

Romans 8:18-25 (ESV)

The Whole Creation Groans

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope

21 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.

22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?

25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Perhaps no other passage in the entire Bible has been used more to support the notion that the entire Creation was cursed at the time of the Fall than these verses in Romans 8. Many have used these verses to suggest that geologic evidence is tainted and we cannot use it accurately to determine earth history. Some say this passage suggests the ushering in of the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics. There is no doubt that Paul here portrays a sad state for the Creation in that it was subjected to futility against its own will. But does this passage actually refer back to the Fall in Genesis 3? Is the reference back to Adam direct, or possibly indirect? We will spend a good amount of time breaking these verses apart to get to Paul's true intentions.

First let us look at the context. In Romans 8, Paul is discussing the difference between a mind set on the flesh and one set on the Spirit. All who are led by the Spirit are called sons of God (v. 14). If we are children of God, we suffer with Christ (God's Son), that we might be glorified with Him (v. 17). But Paul is convinced that the sufferings of this present life are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed to us (v. 18). The word for suffering here is *pathema*, which is a special word primarily used for the sufferings of Christ and the Christians who join in the sufferings of Christ.

Paul switches subjects then in verse 19 to the *ktisis* (creature, creation). It is this *ktisis* that anxiously awaits the revealing of the sons of God. But what is the *ktisis*? *Ktisis* is used 19 times in the NT. The ESV translates as "creation" 16 times, "creature" 2 times, and "institution" in 1Pet. 2:13. The KJV, however, translates as "creation" 6 times, "creature" 11 times, "building" 1 time, and "ordinance" in 1Pet. 2:13. The two versions agree in only 8 out of the 18 instances outside of 1Pet. 2:13. The word is used 4 times in our passage in Romans 8, but only once do the two translations agree (v. 22). Why the discrepancy? It should be obvious that there is some interpretation involved in choosing "creation" or "creature". Context will be our guide.

This *ktisis* is anxiously awaiting the revealing (*apokalupsis*), which refers back to the revealing (*apokalupsis*) in verse 18. This is the revealing of the sons of God in glory. Remember the sons of God are those who are led by the Spirit (v. 14). These sons of God will be revealed in glory when Christ is revealed in His glory (Col. 3:4) at His coming. That begs a question which Paul addresses next. Why is the *ktisis* anxiously awaiting the revealing of the sons of God in glory? The answer is three-fold.

First because the *ktisis* was subjected to futility (v. 20). Second, it is in bondage to corruption (v. 21). Finally, it is groaning in the pains of childbirth (v. 22). It is these three reasons given by Paul that have been the root of fierce debate over the fallen state of Creation. Do these comments indicate that the Creation is cursed as many claim? First of all, it is significant to understand that the word “God” is not mentioned except as the object in the prepositional phrase “sons of God” although He is the probable antecedent of the “Him” in verse 20. It is also noteworthy that neither Adam, Eve nor the serpent (the three characters in the Fall/Curse narrative in Genesis 3) are mentioned directly or indirectly in this entire passage. So what do these three present conditions of the *ktisis* tell us?

In verse 20 we read that the *ktisis* was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it. It is pretty well accepted that the “Him” refers to God. Rather than the typical third person personal pronoun *autos*, the accusative definite article *ton* is used. While this usage is more common in the nominative, it is most likely a good translation although possibly the NIV renders it best with “the one” depicting a relative pronoun. The NET and NCV insert the actual word “God” here which is wrong. The NLT paraphrases the whole as “subjected to God’s curse” which is interpretive and very misleading even though that is the interpretation favored by most YECs. Neither “God” (*theos*) nor “curse” (*katara* or *anathema*) are used in this passage.

In any case “the One” (i.e. God) subjected the *ktisis*. The word for “subjected” is *hypotasso* and it is used 38 times in the NT. The other 8 uses of *hypotasso* in the active voice have God or Christ as its subject. It stands to reason then that God is the subject here as well. According to TDNT, in the compulsory sense (as is the case here by the presense of *ouch ekousa* (not willingly)), the word carries the meaning of “either power or conquest on the one side or lack of freedom on the other” (TDNT, vol. 8 p. 41). The context tells us that it is the latter here. The *ktisis* had its freedom taken away when it was subjected to futility.

The word for futility here is *mataiotes*. It is used 3 times in the NT and 54 times in the LXX. In addition to verse 20 here, it is also used by Paul in Eph. 4:17 and Peter in 2Pet. 2:18. The ESV translates both Pauline uses as “futility” and in 2 Peter they render “folly”. The older English versions translate *mataiotes* in Rom. 8:20 as “vanity”. The NIV “frustration” and the NCV “useless” miss the mark and the NLT’s use of “curse” may be misleading. Does this passage actually say that the *ktisis* was subjected to God’s Curse? We need to look at the semantic range of *mataiotes* and note its other occurrences.

In Eph. 4:17 Paul urges Christians to not walk as the Gentiles do in the *mataiotes* of their minds. He defines this in the next verses as being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of their ignorance and their hard hearts. They have become callous and given over to impurity. The *mataiotes* in this case refers to the sinful thoughts and deeds of the unbeliever. In 2Pet. 2:18 Peter also uses the term to describe unbelievers who speak words of *mataiotes* enticing others by fleshly desires and sensuality, promising freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption (*douloi tes phthoras*: interestingly the same phrase as in Rom. 8:21). In both of these other uses, *mataiotes* refers to a debased condition of the mind of the unbeliever with a warning given to Christians to walk in an opposite manner.

Of the 54 uses in the LXX, 39 are found in the Book of Ecclesiastes. The other 15 occurrences are in the Psalms and Proverbs. In Ecclesiastes, the ESV renders *mataiotes* “vanity” or the adjectival “vain” almost unanimously. In the Psalms there is a wider range of words used in the translation. It may be helpful to explore the vanities of Ecclesiastes to see how Solomon in all his wisdom used the word to describe the things he studied.

- Vanity as a summary with no referent	8 times
- Everything that is done under the sun	2 times
- Filling the heart with pleasure and chasing desires	3 times
- The fate of the fool and the wise are the same	2 times
- The fool inherits the fruit of the labor of the wise	5 times
- The hard work of the wise	1 time
- The collecting and gathering of the sinner	1 time
- The fate of man and beast are the same	1 time
- The endless rivalry between a man and his neighbor	1 time
- The unhappiness of the people with a wise king	1 time
- The increasing of dreams and words	2 times
- The dissatisfaction with money for the one who loves money	1 time
- That a good man does not have a proper burial	1 time
- The [few] years of life	6 times
- The laughter of a fool	1 time
- That the evil deeds of the wicked are soon forgotten	1 time
- That bad things happen to good people (and vice versa)	2 times

There is one commonality as we peruse this list of King Solomon’s vanities: they all pertain to human activity. None of the 39 uses of *mataiotes* in Ecclesiastes refer to the natural world and how it operates. The same is true in the other uses in Psalms and Proverbs. I believe this is significant and, coupled with the other two passages in the NT where the word is used, it appears that Paul’s use here would suggest that the *ktisis* was subject to the shortcomings and futility of man rather than itself being the recipient of a direct curse. In other words we could say that the curse upon mankind has made the *ktisis* anxiously long for the day when that curse would be lifted. Not because it has been cursed, but because man cannot fulfill his purpose of taking dominion over the *ktisis* as is the proper function.

Next in verse 21 we read that the *ktisis* will be set free from its slavery to corruption (Gr. *tes douleias tes phthoras*). For *phthora*, the NRSV and NIV render “decay” instead of “corruption”. The word itself is used 7 other times in the NT, but is part of a larger family of similar words. In general it means a destruction or corruption of something. To use the word decay is misleading as some have taken this to mean the institution of the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics where everything is certain to undergo physical breakdown and decay. It should be clear that that is not what Paul has in mind here. In 2Pet. 2:19 we find the similar phrase *douloi...tes phthoras* (slaves of corruption), speaking of the unsaved who would entice believers. Two other significant passages containing the word are 2Pet. 1:4 where it says that through Christ we have escaped from the *phthora* that is in the world because of sinful desires and in 2Cor. 11:3 where Paul says that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent we may be “led astray” (*phtheiro*) from Christ. These are significant not only because Genesis 3 is directly referenced but because it

states that *phthora* was in the world prior to the Curse (i.e. through Satan). Eve had the sinful desire before she sinned (Gen. 3:6). It is therefore not a product of sin. However it is a quick path to sin, and now a product of the Curse is our bondage (*doulos*) to this corruption. Indeed after the Fall, *phthora* had multiplied exponentially on the earth. By Noah's time we see that the land is filled with corruption (the verbal form *phtheiro*) (Gen. 6:11). In verse 12 God looked on the land and saw that it was filled with corruption (*kataphtheiro*) for all flesh had corrupted (*kataphtheiro*) their way on the land. In an interesting use of wordplay, God then tells Noah in verse 13 that He will destroy (*kataphtheiro*) the land because of them.

To summarize the use of *phthora* and its related words, this most often refers to a warped or corrupted state of the human mind to which we have become slaves after the Fall in Genesis 3. In another passage that refers to Adam, Paul says in 1Cor. 15:42-49 that our bodies are corrupt (*phthora*), but when they are raised they will be incorruptible (*aphtharsia*). It is sown a natural body but raised a spiritual body in power. This resurrection is made possible through our life-giver, Jesus Christ. So then, *phthora* relates to the corruption we have become slaves to since the Fall. Paul speaks of a time when we will no longer be slaves to corruption, and it is this time for which the *ktisis* anxiously awaits. There is no hint in any portion of Scripture that this is a reference to some introduction of physical decay or some deviation from the way the previously perfect Creation operates. That is an interpretation not based on Scripture.

The third condition of the *ktisis* mentioned in Romans 8:22 is that it has been groaning in the pains of childbirth until now. At first reading this may conjure up memories of Genesis 3 where to Eve God says "I will greatly increase your pain in childbirth" (Gen. 3:16). But we should note that two different Greek words are used for "pain". Paul uses the words *sustenazo* and *sunodino* for "groaning" and "pains in childbirth". The two words are used only here in the Bible. Collectively they indicate a groaning and travailing in suffering (metaphorically as in a woman sighing during childbirth). The LXX translates *lupe* for the "pain" Eve was to expect during childbearing. That speaks of more of an emotional pain or sorrow than it does a physical one. The word *stenazo* is used in Romans 8:23 and is a related word to *sustenazo*. *Stenazo* is used 5 other times in the NT and carries a meaning of a sighing as a result of oppression from which a man longs to be set free according to TDNT (vol. 7, p.601). This is directly seen in verse 23 where Paul says we "groan" (*stenazo*) as we eagerly await the redemption of our bodies. Our bodies were cursed with death at the Fall (Gen. 2:17; 3:19). Our beings are full of vanity and corruption from which we sigh in agony, waiting to be set free from this bondage. Paul likens this to the suffering and sighing of the *ktisis*. The word group clearly relates this groaning to human beings in its other usage, and not to any other species or natural process.

To summarize the unfortunate triune state of the *ktisis*, Paul says it was subject to futility (*mataiotes*), it is in bondage to corruption (*phthora*) and it is suffering and groaning (*sustenazo*) as a woman in childbirth. These three terms are used exclusively in describing human activity and emotion in the other uses in Scripture. None of the three terms have any direct tie to the account of the Fall and Curse in Genesis 3 as many have suggested. It is only indirectly at best that the parallel can be seen with the Curse, and only when viewed as a result of fallen man being unable to fulfill his original duty of taking dominion over the Creation. It is because of fallen man and his futility that the *ktisis* has been subject to futility. It is because of fallen man and his corruption that the *ktisis* is in bondage to corruption. And it is because of fallen man and his groaning that the *ktisis* experiences groaning. It is clear that the *ktisis* experiences these things

only because of man, not because of a direct curse from God. Nowhere in either Genesis 3 or this passage in Romans 8 do we find any Scriptural evidence that the *ktisis* itself is cursed.

Now we get to the issue of “what is the *ktisis*?” Though the terms apply strictly to human beings and their fallen state, it is clear that the *ktisis* is not a “creature” or human as the KJV translates. When Paul writes in verse 23, he is speaking of human beings. Therefore the previous verses describing the *ktisis* use analogical language to relate it to the condition we are in as we wait for freedom from this bondage from the Fall. The *ktisis* is not a person, but the Creation personified. This is so we can understand our condition and understand what it is doing to the Creation. We are fallen and the Creation longs for the day when we will be set free at the revealing of the sons of God in glory.

Just as Creation eagerly awaits that day, so we too eagerly await with perseverance (v. 25). This is our hope and this is our salvation (v. 24). It is a mistake to conclude that these verses speak of a cursed Creation. The Creation is still good (1Tim. 4:4), it just longs for the day when we will finally take dominion as we were originally commanded (Gen. 1:28). If Creation is cursed it is only cursed with having to patiently bear us and our futility and corruption until Christ comes and frees us both.

Dan Leiphart
2009