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Otis O. Sellers, Founder

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**THE CREATION SUBJECT TO FUTILITY**

By Nathan C. Johnson

Romans 8:22 declares, **For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.** (All verses are from the *New King James Version*.) This statement might seem clear at first, yet it raises numerous questions. What "creation" is referenced here? Do birds and squirrels, trees and rivers, clouds and winds all groan? Is this simply a poetic description of the harsh reality that sin and death brought into the creation? If so, how is the pain of sin and death "birth pangs," when these cause such destruction? What is our Lord talking about here?

This portion of Romans is talking about God's children, as Romans 8:16-17 declares: **The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.** Being children, they were also heirs, enjoyers of a portion with God, and joint-heirs with Christ, destined to be glorified together with Him.

Romans 8:18 says, **For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.** The result of their being joint-heirs with Christ will be great glory revealed in them in time to come, far surpassing present sufferings.

Verse 19 states, **For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God.** Paul is still speaking of the time when the glory of Christ will be revealed in the heirs of God. He speaks of a

"creation" that earnestly awaits this. The Greek *ktiseos* means "creation" (not "creature," as in the old *King James Version*). Some believe that the creation of everything "in the beginning" by God as recorded in the book of Genesis is the only thing that can properly be called a "creation." There is a traditional idea that "creation" can only mean things that are created *ex nihilo*, which means "out of nothing." However, this is not always the way the word is used in Scripture. We can see this clearly in I Peter 2:13-14: **Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good.**

The word translated "ordinance" in the *New King James Version* is *ktisei* in Greek, a form of the same word translated "creation" in Romans 8:19. The context of I Peter reveals that the "creations" in question are rulers such as kings and governors. When men choose a ruler, they choose one of their own number. He starts as a normal man, and is made a king, a governor, a President, etc. Such rulers are clearly the creations of men. This is what Peter is referring to in I Peter 2:13. Therefore, "creations" may be made by humans, and take place long after the beginning.

What creation is being spoken of in Romans 8:19? "Nature," the creation that God made in the beginning? If so, then Romans 8:20 is difficult: **For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope.** The common thought about this verse is that it refers to the fall of man as Genesis records. It is true that much in nature was severely damaged by the fall. However, this view totally fails when it comes to the second half of verse 20. The one who subjected nature to sin and futility was Adam, along with Satan the tempter. Neither of these subjected nature to sin and futility in hope or expectation of something good to follow, but only in rebellion. The fall cannot be the "futility" spoken of. The One Who did the subjecting must be God. Yet the fall was contrary to His will, and afterwards He acted only as a Redeemer. Therefore the "creation" in Romans 8 is not the natural world.

From the start, Israel was a God-created nation. After the flood, many families grew into nations. These nations created their own rulers, made their own laws, and took over their own land—all things necessary for a people to be a nation. Yet Israel did not achieve these things by their own effort, but God brought them about. Consider Genesis 46:3: **So He said, "I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there."** God tells the man Israel that He is going to grow his family into a nation in Egypt. He did grow them, apparently miraculously, from seventy-five people to several million in just a few generations. After this, God brought them out of Egypt and gave them rulers, laws, and a land. Therefore Israel was a God-created nation.

The book of Exodus gives us the record of God creating Israel into a nation. In Exodus 19:5-6, He sets forth the terms of His agreement with them: **"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."** These *are* the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.

These were the conditions upon which God intended Israel to enter the land. The people responded rightly, saying, **"All that the LORD has spoken we will do"** (Exod. 19:8). However, after God gave them the ten terms of the covenant in Exodus 20 (commonly called the "Ten Commandments"), Israel only managed to keep these for about forty-seven days. Then they broke the first two terms spectacularly in making a golden calf, as we read in Exodus 32. At this point, Israel had broken their covenant with the LORD, and deserved His wrath. Moses knew this, so when he went back up the mountain, he pled with God in Exodus 32:31-32: **Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Oh, these people have committed a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold! Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written."** Moses offered himself in place of the people. This was a good thought, but since Moses had to pay for his own sins, he could not give himself for Israel's sins,

so the LORD refused his offer. Yet He did give Israel a reprieve from destruction, as we read in verses 33-34. He promised to continue leading the people into the land, yet He refused to forgive their sin. From this point on, they were under the penalty of destruction postponed. Someday, someone would have to pay for Israel's sin. The One Who finally paid the penalty for what they did was Jesus Christ Himself upon the cross. The full weight of Israel's sin fell upon Him.

Yet now that Israel had sinned this great sin, they could no longer go into the land under the terms of the covenant. Therefore, God stated new terms upon which they were to enter the land in Deuteronomy 28. In verses 1-2, we read of the terms of blessing: **Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God.** Then a list of blessings is given—great blessings indeed. Next, the LORD goes on to threaten cursing upon them if they do not obey, as is set forth in Deuteronomy 28:15: **But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you.**

The list of curses that follow are equally as terrible as the blessings preceding are wonderful. We cannot help but shudder at threats the LORD makes if they dare disobey Him. Thus, the new terms on which they enter the land are not simply terms of blessing, as the terms of the old covenant were, but rather they must obey or suffer dire punishment. Though they endured for a time, the threatened punishment did finally fall upon them, and they were cast into captivity outside their land.

Israel's history, after the punishment of God fell, was one of futility. They sought to come back into God's favor, yet were never as a nation able to display the character He sought. It became increasingly clear over time that Israel was bound to a law that they could never obey sufficiently to obtain the

true blessing of God. They groaned under the burden of this righteous standard that their corrupted hearts could not live up to and longed for a better situation—one in which they could truly please God and enjoy His blessings.

This brings us back to Romans 8:20: **For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected *it* in hope.** The creation (that is, Israel, the nation God created) was subjected to futility in attempting to live up to a righteous standard they could never nationally live up to until their hearts were changed. They were not subjected to this futility willingly. They had willingly entered into the ten-term covenant with God, but when they broke it the injunction of Deuteronomy 28 was bound upon them, like it or not. Yet the One Who subjected them, God, did so in expectation. He was not subjecting them to such futility forever. Eventually He would make a new covenant with them, wherein He would write His law on their hearts rather than on tables of stone, as Jeremiah 31:31-34 proclaims: **But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people** (Jer. 31:33). This new covenant is the hope He anticipated when He subjected the nation He created, Israel, to futility. When that new covenant comes into effect in the Kingdom of God, the law will be written on the heart of every Israelite. Then they will be able to keep it, and the futility God subjected them to under the old covenant will be wiped away.

Romans 8:21 declares: **Because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.** In the Kingdom, the God-created nation of Israel will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into which they came after breaking their original covenant with God. When Paul wrote Romans, Israel was groaning under the bondage of the harsh terms of the law. Yet that pain was just birth pain, for when the Kingdom comes, God's created nation Israel will be delivered from that law into glorious liberty as God's children. May that day come soon!

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