

Romans 8:18-25: Nondualism and the New Creation

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[0 : 00] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah. It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me actually to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

It's been nearly 27 years since Henry John Dutchendorf flew his plane into the ocean and to his death. off the coast of California. Now, some of you folks will know who I'm talking about if you were raised in the 60s and 70s. As a boy growing up in Mexico, John Denver's music had given me a really live link with the United States, which was very much where I came from, even though I was born in Mexico.

You can think about that later, I suppose. Just hearing him pronounce words like Blue Ridge Mountains had me mesmerized. It evoked images of clear mornings and all wholesome things like grandma's feather bed and homegrown tomatoes. You can imagine how thrilled I was to get to shake his hand and to thank him for his music when I met him as a student in Moscow in the Soviet Union in 1984.

As part of a tour he was doing in the Soviet Union at the time, he and Jim Henson, famous from the Muppets, were giving a small Christmas concert there in the home of the American ambassador. And I managed, even as a student at a language institute in Moscow, to get the day off to go and meet and hear John Denver and Jim Henson. I was well aware, of course, at the time already, that he had songs that were of a more serious nature, along with songs about love and life and places like Starwood in Aspen. On his tour of the Soviet Union that year, he was already singing this song. I won't sing it because I'll get arrested for disturbing the peace. You'll see I stood over here as we were singing so as not to interfere with your peace.

[3 : 15] But anyway, the words, one stanza went like this. It's about time we start to see it. The earth is our only home. It's about time we start to face it. We can't make it here all alone. It's about time we start to listen to the voices in the wind. It's about time, and it's about changes, and it's about time.

How many of you have heard that song? Okay, we have one. All right, that's fantastic. I've recalled John Denver, not to draw the attention to, you know, my moment in glory there meeting him, but because his hope for the future, his doctrine of things to come, the big word there is eschatology reflects a real yearning to hear creation speak. And here he aims to be prophetic, calling us to work together to care for what he believed was our only home.

And this brings us to the fourth and last core value of progressive Christianity that I want us to reflect on. We've tried to do these reflections carefully, trying to understand what motivates it, and here the big word is non-duality. That's in my title. And what in the world is that? What is non-duality?

Well, let me just say that this talk will be the most systematic, I suppose, in the sense of asking us to think various parts of our faith, of what we confess, together as a coherent system. Don't let the word put you off. Don't mentally check out at this point, please. Let me just say that the Apostles' Creed that we just recited refreshes our mind about the systematic nature of our faith.

Because it doesn't just give us isolated points that we affirm like a shopping list or something like that. In fact, we're all systematic when it comes to things that we care about that we know well. Why are we systematic? Well, because we understand the component parts and how they fit together. And that's a system, no matter what area of expertise you happen to have.

[5 : 36] So too, as Christians, I think we need to appreciate how the ancient creeds summarize the story of redemption. That is, from creation to the new creation and how God has provided the way there.

And it's with this tool that I think we can discern the profound non-duality in a song like John Denver's Wind Song, which you can look up later today if you like. Don't look it up right now on your phones because you'll get distracted with everything I'm trying to explain. So what is non-duality? Well, the non tells us something is being negated, right? Non. But put in positive terms, it's the idea that reality, that everything that is, is one in its being, in its essence. It's not two, but one. And I suppose one form of non-duality would be materialistic. That matter is all we have. It's all that's there.

But in using the term non-duality, our progressive Christian friends mean something else. I suspect that John Denver was more of a progressive Christian, at least in this sense. What they mean is that the creator-creation distinction, creator-creation, is an illusion. And if not that, then it has somehow been overcome or abolished in the incarnation. And let me explain. If they say it's an illusion, they intend a form of pantheism, which is a big word for everything that is, is God. It's a little more complicated than that, but that's the basic idea. If they say it's been overcome, then they will extend the incarnation to all of creation. Here's how one theologian summarizes the idea of deep incarnation. He says this, while God is uniquely incarnate in Jesus, that incarnation extends into the depths of the created world in such a way that all living things are touched by divine grace and are caught up together in movement towards union with God. You see, this sounds almost reasonable because we know that the incarnation speaks of what God intends for material things, for matter, for creation. The divine Logos didn't just float around like a ghost. He took on human flesh, the same human and flesh and nature, which he took up in a transformed way in the resurrection and ascension. But progressive Christians want to say more than that. What they mean by deep incarnation is something like the Logos assumed all flesh, all material things. That's why folks like

Richard Rohr, one of the godfathers of today's progressive Christianity, can take a phrase like Christ is all and in all, you remember from Colossians 3.11, he can take that phrase right out of context and declare things like Christ and creation are the same reality.

You see what I mean by a distinction being abolished. With the same logic, Rohr can say that the resurrection is an ongoing process, a natural extension of life itself, which Jesus' resurrection happens to illustrate.

[9 : 20] And all this informs a particular way of relating to everything we encounter. Rohr asks, do we approach things automatically drawing distinctions? Do we say to the gentleman we're talking, do we think, is this man saved or is he unsaved? Is this lady orthodox or not so orthodox?

Is this man gay or is he straight? He says, if you do that, you will, quote, never be able to be a loving person. Have you heard such a thing? He reinforces this with the idea that knowing God is not about things of the mind, but about going into the mystery that is always darkness and light, not insisting on certitude or answers. I might just point out that he's making a distinction there. The truth is, I'm not sure we can really avoid making distinctions. We can't actually think unless we make distinctions of one kind or another. I think it was C.S. Lewis who said that when you think, you have to think thoughts. You have to think something. You have to think things. You have to do that so that you can distinguish the thing you're thinking about from things that are, from the non-thing, from what it isn't. But it turns out that there's a whole area where Richard Rohr really doesn't want us to think. Prayer, he says, is not supposed to involve the mind since at its core it's about breathing the sacred name, in and out, he says. And he coaches you in how to pray this way, breathing in Yahweh, like that. And he says, practice this and you will find that it will revolutionize your prayer life. Now, I think he's right about that. He's probably right about that. If instead of listening to God who speaks in his word and responding to him, I disengage my mind, I'm bound to experience a revolution in my concept of God. I'll move on from the God who is there, who is transcendent in relation to the world he made, and I'll move to the God who kind of flows in the depth of everything, through, in and through every living thing. And in my case, right from my root chakra right up to my crown. And what does this look like as I relate to what, as far as I can tell, is not me? I mean the land, the rivers, the lakes, the animals, the world out there. I was going to say as I relate to nature or creation, but that would presuppose the binary that our progressive friend is trying to avoid. It presupposes natural versus supernatural, created versus uncreated. But since progressive Christians do talk about the earth as something that's distinct from me, what do they believe is my duty in relation to it? Well, Lindsay Perez Lopez, the theologian who writes for Sojourners that I've been bringing into our conversation here and there, says this, the Christian hope for the future is to see the world healed. Here she expresses the fourth and last progressive core value that we're considering together. Quote, to strive to protect the earth and ensure its integrity and sustainability. To strive to protect the earth and to ensure its integrity and sustainability. That's the core value I want us to consider and respond to from scripture. I think that what we can affirm here is the proper yearning to see the world endure because God declared it to be good. After all, creation speaks of God's glory. Psalm 19 reflects his good design, his handiwork.

But because progressive Christians are also committed to this non-dualist or non-binary idea that the world flows out of God's being like rays from the sun, and because they don't divide time with the fall into a before and after, they are more hopeful where they shouldn't be, and they are not so hopeful where they have every reason to be. Let me explain that for just a minute. We've seen how progressive Christian friends read good news into the bad news when they say, well, whatever the fall may have been, man's relation to God is not so terribly broken. It's still pretty much intact, so we should not dwell on sin and rebellion, but we should focus on original blessing. By the same token, they read bad news into the good news and assume that God's command to subdue the earth, Genesis 128, can only be a bad thing. Well, why do they see it as a bad thing? See, they assume that hierarchies are a bad idea when in fact the command entails a loving stewardship of creation that's given before the fall.

But by getting things backwards, progressive Christians can't help but go into something of a panic mode when it comes to caring for the earth, because the task of seeing to its integrity and its sustainability is up to us.

How could it be otherwise? The upshot is that as progressive Christians think about what they call incarnational mission, they declare that the next mission frontier is, well, the environment where climate change activism will be the mark of true discipleship. Now, I got a sense of what that meant when I did some interpreting for Greenpeace some years back. They had Russian guests and they needed interpreters, so I got to be a fly on the wall of this hope that through some kind of activism, we could bring in a better day and proceed to the earth's healing. Now, since I want to turn to scripture, I won't dwell for long on how it is that we in the evangelical world sometimes make just a little bit of room for this confusion that I'm talking about, but here's how it happens very briefly.

[15 : 59] We know better than to say that in the incarnation the logos assumed all of creation, assumed all material things. But sometimes we do entertain the idea that the logos assumed Christians or the church.

And so we come close to confusing Jesus and the church, which means we start to locate the new heaven and the new earth, well, in the church. What does this look like liturgically as we think of celebrating the Lord's Supper later? Well, here and there, some of our teachers would like us to think that when we consecrate the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper, that what's going on is that the bread and the wine are assumed by the new creation. A little bit like the logos, assuming Jesus' human nature, so the new creation assumes the consecrated bread and wine, if only for a moment. And that means that for that moment, at least, we can take the world to come into our bodies. From there, the idea is that you and I are priests of the new creation. We offer the world and ourselves up to God so that he'll heal it. And in this way, we imagine a kind of gradual, uninterrupted line between here and the new creation. Now, I hope you've understood my basic concern here. I'm talking about same team people.

I'm not talking about people who are coming from a totally different worldview. I'm talking about same team people who are thinking that this is the way we ought to be thinking. But I'm concerned that by emphasizing that the creation primarily needs to be healed, which of course it does, but if that's what we emphasize on and put at the top of the list, we miss that creation needs something far more radical than healing, like something like resurrection. And that's what takes us to our passage in Romans. You see, when we think that the new creation is already here, as if contained in the Lord's Supper, we miss the longing and the waiting for Jesus' return in glory when he will come to make all things new. So let's go through Romans 8 to the passage we read.

And three questions come out at us as we read this passage together. What is creation waiting for? What are we, God's children, waiting for? And how are we called to wait? So I'm going to take that in three parts and read verses 18 to 22. Once again, follow with me. If you don't have a Bible, you're very welcome to one that's up here. You may need a pair of glasses to read it if you're like me.

I consider, says Paul, verse 18, that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope, verse 21, that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

[19 : 36] Let me ask you, what do you think of the idea that creation is actually waiting? I tend to think that we imagine that creation is just there, not an actor, but something that gets acted upon. Makes sense, doesn't it? In the progressive Christian vision, it might be waiting to be healed, but it's not waiting for anything like what God teaches us here in Romans 8 through Paul.

That's because for the progressive Christian, the future has been, as it were, collapsed into the present. There's no fundamental distinction between nature as we know it and nature as it has yet to be redeemed. Remember, we're not supposed to make these kind of distinctions if we're supposed to truly love what's in front of us. But here in Paul's message, it's as though creation, excuse me, is a bride waiting for her bridegroom to appear. The marriage still lies ahead, in other words. There's a longing and waiting for the day when God will reveal to the earth its true caretakers under God. It's clear that in Paul's mind, inspired by the Holy Spirit, there's a legitimate and holy hierarchy, let's say, a proper place for earth to bend the knee to God's sons and daughters, all children of the first and second Adam, as to monarchs in their coronation. A proper hierarchy. From there, I should say apart from the theme of waiting in verse 19, there are two points in these verses that we need to pay attention to. The first is, what exactly is creation longing to be liberated from? Verse 21 speaks of its bondage to decay, such that according to verse 20, it experiences frustration. What do these things mean?

Well, because of the fall, the earth isn't sort of just weak and wobbly, but it's deformed, it's impure, and it can only disintegrate. It has a shelf life, if you like. Far more than healing, it needs a complete reversal of this decay, this entropy. It longs for complete restoration inside and out, and it needs a new heart. It needs a new vitality. It needs a new purpose and direction. Even transfiguration, a theme that's common among our Eastern Christian friends, does not quite get to the most basic need, even though transfiguration does speak of the glorious restoration of an image that it lost, but decay means decay, and the earth longs for integrity, for reintegration, so that it's once again fit for its original purpose.

Excuse me, the clear teaching here is of the earth's restoration. That means that the fire that we read about in 2 Peter 3 is not one that finally annihilates the earth, sending it into the big cosmic scrap heap or whatever, but that purifies it and refines it. The second theme is the glory that's anticipated.

When Paul speaks of glory, it's the glory that will be revealed in us. That is in God's children, verse 18. That's why it's specifically the glory, verse 21, of whom? Of the children of God. It's the glory of God's children. So it's not a glory that the earth will experience, enjoy on its own, in isolation. It will be the glory that will be manifest when God's children are revealed.

[23 : 42] It's a glory we can't yet fathom, although I think we get a glimpse of it when we think of the splendor of a bride as she comes and makes her way up the aisle to meet her groom who's there waiting for her and delighting in her. We get a glimpse of this. What a wonderful thought that nature has purpose and direction. We often recall how the heavens declare God's glory, and here, through the special revelation given to Paul, we get to consider how creation declares. It speaks of the purpose that God, of God's purpose, the purpose that God implanted in it as it waits. And I think we can even say this, in its waiting, creation is serving as a kind of missionary.

What is creation's end or purpose in a word? Well, to be a vessel that's filled full with God's presence and a fit place for God's children to dwell forever. There we have the true unity of heaven and earth that God has in store. Oh, that takes us to the second question, and it's right there in verse 23. What are we, God's children, waiting for?

Verse 23, not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. Underline that mentally, redemption of our bodies. In the progressive Christian vision, there's no distinction between the children of Adam and the children of the second Adam. That is, everyone without exception has been adopted as God's child. It's just that some don't realize it yet. By the same token, everyone without exception is already participating in the resurrection since that too has already taken place. That's why Richard Rohr can say this, resurrection is just incarnation taken to its logical conclusion. He explains, if God inhabits matter, then we can naturally believe in the resurrection of the body. Resurrection is just happening all around us, he says.

But not so in Romans 8.23, Paul says we wait eagerly for the redemption of our bodies. At death, the original unity that God blessed us with in the garden necessarily disintegrates, as our spirit is severed from the body, that original unity. But what we wait for is not ultimate release from bodily existence, but a reintegration. The resurrection of our earthly bodies on the day when Jesus appears in glory. Together with this, Paul says, is adoption to sonship. Now by the spirit and through faith in Jesus, we're already adopted. So what does Paul mean here? Well, he means the fullness of our adoption. Just as creation is waiting for God's children to be, if you like, brought out and put on display, so too we wait for the great day when Jesus comes to do just that, to publicly show who are his children and to reign with them forever. Let's bring in the missionary theme here. We have missionaries with us this morning. We'll be saying a word in a few moments. If creation has a missionary role or function as it waits, so too we are called to evangelize others by speaking of the promised adoption in Christ for all those who put their trust in

Jesus. There's a third theme in our passage, and it has to do with the way we wait. And it's in verses, I'll read verse 23 again and then conclude with the remaining two verses, verses 24 and 25. I'll just shift the emphasis slightly to make my point. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. And then verse 24, for in this hope we were saved, but hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?

[28 : 24] But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it, you see the word there? Patiently. We see that to the fact that we wait, Paul adds the how of waiting. And here I want to just emphasize two things. First is our waiting that is with eager inward groanings. What are those?

Well, Paul links them to the first fruits of the Spirit. This means that they are inward longings that we don't produce ourselves. They're the gift. They're a gift that comes through our union with Christ Jesus. Since we're saved in the hope of redemption of our bodies, verse 24, it's clear that the longings produce in us an assurance that what God has in store for his children is there. To the eager, eager waiting, we add the second patient waiting, verse 25. Paul implies that the hope is patient by definition. By definition. He says, if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently, verse 25. So while in the day-to-day, you and I can kind of wait patiently and sometimes not so patiently when we have to stand in line or whatever it is, baptized hope is always patient and eager because it's sure of God's promise and sure that God's promise is good and worth waiting for. For the progressive Christian, waiting is minimized, if not abolished, because he's persuaded that he hasn't really left the Garden of Eden.

You get a sense of this when you, well, you might come close to Rec Beach there in Vancouver or you go to some lovely spring in Vermont where, well, folks think they're still in the Garden of Eden because the clothing is entirely optional.

I hear a chuckle. Maybe somebody's wandered down into those parts. By contrast, through union with Christ, we look forward to a city. Yes, it's a city that has a tree in it and a river flowing out of it. So it's like a city with a garden, but it's a city, right? It's a city with foundations, our theme that we've been considering. It's a city designed and built by God himself.

And it's there. And that's the glorious truth. To make things just a bit more personal, because so much of this is abstract, isn't it? Although I hope you can see the practical working out of how we're considering the biblical worldview here. But to make things more personal, maybe this is a good moment to ask ourselves, how would I describe my waiting? Is it an eager waiting so that I can say that I'm longing for Jesus' appearing, that I pray, come, Lord Jesus? Is it a patient waiting so that I find myself trusting that God is actually working out his purposes in and through human history, bringing things into his perfect will, in spite of all the upheaval, in spite of all of what's in the news, in spite of suffering and ways in which we begin to doubt that God's purposes are being worked out? And yet, he strengthens us by his Spirit. And in what practical ways can we wait for Jesus' return? Well, I really can't think of a better answer than to do something that we all need to grow into together more and more, into really digging into Scripture and into letting Scripture get into us so that it can do its work of sanctifying us and setting us apart for the work that God has for us.

[32 : 33] So let me just conclude with a few thoughts. I hope that through these four talks, responding to the core values of progressive Christianity, that I haven't been trying to hurl rotten tomatoes. I've been trying to understand the shape and the hopes that progressive Christian friends have so that we can speak of a greater hope that we're called to through the gospel. I hope it's been clear that progressive Christianity, while picking up certain Christian themes and here and there sounding very, very gospel-centered even sometimes, isn't really Christian in its foundations at all. I know that's not going to please a lot of people, but I think that's what needs to be said. It's coming from a different universe of meaning, if you like. Think of the way John Denver's remains were laid to rest.

We're told that his ashes were just scattered throughout the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Now the God who formed us can surely reform our scattered ashes, most certainly, but symbolically, symbolically, I think the scattering of ashes bears witness to a lie. It speaks of a final disintegration of created things. It speaks of a final loss of individuality as when a drop of water goes back to the ocean. I think scripture calls us to a far greater hope, a reverence for material things. Yes, not so as to worship matter, but to handle material things as good stewards, as were commanded in Genesis. This, of course, is the business of creation care, which is a way to bear witness to the goodness of God's creation, but also as a form of hospitality as we think of caring for the world around us for the sake of those we want to show hospitality to in the next generations to come.

But there's no panic. There's no panic in this because we don't panic about this matter because it's in God's hands in the same way that you and I, we don't fret about our own death if we're in Christ.

If we're truly united to Jesus, then we already are by grace participants in his death, which is the same as saying that we carry the down payment, if you like, well, that's the scriptural word, of our resurrection. So, and I'll end with this. May the way in which we wait for the day of the Lord serve as a living question mark for our progressive Christian friends. And may God give us joy in waiting for him and waiting for the day, anticipating the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Do I hear an amen? Amen.