

If the universe could talk . . .

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[0 : 00] Well, as I said, we are going to continue our study of Romans today and we're in chapter 8 and we've come to the fascinating words of verses 19 to 22.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. Throughout chapter 8, Paul has been talking about the wonderful blessings that are ours if we are united to Jesus Christ by faith.

And it's wonderful to just, even after the service today, to go back to chapter 8, read through it and to see all of the amazing blessings that belong to us if we put our trust in Jesus.

At the start, he reminds us that we no longer face condemnation. He then tells us that we have freedom and life as God's people. Not only that, we have God the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts and we have the extraordinary privilege of being adopted as God's beloved children.

[1 : 24] Because we are His children, we can go to Him at any time with all of our needs just as a child goes to their father. And even though we might suffer now, Paul reminds us that these sufferings are nothing and they're not worth comparing with the wonderful future that God has planned for us.

So this chapter is a great summary of the blessings that we as individuals and that we as the collective people of God have through faith in Jesus Christ.

And these are the blessings that will be yours if you put your faith in Jesus if you haven't done so already. It's all reminding us that following Jesus doesn't make a we difference in your life.

It makes a massive difference, a massive difference both for now and for eternity. The blessings are immeasurable.

So Paul is talking about what we have if we are Christians or what we will have if we put our faith in Jesus. But then all of a sudden Paul kind of goes off on this tangent and he starts talking about creation.

[2 : 49] And in verse 19 we are introduced to this fascinating little section where Paul says and talks about the fact that the Gospel is not simply good news for people, the Gospel is good news for the whole universe.

And in three remarkable little verses Paul gives us this fascinating insight into the implications of the Gospel, not just for people but for the universe as a whole.

And in these verses Paul basically personifies the universe. In other words he writes as if the universe was able to communicate like a person, behave like a person.

So I think basically what Paul is saying is if the universe could talk then this is what it would say.

So what is Paul saying? What are the implications of the Gospel for the universe? You look out the window, you see the created realm, you think of the whole of the universe that God has created.

[4 : 04] What difference does the good news of Jesus Christ make for creation? That's what we are looking at today. And in order to ask that question and explore it we are going to ask two further questions as our structure today and they are very simple.

What has happened to the universe is our first question and our second question is what is going to happen to the universe?

So question one, what has happened to the universe? In these verses Paul is basically getting us to think about the universe's story.

Notice in these verses he starts off by talking about the present, creation waits, there's a present waiting. Next verse he talks about the past, he talks about what the universe was, what has happened to it, was subjected.

And then verse 20 he is talking about the future, what will happen. And so our minds have been drawn towards the history of the whole universe, past, present and future.

[5 : 15] So what is that story? What has happened to the universe? Well that's a really really interesting question because if you go back to the beginning of the Bible you discover that it's the story of the universe that is the very first story that the Bible tells.

Back in Genesis if you read through the whole of the book of Genesis you would discover that it's divided into ten sections. They're all of different length but there's ten sections in the book of Genesis and each one of these sections is introduced with a similar phrase which says something like these are the generations of.

So whenever you're reading through Genesis and you see that phrase these are the generations of. You're starting a new section. So for example Genesis 5.1 this is the book of the generations of Adam.

Chapter 6 these are the generations of Noah. Chapter 37 these are the generations of Jacob and there are numerous others as well.

Each of these sections is telling a particular story. But do you know what the first one is? Do you know whose story comes first?

[6 : 36] Well the answer is in Genesis 2.4. These are the generations of the heavens and the earth. And so chapter 2.3.4 of Genesis is telling us the story of the universe.

And that history of the universe has a beginning, it has a middle and it has an end. The beginning is brilliant. Genesis 2 gives us this glorious picture of a perfect world created by God.

And the beauty described in Genesis 2 echoes the stunning descriptions of Genesis 1 where God brings life and order into the created realm. The whole of that creation is wonderful but there is a particular aspect of that creation that is the high point.

And that's you, humanity, man and woman together as God's family is the high point of God's creation.

God has created a people to dwell in his creation, to serve and glorify and enjoy him and to bear the image of God himself.

[7 : 48] So the beginning is wonderful. The middle is tragic because in Genesis chapter 3 we read of the fact that humanity created as the high point of God's creation rebelled against their Creator.

And that fall of humanity as we call it when we sinned against God it changed the history of the universe because the result was that a curse came upon the creation of God.

God said to Adam, because you've listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten the fruit of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it, cursed is the ground because of you.

So very quickly the order and beauty and splendour of Genesis 1 and 2 descends into the horrible chaos of Genesis 3 and in particular Genesis 4.

You read Genesis 4 and it's full of murder, domination, hostility, arrogance, fear and the whole world which was created beautiful is now very broken.

[9 : 07] And we can still see the evidence of that around us today. The shift from order to chaos is very much evident. We can look at the world and you can see that it was created as a thing of beauty.

The splendour and beauty of creation is still visible. But at the same time we all know that the world is broken.

We know that it can hurt us and often people are toiling in order to survive. And coupled to that is the fact that our relationship to the creation has shifted from order towards the realm of chaos.

Because back in Genesis 1 God gave humanity dominion over the created realm. Now it's important that we understand what that word dominion means because in the Bible the word dominion is referring to the exercise of a responsibility.

Whenever the Bible talks about rule or dominion it is always with a view to looking after that which is under your authority. It's never an excuse to just do what you like with something.

[10 : 26] And so when God gave dominion to humanity he was not saying you can do what you like with the world. He was saying you must care for it and look after it.

So originally we were created by God to be responsible for the world and to look after it and he says you do not have the excuse to abuse the world for your own benefit.

But that's exactly what we've done isn't it? You look across the history of humanity and we see that we have rejected God's command to care for the creation and instead we've used our own sense of authority as an excuse to use and abuse the world that we have been given.

And that's why so much environmental damage has been done to the world and why it is still being done. Now at times are really really interesting question.

Why is it that humans destroy the world? So why do we wreck the environment? Because all logic would tell us that that's a crazy thing to do.

[11 : 40] You'd say you would be crazy to wreck that. So if you imagine putting some sheep in one of these fields that you can see it well you probably can't see it at the window but I can see it at the window.

One of these wee fields imagine putting some of these sheep and imagine the sheep got together and decided to just wreck the field to turn up all the ground and to destroy all the vegetation that was growing and just muck it all up.

You think these sheep are crazy. But yet that's what we do. As humans we destroy the world that we've been given.

And you ask yourself why do we do that? And the only logical answer that I can find is the answer that the Bible gives us. That we have rebelled against God and part of our rebellion is that we want to rebel against the fact that he's told us to look after the world.

And it's a great reminder that caring for the environment is honouring to God. It's something that he wants us to do. And so that means that if you just are careful about litter, if you're careful about your energy consumption, if you're involved in a community cleanup that is honouring to God because God wants us to care for the world around us.

[13 : 06] But the reason we have to highlight environmental damage and all of these things is because the order of the world has descended into chaos. We're abusing the creation that God has given to us.

And the beautiful world that we have is now broken and it's under a curse. And Paul uses three really interesting phrases to describe the situation that creation is now in.

He says, creation is subjected to futility. It's in bondage to corruption and it's in the pains of childbirth.

Now, what does that mean? Because if you think about it, if you were asked to describe the state of the universe, we probably wouldn't choose phrases like this.

So what is Paul telling us? Well, first of all, he says that creation has been subjected to futility. And that word futility is a really interesting word because it basically is the word that means vanity.

[14 : 09] It conveys the idea of emptiness, nothingness, pointlessness. In other words, the creation has been broken and it's no longer fit for purpose.

The world that was originally created to be a wonderful habitat where we could live as God's people bearing God's image, it's been ruined and it's no longer fit for purpose.

It's no longer fulfilling the purpose that it was meant to have. Paul says it's been subjected to futility that brings frustration and hindrance and emptiness to the great purpose that creation once had.

And our experience of life backs that up. How often is life frustrating? How often do we see things happening in the world which make no sense?

You look at the world, you look at the events in the news and you see horrendous things happening and you think that seems to make no sense at all. And that shouldn't surprise us because sin has brought a futility and a senselessness into the world.

[15 : 24] There's futility all around us. And that futility comes from the fact that we have rejected God. And this is why people who reject the existence of God, the people who really think about that, and so the people who will say, okay, there's no God, the people who really think that through to its logical outcome, they all come to the same conclusion.

And the conclusion is this, life is pointless. People who reject God cannot avoid the ultimate conclusion that life is pointless.

It's a futility in the world around us if because we rebel against God. And so people instead of looking at creation and thinking, wow, look at what God has made for us.

People look at creation and look at the universe and they think, is there any meaning to life? Because they've pushed God out of their worldview. So Paul is recognizing that the world around us, the creation has lost a key aspect of its purpose.

And that loss of purpose manifests itself in the next thing that it says, creation is in bondage to corruption. What does that mean? Basically, it means that the world is rotting.

[16 : 57] The world is being spoiled. The world is deteriorating. And it can't escape from that.

As Paul says, it's not willingly, it's not what it wants, but it's something that it is in bondage to. The world cannot escape the fact that it's subjected to futility.

The world is decaying, it's been spoiled. And we can see that again. The evidence of this is around us. It's not the Bible is not talking nonsense.

It makes perfect sense. You look at the environment, you see the thriving world that God created and it's battling against decay and ruin.

So animals become extinct. Diseases continue to spread and new ones can manifest themselves. And damage is done to the environment which cannot be repaired.

[17 : 54] It also affects behavior. So you look at the animal kingdom and you can see that it's brutal at times. It's hostile. And then you look at humanity and you see that we can only hang our heads in shame in terms of how we treat people and in terms of how the human race has behaved towards one another across the ages of history.

You go home after church just now and look at the news website on your phone and ask yourself the question, is the world rotten?

The only answer is yes. And that corruption, that rotting is dominant over nature now at this present time.

Creation is a slave to that corruption, can't avoid it, it's an illness from which it can't recover by itself. And that bondage to corruption brings hurt and pain and suffering into our lives too.

And all of that is a result of the fact that what creation was made to be has now been spoiled and hindered because of sin.

[19 : 09] And that's brought out in the third phrase that Paul uses, that the whole of creation is groaning together in the pains of childbirth. Paul uses this remarkable image of childbirth to describe the situation that the world is in now.

Now, what does that teach us? Well I think it's teaching us two really important things. What is it, what's the two things that are true of childbirth? You probably think you're Thomas, you have no clue what childbirth is like, all the women here will be saying that.

But there's two things that we can say about childbirth. One, childbirth is sore, incredibly sore. And so we're being reminded here that the current state of creation is not one of peace or harmony.

It is one of agony. It's likened to the severe pain of a woman in labour. There's an agony and a pain in the created world around us.

But secondly, childbirth, yes it is incredibly sore, but it is a precursor to something wonderful.

[20 : 23] So although the pain of labour is immense, it leads to the wonderful joy of a precious baby being born. And so this image of childbirth is presenting, conveying to us present agony and distress, but it's also expressing the fact that something good is coming, something wonderful is coming.

And that brings us straight into our second question, what will happen to the universe? So we'll just recap, we're talking about the story of the universe. It's got a beginning which is wonderful when God created everything very good.

It's got a middle which is tragic where sin has brought a purposelessness and an emptiness and a chaos into the world. But what about the end?

What is the end of the story like? Well it's interesting, if you go back to Genesis you'll see that even there there are hints as to what the end will be.

In Genesis 3.15 God promises that the serpent whose actions led to the fall is going to be crushed and defeated. And then immediately afterwards when Adam names his wife Eve, he is recognising the fact that God's promise has brought the hope of life.

[21 : 45] Because Eve means mother of all living, implying the fact that Adam recognises that there's a hope of life. Although he has sinned and he was told the day you sin you shall surely die, he doesn't call his wife the mother of the dead.

He calls his wife the mother of the living because he recognises that there's an end and there is a hope. And Paul reinforces that point when he says yes creation has been subjected to futility but it is in hope.

So that means that even with the brokenness of the universe now there's an end in view and there's the hope of something better. And when you read through the whole Bible it all becomes very clear because God's great plan is to restore and recreate the universe so that we will live in a renewed and restored creation back to what it was always meant to be.

Because at the very beginning of Genesis you read about the generations of the heavens and the earth. You go all the way to the end of the Bible you will read about the coming of the new heavens and the new earth where God will restore everything back to what he wants it to be.

And if we are trusting in Jesus we can look forward to the beauty and joy and wonder of the new restored creation.

[23 : 14] So here in Romans 8, 19 to 22, Paul tells us something really interesting and something quite remarkable.

If you look at that it says that creation is hoping for something in hope the subjection took place.

So we have to ask the question what is creation hoping for? If you personify the universe and you imagine that you could say what are you hoping for creation? What would the answer be?

What would the universe say if it could talk? Well we would naturally think the answer to the question would be something like well creation is longing for the return of Jesus.

Creation is longing for the restoring work of God. Creation is looking forward to all that God is going to do. And all of that is true isn't it?

[24 : 10] That is the kind of answer that we would expect isn't it? Except it is not what Paul says. Paul doesn't mention any of those things.

What does Paul say that creation is hoping for? Well creation is hoping for the revealing of the sons of God and creation is looking forward to the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

In other words the focus is not on God. The focus is on you as the people of God.

The focus is on all who are trusting in Jesus. And we have to ask the question why is that? Why does Paul make this sort of strange link between the restoration of creation and the children of God?

Why is there this link between creation and the sons and daughters of God? Why is there a link between creation and you?

[25 : 28] I think the answer is as follows. You go back to that word futility. It tells us that creation has lost its sense of purpose.

In other words right now the universe is not what it is meant to be. So we have to ask the question what is the universe meant to be? What is the purpose of the created realm around us?

What do you think the answer to that question is? Well the answer is that the universe was made to be your home.

The universe was made to be an environment where humanity could live as the family of God. Therefore the reason why creation is longing for your salvation is because creation longs to be a perfect home for you.

It's because the whole purpose of creation is to be that perfect environment where you can live as the people of God.

[26 : 45] And so creation Paul tells us is longing for the full salvation of God's people, longing for the resurrection day when our bodies will be reunited with our souls and we will be free forever from the decay and power of sin and the effect of the curse.

And on that day creation will finally be able to fulfil its purpose and be a perfect home for you. It's no wonder that creation is longing for that day because that's the day when it will be back to what it was meant to be.

That's the day when order will return. That's the day when the purpose of the universe will be fulfilled. The creation longs for you revealing as the sons of God at the end of time because the universe was made for you.

It was made to be your home. And I think that's utterly astonishing. The universe is longing for you, for your salvation because you are its purpose.

You look at the whole universe and you ask yourself the question, what is all that for? The answer is you. God has made this world for us and surely that tells you how special you are in the sight of God.

[28 : 23] God has given us this universe as an extraordinary gift, as a home where we can live.

Creation has spoiled that but creation is groaning in expectation of the day when it can be restored to fulfil its purpose as our home.

And I just want to spend the last two or three minutes highlighting a crucial point that arises from all of this.

It is where we see that every non-biblical worldview will ultimately devalue humanity.

What do I mean when I say that? A worldview is just your conception of the universe. Everybody has a worldview. Most people in Scotland today have a worldview that doesn't include God and certainly one that rejects the Bible.

[29 : 29] But what I think we need to recognise is that if you do that, you devalue humanity. So for example, some people reject God and they look at the universe and they come to the conclusion, well everything is pointless.

And that means by implication that humanity is just another cog in this massive machine. This massive universe is just a thing that comes from something and that ends up as something and the whole thing is meaningless and the human race is just nothing more than a blob of stuff that spends a short time existing as part of this thing.

Now that is, I think, the only logical conclusion of atheism. And a lot of people hold that view but if you think about that too much, it can lead you into a horrible depression.

Which is why the people who hold that view kind of do their best to actually try and forget about the logical conclusions of their worldview and they try to create an illusion of meaning in their life and they avoid the question as to the meaning of life because the answer is unbearable.

So some people just reject God and ultimately they view the world as pointless. Other people however do seek to find some meaning in the universe. So some people will look at the universe and they'll think of the universe as a sort of God and they'll worship the universe or maybe they'll think of nature or fate as something that has a kind of authority over us and that we want to live in harmonies with.

[31 : 12] So you've got the world, the universe and we want to be in harmony with that universe and so we kind of almost, some people slightly worship the universe in that sense.

Other people don't go as far as that, they wouldn't say that the universe is a God but yet they still regard nature as something that should be served. So even today you've got a lot of people, genuine, sincere, well-meaning people who are passionate about caring for the environment, passionate about looking after animals, passionate about trying to do good for the world around us and that's a great thing.

But the crucial point is that all of these approaches devalue humanity. The view that says that the universe is pointless is effectively saying that we are pointless and the human race is no more valuable than a stone or a rat or a germ.

The view that makes a God out of the universe devalues humanity because it's saying that we are subordinate to nature, it's saying that we are kind of below nature, nature is this kind of God whom we need to live in harmony with.

It's basically making the universe more important than us and the view that wants to care for the environment, for the sake of the environment, again devalues humanity because it makes us the servants of the universe.

[32 : 39] All of these views devalue humanity but the Bible says something very different. The best that the world can say is that we find purpose looking after the universe.

The Bible says that the universe finds its purpose looking after us.

We are not pointless objects in a pointless universe. We are not subordinate creatures under the rule of nature. We are not servants who need to try and find meaning and purpose in the universe around us, the Bible tells us that you are far, far, far more special than any of that.

You weren't created to be a pointless lump of stuff, you weren't created to be a servant of the universe, you weren't created to be a worshiper of the universe, you were created to be the child of God.

And the universe was created to be the place where you live, the home where you can be all that God wants you to be.

[34 : 01] Now sin has ruined that but Jesus came to fix it and the whole of creation is longing, longing for the day when finally it can be the perfect home for God's perfect family.

This is where you discover that it is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ that the whole universe fits together. The whole of creation is centered on God's plan to make this perfect place for his family to live and where he himself can dwell with him.

And this is why a key term is used to describe hell in the Bible.

When the Bible talks about hell it uses a key word, outside. Because hell is outside all of that.

God's great plan is to restore the whole universe and his great desire is that you will be there as his child and where we can enjoy all the wonder of God's creation.

[35 : 29] And make no mistake, God wants every one of you to be part of that. And all you have to do is put your trust in Jesus.

We put our trust in him, we are adopted into God's family and creation itself is longing for the day when you will be brought home.

That's what God has for us all if we trust him. Let's pray.

Dear God our Father we realise that your plans are so much bigger than we ever realised. We thank you for this creation that you have made and that you have provided for us as a wonderful home.

And we realise and acknowledge how blessed we are. And we look forward to God for that day when the universe will be restored and where we will dwell in your home as your people.

[36 : 42] And we pray that every one of us would take the opportunity that we have now to trust in Jesus so that we will be part of that great future that you have for your creation.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen.