

## "THE HOPE OF THE GOSPEL"

(Romans 8:18-30)

(Frank Theilman)

The Capitoline Museum in Rome houses a large stone slab, once part of an early first-century AD funerary monument that stood beside a busy road outside the city boundaries. The inscription reads as follows:

You see the funerary monument of Lucius Vettenius Musa Campester, place of rest for those who are tired of life; exhausted by a life conducted in many different regions; tranquility welcomes him to a deathly abode. Death is release from wealth and poverty, for Nature forces both rich and poor to live in anxiety.

Lucius might have just as easily lived in the twenty-first century. Like so many people today, whether they are wealthy or poor, he seems to have run himself ragged trying to survive life and free himself from its inevitable anxieties. Although wealthy enough to afford a beautifully engraved and public monument, he recognized that his wealth had bought him no more freedom from life's troubles than if he were poor. If he was like many others of his own time and culture, he was sure that death simply brought annihilation from existence and, with it, release from the sorrow and worry of life in an unfriendly world. It was simply in the "nature" of things that life was difficult.

In this climate, it is no wonder that the gospel took root in Rome at an early date. The hope of the gospel that Paul explains so clearly in Romans 8:18-30 must have come as truly good news to people with Lucius's understanding of life, and its message has lost none of its power for suffering people around the world today. In this passage, Paul explains three elements of the gospel that help those who believe it to endure life's difficulties.

### **Realism about the Hardships of the Present Life**

First, the gospel is realistic about the difficult nature of life for everyone, including believers. Everyones life is burdened with "futility" (8:20) and "decay" (8:21) and at times the world itself seems to cry out with pain (8:22). Who has not spent effort or money on some project or product that, in the end, had no discernible redeeming value? Who has not noticed that even the healthiest person, the most well-built house, or the most cleverly designed machine eventually falls apart? What even modestly sensitive person has not grieved at the suffering of so many people at the hands of brutal criminals and crazed ideologues that somehow end up in charge of entire societies? Lucius's anxiety, and the anxiety of so many people down through the ages, is well founded.

Paul's gospel takes full account of these realities and explains, at least in general terms, why they exist. The world suffers because God's human creatures have rebelled against their creator. Rather than worshiping him and giving him thanks for the blessing of the good world he had created, they disobeyed him and went their own way (1:19-22). The results were disastrous both for their relationship with God and for their relationships with one another (1:23-32). The world also suffers because God has actively handed over his rebellious human creatures to the consequences of their sin (1:24,26, 28). He is a righteous God (1:1; 2:5; 3:4-5), and this is a fitting punishment for their rebellion (cf. 8:20).



## Hope for Freedom from Sin and Its Effects

Second, the good news of the gospel is that God's just punishment is not his last word. When God subjected creation to futility, he did so "in hope" (8:20), and this hope characterizes Christian existence in the midst of a suffering world (8:20, 24-25; cf. 4:18; 5:2,4-5; 12:12; 15:4,13). It is not that Christians necessarily have any fewer practical problems than other people or experience less sadness, sickness, and disappointment. One only has to review the sordid history of the marginalization and outright persecution of Christians to discover that Christians may suffer more than others precisely because of their Christian commitments. In his next paragraph, Paul observes that it often seems as if Christians are lined up like sheep ready to be slaughtered for God's sake (8:36; cf. Ps 44:22). The gospel, however, gives believers hope that the suffering and injustice they and others experience will one day give way to God's re-created world. In that new creation they will no longer grow weak, fall apart, and die but will live in immortality. Moreover, God will also release the world around them from the effects of sin (Rom 8:21), and so both they and the world in which they live will be free from suffering. They will live in loving fellowship with God as his adoptive children (8:21,23,29; cf. 8:15-17; Gal 4:4-6), and their existence will be like that of Jesus himself, who presently lives in immortality and in a loving relationship with his Father (Rom 8:29; cf. 8:17).

All this gives believers a different perspective on life than Lucius had in first-century Rome and that many have today. Lucius may have thought that "Nature" was a force with a will of its own that "brings all things to destruction and recalls them to the state from which they sprang" (Seneca, *Polyb.* 1.1 [John W. Basore, LCL]). In more recent times, people have thought of moving in chaotic and random ways that sometimes create havoc for people. In contrast, Paul affirms that God created and is sovereign over the natural world and the course of events in it, and he is so gracious that he will one day erase everything in nature that creates suffering for his people. This should give Christians a generally optimistic view of life and prompt them to work to alleviate suffering in the world around them. To do so is to cooperate with the ultimate purposes of God.

Understanding the sovereignty of a gracious God over nature also provides believers with encouragement when efforts to alleviate suffering fail. God will eventually overwhelm all forms of suffering with a creation restored to his original design for it (Rom 8:18-19).

## The Promise of God's Sympathy and Help

Third, the gospel affirms that God has not only given his people a forward-looking hope that sustains them in the midst of hardship, but the Spirit to aid them in the midst of their present suffering (8:26-27). The Spirit's groaning, reminiscent of the groaning of creation and of believers (8:22-23) assures them that God is not unaware of, or unconcerned about, their plight. Just as God heard the "groaning" (στεναγμός) of his people in slavery in Egypt (Exod 2:23-24; cf. 3:7, 9) and was sympathetic with their suffering, so he continues to sympathize with the suffering of his people in all times and places (cf. Rom 8:26). When believers experience trouble so profound that they do not know even how or what to pray, they should not add to their anxieties the notion that God fails to hear their unspoken, inner yearning for relief. God the Holy Spirit searches their hearts (8:27) and knows them fully, and God the Father also knows fully God the Spirit (8:27; cf. 1 Cor 2:10-12). This means that God understands the suffering of his people and is deeply concerned for them.