

Salvation Was Near For Roman Disciples

There are not many allusions to the “parousia” in Paul’s epistle to the Romans, but the few that are made are significant and in harmony with all that we have seen in previous studies relating to the end of the age. We will not be particularly concerned in this essay with his teaching about justification or the future of Israel but only with those passages relating to the coming of the Lord. From other studies we know that Rome brought persecutions and the destruction of Jerusalem, but in this letter to the Romans, Paul discreetly avoided assigning blame which might make their situation worse.

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul addressed both Jews and Greeks including both disciples and those who did not acknowledge God. His eagerness to preach the gospel to them is made evident as he reviews the dire moral and spiritual state of both the unenlightened pagans and the Jews who knew better but were caught up in the same sinful manner of life. “*We know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who do such things,*” he warned (Rom. 2:2). The day when the righteous judgment would be revealed was approaching.

Centuries before, Malachi had described that event as the coming of “*the great and terrible day of the Lord*” (Mal. 4:5). In making the way for Jesus, John preached it as “*the wrath to come*” (Matt. 3:7). Jesus himself spoke of it as “*the day of judgment*” (Matt 11:22, 24). Jesus spoke of the imminence of this: “*For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste of death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom*” (Matt. 16:27-28). Then in this letter the warning of imminent judgment was passed on to the Romans. All of the Roman epistle must be interpreted in harmony with the imminent coming of the Lord in judgment.

“*Do you not know that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will render to every man according to his works*” (2:5-6). Both Jew and Gentile would be judged “*on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus*” (2:16).

This is the context of Paul’s message of eschatology in Romans 8:18-23. There have always been problems in ascertaining the meaning of this passage. One of the main causes of that difficulty is the translation of the Greek word “*ktisis*” as “*creation.*” Vine states that the word means primarily the act of creating, or the creative act in process and, like the English word “*creation,*” it also signifies the product of the creative act, the “*creature.*” The KJV translates it “*creature.*” In other versions, translators interpreted it as referring to the material product created; so they rendered it “*creation.*”

Since they were “eagerly awaiting” the imminent event, evidently, it was the rational creature capable of hoping, not the physical creation, that was to be affected by the coming of the Lord. If we retain “creation” as most translations do, and understand that it refers to God’s created or sponsored people -- mankind or humanity -- it makes more sense. Otherwise, we have a physical universe put in a setting in which it does not fit logically, that is, having the character and sensibilities of mankind.

It is essential to understand and remember that Bible history and prophecy occupy themselves with covenant history rather than the history of this physical universe. There are no “end times” revelations relating to this physical world.

Here we will copy this text from the NIV and insert in parenthesis the KJV rendition. *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that shall be revealed in us. For the creation (creature) waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation (creature) was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation (creature) itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation (creation) has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”*

Paul assured the disciples that a glorious goal was ahead. It would be revealed IN them, not just TO them. It would be the fulfillment of the longing of frustrated mankind and the hope of Israel. It would be worth far more than the cost of their present suffering. Their hope was to be liberated from bondage to death and decay. Even their covenant and law did not promise that. The “hope of Israel” was for resurrection. It was promised by Jesus and to be fulfilled at his soon return. The righteous of Israel who slept in death and the early converts to Christ, the firstfruits of the Spirit, were eagerly awaiting that momentous, approaching event. Their glorious adoption as Sons of God would be confirmed through the resurrection. The promise was to the Jew first and also to the Greek. A remnant of Jews believed but the fullness included Gentiles so they could be saved together without distinction.

In the transitional period from Jesus’ death until his return in the events surrounding AD 70, those early converts had not received that confirmation. Hebrews 9:1-9 tells us of the lacking of completion (“that which is perfect”). *“By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary is not yet opened as long as the outer tent is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age)”* (v.8-9). The work of redemption was not complete until the “parousia.” The way into the sanctuary was not opened when Paul wrote to the Romans, so he continued, *“For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently”* (Rom. 8:24-25). Paul had not yet experienced it, but he hoped for the resurrection (Phil. 3:8-11).

Only the dead need a resurrection. We, as believers today, do not need a resurrection for we have eternal life. It is Jesus' own promise: "*Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?'*" (John 11:25-26). We do not hope for what we already have! Even when this physical body dies, we will continue to live.

Here we include a summarizing paragraph by James Stuart Russell: "There was a fitness and fullness of time at which the old covenant was to be superseded by the new; the old and the new were permitted to subsist for a time together; the goodness and forbearance of God delaying the final stroke of judgment. Although, therefore, the great barriers to the introduction of all men, without distinction, into the privileges of the children of God were virtually removed by the death of Christ upon the cross, yet the formal and final demonstration that 'the way into the holiest of all' was now thrown open to all mankind, was not made until the whole framework of the Mosaic economy, with its ritual, and temple, and city, and people, was publicly and solemnly repudiated; and Judaism, with all that pertained to it, was for ever swept away" (The Parousia, page 230. This book is a "must read"!)

The things considered above make Paul's words (13:11-12) much more meaningful. The dawn of the last day had dispelled the darkness. They were living in an hour of the last day. "*Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand.*"

In his closing exhortations Paul assured the Roman disciples, "*then the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet*" (16:20). They would be victorious! The power of Satan would be destroyed. And it remains so for us.

(Cecil Hook, January 2002) []