Kings, Priests, and the Groaning of Creation

An Overview of Romans 5–8

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So What?

I want to share an overview of Romans 5, 6, 7, and 8, not as a verse-by-verse review, but as it bears on the work the people of God have been called to do, the vocation we have been given.

We've been saved and forgiven of our sins. So what? If that's where it leaves us, if there's nothing else beyond forgiveness, then who cares? My dog doesn't feel bad. Why should we? The beasts of the field aren't troubled in conscience because they ran down an antelope and ate it. But there is this thing called sin in our lives, and it seems to dominate us. And there is an amazing experience we can have in the forgiveness of sins, where we feel almost lighter, the word is freedom. We feel a freedom come over us when we are forgiven.

That's a strange experience. My dog doesn't have it. The beasts of the field don't have it. They don't feel freedom from sin. We do. And I think that sense of freedom is a pointer, a pointer to what we are actually supposed to be engaged in as human beings.

The Brown Corduroy Pants

There is nothing worse than a young man or a young woman with no work to do. I know, because I was one. When I lived in Rubidoux, California, between Riverside and nowhere else, I needed a job. I finally landed one at Little Caesar's. Pizza, pizza. They told me, "Go down and

buy brown corduroy pants. That's the uniform. We'll give you the shirts." So I went down and bought the brown corduroy pants. I put them on, looked at myself in the mirror, and I just couldn't do it. I never showed up for a single day at that job. My pride was too great. I could not work for a piece of pizza in brown corduroy pants.

Looking back over my work life, that little episode tells me something. There is something in us that wants to know we are doing something meaningful, that we are contributing to something bigger than ourselves. None of us feels good about doomscrolling all day, or flipping on the TV and watching it from morning to night. But if you get up, have your coffee, work in the garden a bit, have a good conversation, go to work and do your thing, you start to feel, "I'm contributing. I have a part to play." My dog doesn't feel that way. The beasts of the field don't feel that way. My dog doesn't care that he sleeps eighteen hours a day.

People are different. We were created for something. And for the next several weeks I want to walk down this path: What were we created for, and what does our salvation, our being filled with the Spirit, have to do with it? This is the whole reason for our being. We are called human beings; we have a reason for our being.

In the Image of God: Kings and Queens of the Earth

It starts in Genesis 1. God creates everything in all the spaces he makes (sky, sea, land) and he fills each space with rulers of its kind. Birds are kings of the air, fish kings of the sea, lions kings of the jungle, the beasts of the field kings of their domain. But something is still missing at the end of the sixth day. Genesis 1:26 says:

> Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man

> in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it.” (Genesis 1:26–28)

This is a vocation of kingship and queenship: a royal calling given right out of the gate, grounded in the image. We are the image and glory of God on the earth. All the majesty and authority that belong to God, he extended to his creation, to humankind.

Then in the next chapter, he places the man in a garden and tells him to tend and keep it. “Subdue the earth” is the royal calling. “Tend and keep” is something else. Those two Hebrew words, when used in close proximity, are the language used elsewhere of priests in the temple, to tend the sanctuary and keep it from anything unclean. Two roles, then, given to humanity from the start: the royal call to have dominion and subdue the earth, and the priestly call to tend and to keep.

The Order of Melchizedek

This dual vocation gets played out across the entire Bible. The writer of Hebrews (likely Paul, working through these same Hebrew Scriptures) says Christ is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. Who was Melchizedek? Abraham, the highest figure of the Old Testament, the one to whom everything is promised and in whose seed everything is fulfilled, finds his way to this king of Salem and priest of the Most High God. Abraham gives him an offering, and Melchizedek blesses Abraham. The writer of Hebrews says, in effect: notice how great Melchizedek must have been. And this is the priesthood Jesus belongs to. He is both king and priest.

What does a priest do? A priest mediates: stands between God and humanity, ever interceding. A king rules and reigns, subdues and orders. We are called to both.

David picks this up. David fancies himself a Melchizedek figure. That is why, when he becomes king, he wants to take the city of Jerusalem, Salem, because that is where the king-priest had reigned. And when David brings the Ark of the Covenant up into Jerusalem, he girds on himself the linen ephod of a priest and dances before the Ark. King and priest. He says it outright in Psalm 110:

"The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'.. The Lord has sworn and will not relent, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'" (Psalm 110:1, 4).

What Is Man?

But we know it didn't work out. Humanity did not do what humanity was called to do. Adam and Eve listened to the voice of the serpent. Sin entered, and a snowball began to roll out of Eden, into Cain and Abel, into Lamech, into the sons of God and the daughters of men, into the violence that brought the flood. Chaos.

And yet David, in light of all the promises to Abraham, the law given through Moses, and the deliverance from Egypt, was still anticipating that God would come and dwell with humanity again. In Psalm 8 he writes:

> When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas. (Psalm 8:3–8)

When we hear the word “glory,” we sometimes picture a radiance, what we’ll be when we die and go to heaven, shining with splendor. That is not what David is talking about here. The crowning with glory and honor is the restoration of our office. Verse 6 puts it plainly: God puts humanity over the works of his hands and all things under his feet. David is saying: We are going to take our role again as the responsible vice-regents in your kingdom, O God.

The DNA of Slaves

David has good reason to say this, because of what God did in Egypt. The children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt for four hundred and thirty years. To put that in perspective: the United States is two hundred and fifty years old this year. Israel’s enslavement was nearly twice that. After multiple generations of slavery, you begin to think like a slave. The DNA of those people was the DNA of slaves. They thought slavery; they thought nothing other than their enslavement.

Then God sent Moses down into Egypt with a word: “Tell Pharaoh to let my son go.” He calls Israel his son. Why? Because, as Exodus 2 says, he had heard the groaning of his people. Hold onto that, the groaning of his people. The plagues come, Pharaoh finally lets them go, and Israel walks down into the Red Sea on dry ground and comes up on the other side. But Pharaoh has a change of heart and follows them in. Exodus 14:27 says:

> And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and when the morning appeared, the sea returned to its full depth, while the Egyptians were fleeing into it. So the Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. (Exodus 14:27)

Then in the song of Exodus 15:

"Pharaoh's chariots and his army He has cast into the sea; his chosen captains also are drowned in the Red Sea. The depths have covered them; they sank to the bottom like a stone" (Exodus 15:4–5).

Don't feel too sorry for them. They had seen ten cycles of miraculous plagues, and still, when they saw the Red Sea opened, they had the audacity to chase their slaves into it. I might have thought, "Maybe God is with these people. Maybe I should hold back." But they didn't.

A Kingdom of Priests

After the Red Sea, Israel makes another fifty-day journey and arrives at the base of Mount Sinai. There, before they have heard a word from God, Moses delivers this commission from the Lord:

> 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. (Exodus 19:5–6)

A kingdom of priests. A royal priesthood. Peter picks this up in 1 Peter and applies it directly to the church. Israel is being given the mantle that humanity was given in the garden, to restore the Eden vocation, to have dominion and to tend and keep, to intercede for those who need intercession.

Of course, you know what happens next. Moses goes up the mountain, stays forty days, and when he comes back down, the people are already worshiping the golden calf. He breaks the tablets, grinds the calf to powder, makes them drink it, and asks, "Who is on the Lord's side?" Many repent. Three thousand do not, and they fall under the sword of the Levites.

And so we get a God who, in effect, says, "I cannot dwell among this people the way I would have. But here is how we will do it." He gives Moses the plan for the tabernacle: outer

court, holy place, Holy of Holies. Once a year, one man could enter that innermost place with blood and make atonement. When Moses finishes the work, Exodus 40 says:

> Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. (Exodus 40:34–35)

From then on, when the cloud lifted, Israel followed it. When it rested, they pitched the tabernacle beneath it. For forty years.

Casting Our Sins, Not Our Enemies, Into the Sea

Now, the prophets begin to reframe this story, and Paul will pick up their reframing as he tells the new Jesus movement what it has inherited. Listen to Micah:

> As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt, I will show them wonders . . . Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. (Micah 7:15, 18–19)

Notice what Micah does. “Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity”: That is a quotation from Exodus 34, given right after the golden calf. And then he turns the Red Sea image inside out. We are not casting our enemies into the depths of the sea. We are casting our sins into the depths of the sea. Micah is saying to his fellow Jews: your true slavery is not the Egyptians. Your true slavery is the iniquity that has you bound. The same iniquity that drove the Egyptians to enslave you is the iniquity you are still captive to. You are bound by your sins, and God will cast those into the sea.

That sets us up for Romans 5, 6, and 7.

Romans 5: Two Adams, Two Reigns

In Romans 5, Paul gives the great contrast: by one man, sin entered the world, and death by sin. Death passed to all because all sinned. But there is another one, a second Adam, through whom grace and the gift of righteousness have abounded to many. Look at verse 17:

"For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:17).

Death has reigned like Pharaoh through Adam. But those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness will reign in life through Jesus Christ. Do you see the work that Jesus did through his death and resurrection, and through the giving of his Spirit? It is an empowerment for us to take our rightful place again, kings and queens and priests in his creation. We are not merely forgiven for our sins so that we can go and try to be good little boys and girls. That is part of it; God is not interested in representatives of his who go on sinning. But his deliverance is a power to deliver us from the bondage of sin itself. The taskmaster who has dominated our lives has been crushed in the Red Sea.

And he closes the chapter:

". . . so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:21).

Sin, capital S, was a dominating power, like Pharaoh, reigning in death. Grace now reigns through righteousness.

Romans 6: Through the Red Sea

So what shall we say? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid. How can anyone who has died to sin live any longer in it? You have come out of Egypt. Stop being

Egyptian. You are not a slave anymore. The Red Sea is behind you. Pharaoh and his armies cannot reach you. Be who I have called you to be.

And notice the imagery Paul reaches for. Romans 5 is about the power of Pharaoh, the sin monster, and how he has dominated our lives. Romans 6 is about getting baptized into Jesus Christ, just as the children of Israel went down into the Red Sea and came up on the other side.

> Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3–4)

We went down into the Red Sea. We have come up on the other side. But now something different is happening in us. We walk in newness of life because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The children of Israel were delivered from their captors, but something still dwelled in them. They got free from their physical chains; they were not free from the domination of sin. They proved that every time the law was read.

Paul writes:

> Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin . . . Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. (Romans 6:6, 12)

That last line is Pharaoh standing on the other side of the Red Sea, shouting, “Get back here! Get back here and serve me!” We do not have to go back. We do not have to do his bidding.

Romans 7: At the Foot of the Mountain

Just as Israel celebrated the death of the sin monster at the Red Sea and then journeyed to Sinai to receive the law, Paul moves in Romans 7 to the law:

"Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives?" (Romans 7:1).

And then verse 5: when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members. Every time Israel heard the law of Moses, something inside them rose up. Verse 10: the commandment, which was supposed to bring life, brought death. Verse 12: "the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good." Then how is it that what is good has become death to me?

It is not that the law is bad and we are no longer under it because we have escaped some defective code. The law has been filled up. The righteous requirement of the law has reached its fulfillment in what Christ did. Verse 18: "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells." The whole of Romans 7 depicts a person standing at the base of Mount Sinai, hearing the words of God, feeling unable, and proving over and over that he is unable to attain to that law.

Was Paul still describing himself there, after his Damascus road encounter, after he received the Spirit? I don't think so. Because in Romans 8:9 he says:

"But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you" (Romans 8:9).

If God is dwelling in us, we cannot say any longer, "In me there is no good thing." There is something good in us. It is the Spirit of God.

Romans 8: The Tabernacle Has Moved

Here is the staggering thing. At the end of Exodus 40, the Spirit fills a tabernacle, and even Moses cannot enter. At the beginning of Acts 2, the Spirit fills people. And the very first thing the Spirit-filled people do is go out and minister. They speak. The crowd hears them and is cut to the heart.

Acts 2 is our Mount Sinai. The fire and flame are not on a mountain anymore, they sit on individual people. The wind and the ruckus that filled the upper room is what was happening on Sinai. But instead of dwelling in a tent that none of us could approach because of our lack of holiness, God in the new covenant has chosen to make us, all of us, living stones built into a spiritual house. Fire from heaven comes and dwells on each of us, and makes us agents who go out and speak.

And when Peter began to preach ("these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day") he said, "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel":

> And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. (Acts 2:17, citing Joel 2:28)

An explosion of prophetic utterance. Everyone doing the job of king and priest in this earth, interceding between God and his enemies. That is why we do not kill our enemies. We intercede for our enemies. While we are dying on the cross, we say, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." When I resist that, those are my worst days. When I embrace it, those are my best.

Abba, Father

Paul gives us a hint of the inner life of this priesthood in Romans 8:15:

"For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father'" (Romans 8:15).

Don't go back into Pharaoh's sin culture. You have received the Spirit of adoption, by which we cry, "Abba, Father." Notice that phrase is in quotation marks in your Bible. There are no quotation marks in Greek; the translators put them there because this is a direct citation of Jesus in Gethsemane. He is striving in the garden, sweating drops like blood, saying, "Father, let this cup pass from me." He was going into the darkness for us. He was already doing the priestly work. Peter, James, and John could not stay awake. The men he had called to sit on twelve thrones, the priests and kings of the new Israel, were sleeping while he groaned under the weight of his vocation.

And when he came out of that garden, he came out as the priest who had wrestled and won. Our cry of "Abba, Father" is the cry of those who groan with him. Paul goes on:

"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" (Romans 8:18).

This is not a glory reserved for the great by-and-by. This is the glory of Psalm 8: "You have crowned him with glory and honor, and set him over the works of Your hands." Forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Spirit, the commission to take up the role originally given to humanity as kings and priests over creation. What a powerful commission.

Working Together for Good

This is not us sitting at home wringing our hands, wondering whether the world is going to turn around. Paul writes:

"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

In the King James, the New King James, and several other translations, that verse is rendered with “all things” as the subject. But the better reading takes God as the subject: God works all things together for good with those who love him. There is a collaboration. There is a vocation. We are working with God for the good of this world.

And how do we know where to go? Listen for the groaning. Romans 8 keeps returning to it:

> For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. (Romans 8:19–22)

Do you hear the slavery imagery? “Bondage.” “Groans.” These are the very words used of the slaves in Egypt when they cried out and God said, “I have heard the groaning of my people.” Like Father, like sons and daughters. Our vocation as children of God is to open up our ears and hear the groaning of people. Actions don’t always tell us the full story of who someone is. Sometimes we have to listen to the groanings.

And then we go in. The Spirit goes in with us:

“Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26).

God himself is groaning. We are groaning. Creation is groaning. And we go together into the darkness of that groaning.

Put on the Garments

If you trace the story of Israel and see how Paul lays the story of the church on top of it, you will recognize that we have been called to a vocation. We are not sitting on a beach with a drink in hand thinking, “It’s all good. I got my ticket to heaven.” No. You got your ticket to the royal priesthood. Now put on the garments. Shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace. Put on the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit. Go out into this world and fight against the darkness that keeps other people in the same bondage we were once in.

You have been washed. You have been cleansed. But you have been washed for a purpose: that you can share that experience with others and deliver them from the power of sin, from the taskmaster Pharaoh, and walk them through the baptism waters of the Red Sea.

Here is the difference. The children of Israel went down into the Red Sea and came up dry. The enemies of God went down into the Red Sea and came up wet. Everyone from Jesus on through baptism, we all get wet. We all participate in the sufferings of our enemies. While we were enemies, Paul says in Romans 5, Christ died for us. While we were enemies. What a powerful love.

Jesus went down into the waters. He is the one who drowned. We follow him in death. We drown like the enemies in the Red Sea. But when we come up, we walk in newness of life. We are a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, all things have become new.

So let’s go out. Start with the person down the hall, at home, at your workplace. I have to remind myself of this. Tomorrow will be another day. Lord, help me remember these things. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. We are not just trying: We are walking in

the Spirit who has been given to us, the Spirit of the king-priest who has gone before us, ever interceding.