

In Hope You Have Been Saved: Suffering and Realistic Eschatology

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I spoke with a friend last week, a man who has shown godly perseverance through a lot of health problems. But now he's facing a new problem: his kids are suffering chronic pain. This has been tough on his family, he admitted to me, and tough on his faith.



In situations like this, it's hard to know what to think. Our minds play tug-of-war. How should we view this situation? How should we pray? One the one side, perhaps we should believe that God will do great things to bring this family out of their affliction. The Bible tells us that life in Christ is a victorious life, that we have been redeemed from the curse of sin and have become partakers of the new creation. Christ in fact encourages us to expect great new things from God and promises to give us good gifts. Should we pray in faith that God would remove this suffering from their lives?

Yet, feeling a tug from the other side, I wonder, "But maybe that isn't God's will. Isn't he supposed to use our suffering sometimes?"

Correctly "realizing" our eschatology

It's here that I think the apostle Paul would step in and temper our perspective on the Christian life. Sometimes believing that Christ will triumph over our difficulties by removing them is the right response to suffering, but sometimes it isn't. Here's what Paul says in Romans 8:

For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it. (Romans 8:24-25)

He's talking here about suffering, that fact that in order to be glorified with Christ we must "suffer with him" (8:17). He says that the whole creation is groaning in bondage to corruption with the hope that it will be set free one day into the glory of God's children. And not only is the

creation groaning, but we are also groaning, "even though we have the first fruits of the Spirit, waiting for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body" (8:24).

That's when he says this thing about being saved "in hope." "But hope which is seen is not hope . . ." The argument works something like this: If it's Wednesday, and I get paid on Friday, I have the hope that I will receive a paycheck. What I hope for is not yet a reality, so I hope for it. But if it's Saturday and I've already been paid, I can no longer hope, because my hope has already become a reality.

Just so with our salvation. We have indeed been saved, but we have been saved in hope. That means that there is still an element of our salvation that is not yet a reality. We have the firstfruits of the Spirit, and that is a wonderful thing, but the Spirit is still only the firstfruits of what we look forward to.

You might say that Paul is keeping us from "overrealizing our eschatology." That is to say, he doesn't want us to think that our future (eschatological) hope is already fully realized in our lives. There's still a lot left to hope for.

If this is true, we should expect to suffer. God has not yet fully delivered us from this groaning world. We live in a period of overlap between suffering and glory, the old and the new. And sometimes God will emphasize in our lives his salvation *from* our suffering and sometimes he will leave us *in* our suffering to hope for the future.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God

But there is one thing we can be confident about in every circumstance. God loves us and works in all our circumstances—easy or difficult—to achieve his goals for us. As Paul famously states next, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose" (8:28).

Is there any affliction that can separate us from Christ's love? No. *In* every one of our difficulties (and not always *over* them), we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.