how would it impact your life? You are not asking them to change their mind, only try it on for the duration of your discussion.

3. (28) The Greek word for work together is the word synergeo from which we get the word synergy. It is normally translated work together, work with, cooperate with – rendering the promise “God works all things for good with those who love him”. Read this way what does this promise invite the follower of Jesus to?

This reading invites us to give ourselves over, our time, talent and treasure to be the means in and through which God is at work in the world. We are to be agents, ambassadors, citizens of new creation. We are to point to the Kingdom that God is bringing in its fullness in all we do and say and pray.

4. (28-31) Why can Paul use the past tense “glorified” when speaking of followers of Jesus? What does this communicate about the certainty that salvation will come to its completion in new creation?

This is linked to the unbreakable chain of these verses. Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son. Those whom he predestined he also called, those whom he called he also justified, those whom he justified he also glorified.

All of these promises have to do with the reality that we are "in Christ". They are true because of where we are located. What is true of Jesus is true of us. His destiny is our destiny, his future is our future, his purpose is our purpose.

5. (31-35) Paul closes this text with five questions each intended to build our confidence in the promise he has articulated. How does each answer uniquely build confidence in the promise of 8:28? Where is ultimate assurance to be located?

This is an unedited excerpt from the sermon which will cover these questions:

This pursuit of assurance continues as chapter 8 closes with five questions – each meant to build our confidence in the promise – vs. 31 - What then shall we say to these things – if God is for us – who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all – how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

I believe it was Charles Spurgeon who said – Jesus Christ was up on the cross – nailed – bleeding – dying – looking down at the people betraying forsaking denying - and in the greatest act of love in the history of the universe he stayed – he stayed for you – he stayed for me – look at that says Paul – look what he did when we were at enmity with him - let that be your assurance - now that you are his beloved child – adopted by grace – how will he not graciously give us all things – let that be your assurance that he will bring salvation to its completion in new creation.

Paul's next two questions continue to pursue assurance – they are questions related to internal matters – matters of guilt and condemnation – I almost see behind them an objection – ok Paul – you are telling me that God is bringing about new creation in me – that I am predestined to reflect the image of Jesus – but I'm not seeing that in me – I'm not seeing that change - that transformation – I'm feeling condemned – guilt weighing me down.

Now Paul could have said – borrowing some of the truths of Jesus' kingdom parables – well like a seed kingdom growth has small beginnings – like organic growth it takes time – there

are seasons where it doesn't appear like much is happening – but give it time – it'll come – take the long view – are you more patient than you were a year ago – more loving – joyful – content – less anger or bitter – well take heart new creation is taking shape in you...

And while such things are true Paul does no such thing – he doesn't at all want us to take our feelings of guilt or condemnation – our concerns that new creation isn't taking shape in us to ourselves – for so often we try in vain to silence those inner voices with self-justification – right? – well I may have done that – but I am better than so and so – or I made up for it by doing this – or I had these very legitimate reasons for doing that – no no Paul does not want us to look to ourselves for assurance – Paul invites us to take such concerns to Jesus.

Take heart – he says – in Jesus you are justified – you are declared right before God – you are in Christ – meaning when God looks at you he sees the beauty and perfection of his son – Don't for a moment wallow in condemnation – Jesus took all of your sins to the cross – past / present / future – and rose again declaring forgiveness and new life – and even now stands before his father pleading your case – announcing his love and forgiveness – praying for new creation to be brought about in you and through you – when guilt and condemnation rob you of assurance – look nowhere else but Jesus.

Paul now moves from reflecting on internal matters – to a final question reflecting on external ones - again I hear behind it an objection – Paul you want me to have assurance that God is bringing about new creation – I'm not seeing it – everywhere I look tribulation – distress – famine – nakedness – danger – sword - we could add our own – how can we be assured that God is bringing about new creation – I look around me I'm not seeing evidence of it – political upheaval – financial crisis – a despot in Putin waging war – pandemic disease – climate catastrophe.

How does Paul respond to that objection? Well we often look at such things - the circumstances of our lives – the circumstances of our world as evidence of God's love – if things are going well – consistent with our definition of good – well then I can be assured God loves me and is at work – if not...

No no says Paul – your circumstances should never be turned to - to determine God's love for you – the only place you should be looking is Jesus – for I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come – nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all of creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the face of circumstantial evidence that suggests God is not at work – that suggests you are not loved by him – the most profitable thing that you can do is reflect on his love – reflect on the reality that he placed his love upon you right from the foundation of the world – he knows you right the way to the bottom – knows you better than you know yourself – and loved you to the end – loved you to the point of letting go of everything for you – entered the depths of hell for you – separated from his father's love for you - and thought it completely worth it.

Ultimate assurance then is in Jesus – in his love displayed in his death and resurrection.

Out of this passage Tim articulated that the final dynamic of discipleship are four core convictions that must be held together with equal conviction and passion so that they are held in balance. The four convictions are 1. We are called in light of the gap between what is and what will be to grieve, lament, and yearn for new creation. 2. We are to be assured that Jesus is coming again to make everything new. 3. We are loved by God in Jesus beyond imagining. 4. We are to pick up our purpose to be agents, ambassadors, citizens of new creation.

6. Which of these convictions do you believe as a church we need to lean into? Which do you personally need to lean into so that they come into balance, into equilibrium?

If there is a place to linger this would be it. If you get some insightful answers around where your group thinks we need to lean into as a church please do share it with me I would be really intrigued to hear.

This is an unedited excerpt from the sermon which will cover these questions:

When you look out on the church in the west – do we see these pillars together? – equal – strong – I know this is a bit of an oversimplification – but I think when we look at left leaning churches we find absolutely that they have picked up their purpose to be a kingdom people – people of new creation – you can see in them a grieving – a lamenting of the gap of what is and what should be – but in them has been an erosion of trust in Jesus’ love displayed in an atoning death upon a cross – an erosion of trust in a bodily resurrection that assures forgiveness and new life – an erosion of trust that Jesus is returning to bring the fullness of his kingdom – no that’s our job they’ll say

I think when we look at right leaning churches there is often solid conviction of Jesus’ love displayed on a cross – a bodily resurrection – his return to make everything new – but to pick up our purpose? – as ambassadors / citizens of new creation - well isn’t Jesus coming again to destroy everything and start over – I wouldn’t put any more money into the car that is headed to the wreckers – why invest time money talent into a world that will be no more – the right leaning church is often apathetic to the injustice poverty and pain that runs rampant in our world – their lamenting the gap between what is and what will be anemic and far too personal / individual - I grieve and lament that my circumstances don’t reflect the goodness God promises.

At little t we have both right leaning and left leaning – and everything in-between – Paul is inviting all of us individually and as a church to hold onto these pillars with equal conviction and passion – so where do we need to lean in as a church? To learn from one another with our various left leaning and right leaning tendencies? - where do you personally need to lean in? so that these pillars come into equilibrium - into balance – entering more fully into this spirit-led dynamic of discipleship?