

Image, worship and obedience

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[0 : 00] So, if you have your Bibles with you, please turn to Romans chapter 8. But I would want to point out that though our reading is taken from Romans chapter 8, like last week, because of the series, we'll be flicking through, or not necessarily flicking through, but looking at other parts of Scripture within the message, the body of the message itself.

So, I'm going to pick the reading up in verse 18 of Romans chapter 8. We're going to read through to the end of verse 25. Not many, but important verses.

Well, they're all important. Let me read. Now hear God's word. For I consider that the sufferings of this present age are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

For the creation waits with eager longing 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.

That the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtained and obtained the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

[1 : 26] For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, we who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

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

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

Well, may God bless his word to us this evening. Thank you.

Amen. As well, we began last week by looking at the origin of mission.

[3 : 01] And in order to do that, we had to take into consideration that God had, at least in the beginning, there was one mission that God gave to the first man and the first woman. And then after that, there is a new mission.

Once the full sin entered the world, and that changes things. But of course, there is an overlap between the original mission, be fruitful and multiply in a world without sin.

And then of course, that command, be fruitful and multiply, is repeated in Genesis 9, in a world with sin. So there is an overlap there. But the new mission in Genesis 3.15 is God's mission.

Something that God will do by sending the Lord Jesus Christ to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And as I said, that this sermon series is going to follow the book series, Original Mission. But instead of focusing on the general ideas of mission, like we did in the book, we're going to be focusing on a few particulars. Last week, we looked at how the image of God is central to communion with God.

[4 : 13] And we asked the question, what is the image of God? Many Christians know that Adam and Eve were made in the image of God, and that Christians are to reflect the image of God.

But many, few less, actually know what that image is. So we're able to declare, yes, we're made in the image, but then get confused as to when it comes to explaining that image.

And so we looked at what that image is and how it's important for communion with God. The two go together. The moment they become separated by sin, then you lose both.

You don't just lose one, you lose both. Well, this evening, we come to part two, and our attention is drawn to the world being the place of mission.

And it would be right to say, to point out the obvious truth, that where does God's mission take place? And we could say, well, here. This is the place of God's mission, because this is where we are.

[5 : 16] But I want to draw, at least at this beginning part, to draw your attention to the less obvious. Now, I call it less obvious, but it's less obvious to many believers, but not for any good reason.

There's no reason why this should be less obvious, what I'm about to say, than any other thing within Scripture. And that is that in the fullness of time, okay, when all the time is used up, if I can put it that way, by God, in the fullness of time, God will unite all things in heaven and on earth in Christ Jesus.

All things in heaven and on earth that are now not in a state of unity will be in a complete state of unity in the fullness of time in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And the reason for drawing your attention to this is to draw your attention to the actual scope and field of mission. The mission field, as it were, is the heavens and earth.

Okay? It's not localized to people. It's everything. Everything that God created. Because as we read in Romans 8, the whole of creation waits for that day when the fullness of time comes.

[6 : 32] And there is the unity of things in heaven and on earth. Anything less than that is sort of a reductionistic view of what God is actually doing.

It's almost as if, well, I'm only concerned about what God does with me. Or I'm only concerned what God does with other people. It's good to be concerned with what God does with you and other people.

But that's a bit reductionistic. It's a bit limiting what God is actually doing. And so, in the final analysis, when the fullness of time has come, all things in heaven and on earth will be unified in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this fallen world will be no longer living under the corruption that it does, no longer living under the curse. It will be set free. And the creation, as we read in Romans 8, is waiting for that day.

It's waiting for us to enter into glory and it's waiting for itself to enter into glory as well. Now, if you don't have that kind of view of God's mission, what you end up doing is you end up thinking that God's mission is purely evangelistic.

[7 : 46] As though evangelism is God's mission. Now, evangelism is part of God's mission. And it's the part of God's mission that focuses on people who are meant to be the image of God on earth.

It reaches them. We declare what God has done in Christ Jesus to people. But that is part of God's mission. It doesn't take into consideration the unity of heaven and earth.

And so there's the obvious side. Evangelism would be the obvious side of mission. It's the part of mission that everybody knows about. The less obvious side is in the fullness of time, God will unite all things in heaven and on earth.

God is taking care of everything. Everything is going to be taken care of in God's mission. And so properly understood, the mission of God and the mission field of God is everything God created. Everything God created, God is going to take care of. And he's taking care of it already through the accomplishment of Christ, which is proclaimed to a fallen world.

[8 : 54] The creation itself is waiting to be set free from its corruption. Now, to keep in line with where we were last week, I want to keep this idea of image and communion front and center of almost every message for the very simple reason it's one that turns up in every message.

So in the beginning, you have God's people, you know, made in the image of God, reflecting God, living in communion with him. And in the fullness of time, in the new heavens, in the new earth, you're going to have exactly the same thing.

God's people made in his image, reflecting him, living in communion with him. So the beginning and end is identical. And it's the redemption accomplished by Christ for us that gets us from the being in the wilderness to in the kingdom, as it were.

So as we look here, we want to take into consideration, at least not forgetting, that we are still thinking about what it means to be made in the image of God and what it means to be in communion with God.

The trouble now is that we have to deal with the issue of sin. We have to take into consideration how does sin affect the image of God in man, which we looked at last week.

[10 : 16] Adam's son reflected him. He did not reflect God. So Adam was made in the image in the likeness of God, but Adam's son, Seth, was made in the likeness of Adam, a fallen, sinful man.

And all children, after that, don't reflect the image of God, but they reflect the image of their fallen parents. So all children, every generation, needs to be restored in exactly the same way if they're to

be restored back to that image.

Now, the world that we live in is a sinful one, but at the same time, it's one full of God's grace. God's common grace, and it's called common, to use not-so-technical language, because everyone experiences it, whether they realize it or not.

It is common to everyone. The command to be fruitful and multiply in Genesis 9 is an exact command that was given to Adam and Eve before the world was even sinful.

Now, you might want to ask yourself the question, why would you want to further the multiplication of people when it's clear that the moment you do that, you further the multiplication of sin?

[11 : 30] Okay, you can't have one without the other. And that's the condition that the world now suffers under. Any multiplication of any good thing is a multiplication of the corruption that goes with that good thing now.

So Adam and Eve have children, then other children, and, you know, it carries on generation after generation. And you have the multiplication of sin through all of those families and nations and languages and to the ends of the world.

But God has also given, in his common grace, family, government, laws, education. He's been good to the environment.

And all of these things increase as the world increases. The knowledge increases. Wealth increases. Generations of people increase.

Families increase. Governments increase. And, of course, laws increase. The issue now is that sin is a new reality. All of those things would have been good.

[12 : 37] And much, we would have enjoyed their goodness in a much better way without sin. But now that they, we have sin, sin is going to corrupt them.

But I want to point out something that should be obvious. That even though sin corrupts them, it doesn't make those things bad. So family is good even if sin corrupts it.

Government is good even if sin corrupts it. Okay? Laws are good even if sin corrupts them. And that's an important distinction that we have to make.

In the same way that we can make a distinction between a good government and a bad person in government. Okay? We're able to say, well, the idea of government is good even if the person at the top is not good.

We're able to make that distinction between the two. And that's what we have to do when we take on something like anything. Education, law, government, family.

[13 : 41] Those things are good. But when the new reality is sin, we ought to be able to expect corruption in those areas. So marriage is good. Bad marriages are bad.

Bad marriage is good. But the idea of marriage itself is good. And that's something that we have to get used to. That just because it can be corrupted does not mean that the thing itself is a form of corruption.

When it isn't. And God would have us make that type of distinction. That we are able to distinguish the difference between what it is and how sin ruins it.

Now the world tries to answer the problem of corruption in totally the wrong way. Because it does not identify where the corruption actually is.

And so governments will pass laws for the common good which may not reflect at all what is good. And so you can have certain laws that can benefit certain people groups or certain nations or certain business contracts in the world that are good for some but that are not good for others.

[14 : 57] The corruption is creeping in. And so the only weapon, the only weapon that governments have to sort of stem monopolization or something like that in a business world is pass more laws.

But God in his word points out to us very, very clearly that the source of corruption is the human heart. And even his law, even his law couldn't redeem the human heart.

Okay? You can't get people to do what you want them to do by giving them rules. It just doesn't work. And this is something that we ought to learn from God.

God says, my law is holy, perfect, and true. And we see that in scripture. And we think, well, it's bound to do what it's meant to do.

Well, it does do what it's meant to do. But what it cannot do is remove the corruption from the human heart. It just cannot make that kind of change in a person.

[16:04] And so in the church, we ought to love the law. We ought to train children to love the law long before we train them to keep it. Because keeping the law is a byproduct of loving it.

Because the law itself isn't going to change the human heart. You're not going to change a person by giving them a set of rules. It doesn't work like that. But the world without Christ, without God, without the new birth, the necessity of the new birth, all they have is a few rules.

We'll just pass more laws so that we can at least confine the spread of corruption any further than what it is.

And it doesn't work. So what are the fallen conditions when you then take this back to the image of God and communion with God?

Well, the presence of sin means that both image and communion are no longer possible. But sin, while it's a big problem, okay, the biggest problem facing the world is not the fact that they're living in sin.

[17:16] It is true that sin is a new reality and it is a big problem. But that's not the biggest problem. The biggest problem is that God's judgment is coming upon sin.

And this is why the gospel is the way of escape, as Hebrews puts it. Don't harden your heart to the Lord Jesus Christ, for it is the only way you can escape the coming judgment.

Sin is a problem, but the judgment of God upon that sin is a greater problem facing the world. That's a much greater issue. And it's the gospel that deals with that issue.

It's the Lord Jesus Christ that deals with that situation. This is how Paul puts it when he talks about it in terms of people living in sin, in terms of image and communion.

In Romans 1, he says that people in sin exchange the worship of God, and worship is a means of obeying God. Okay, I obey God. They exchange that worship of God, of loving God first and trusting him first, for the worship of created things.

[18:22] Now, if you go from worshiping God to worshiping a created thing, that is, loving a created thing first above God, what happens is your obedience goes with it.

Okay? No longer are you obeying the uncreated God, but now you're obeying something in the world. It could be something originally that you were meant to have dominion over, or it could be another person that is your equal.

You're obeying them, and you're not obeying God. Worship is simply you obeying something, you living in a form of submission to something that you're loving and trusting.

And as the scripture points out time and time again, that those who worship idols, that is, anything that is not God that you trust and love, that those who worship idols become like them.

In short, you become like what you worship. You become like what you give your life to. I don't watch huge amounts of TV.

[19:33] In fact, I hardly watch any. But every now and then, you sit down when you're tired, and you think, well, I'll flick something on. And there's these silly programs on about owners that look like they're dogs.

And you think to yourself, we become like what we worship. Well, I'm not quite so sure it goes to that extent. But the idea of people loving something and then being shaped by that thing so much is not so strange after all.

People can have hobbies. They can have memberships. They can have things that suddenly they thought they were in control of when all of a sudden it's now beginning to reverse.

And the distinction that we have to make is that those things can be really, really good, but they can also be corrupted. And it's that corruption that can then corrupt us in that form of idolatry.

We become like what we worship. In biblical times, they would cut down, a man would cut down a log, a tree trunk. He would chop it in half.

[20:38] Half of it he would use to cook his dinner. And the other half he would sculpt into an idol and bow down and worship it and thank God for what's just happened.

Now, that doesn't make any sense, but it makes perfect sense when you understand what idolatry does to a person. When that man bows down to something that he has sculpted with eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear, okay, he's become like what he worships.

This is why Jesus constantly has to say to people, because the issue of the day is idol worship. He says, let him who has ears to hear, hear. Why is no one listening?

Well, it's because their heart is given over to something else. It's given over to something that can't hear. People who can't hear the word of God are worshiping that they can't hear.

It could be money. It could be education. It could be a business. It could be the holidays. It doesn't matter what it is. If it's not the living God, they're becoming like what they worship.

[21 : 46] And so they become deaf and blind to the things of God. So when Jesus is with his disciples and he tells them parables and he then says to them, well, I have to explain this to you as well.

That's a real criticism of the disciples. He's basically saying to them, look, you're much further down the line of idolatry than you think you actually are. If I'm having to explain this to you, your heart and your mind is already given over to a love for something else.

You're caught up in an area where you're unable to see and hear the things that I'm telling you.

That's not an issue of learning. That's an issue of idolatry.

We think, well, they just need to learn more. That's not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying this is not an issue solved with education, but even a biblical education.

This is an issue solved with killing your idols, chopping your idols down and turning to the living God. People become like what they love.

[22 : 56] People will follow what they love. Now, if it's Christ, then no problem. But if it's not, then the whole of their life is directed by what they worship.

And if we become like what we worship, we then take on a new image. No longer do we, no longer can we reflect the image of God because we're living in sin.

But now it's not just that we're no longer reflecting the image of God. We begin to reflect something else. We've taken on a new image. It's not that we've just lost God's image in us, but we've actually taken on a new image.

So when people become like something other than God, they have a new form of communion.

Okay? They have a new image, and so they have a new communion.

And the communion can be with whatever it is that they are devoted to. So the idea of image and communion going together in the original creation with God is simply now corrupted by sin.

[23 : 59] But the idea of image and communion still remains the same. They stay together. They stay together in one sense. And so a person who's becoming like what they worship is having communion with the very thing that they're becoming like.

Image and communion in sin, image and communion out of sin with God. And that's the seriousness of the matter. It's not that image is wrong. It's not that communion is wrong.

But when sin corrupts it, then it's wrong. The image of God is beautiful. The image communion with God is great. We ought to be able to notice these differences.

Now, we know that the early church understood that God creates unity by making everyone different. You wouldn't do that. You think that the way to create unity is to make everyone the same. God doesn't do it that way. But he also understands in points 8 to us that the reason we have disunity now is not because we have differences in the world, but rather because what causes those differences.

[25 : 06] The differences that are caused by idolatry causes also a lack of social cohesion. No one can be unified in the worship of idols because if the idols are different and plentiful as they are and people are becoming like them, then you also have a lack of social cohesion.

It is only the image of God and communion with God where he can make everybody different and yet at the same time unify them. So in the fullness of time in Christ where we are clearly all different, yet we will all be united.

So if you were to read Romans as an overview, this is what it would actually teach. That in Romans 1, you have the description of a false worshiper or rather an idol worshiper.

In Romans 12, you have the transformation of that idol worshiper in Romans 1 into a true worshiper, the living God, Romans 12.

And how did that happen? Well, through the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, Romans 5. So if you take Romans as just an overview of what it means to be saved by the gospel, it is to be transformed from an idol worshiper to a true worshiper through Jesus.

[26 : 32] Romans 1, idol worshiper. Romans 12, true worshiper of God. Through the death of Christ, Romans 5. And in Romans 6, out of the new heart that God gives us, we become obedient.

Okay? Worship. Obeying the one that we love. Obeying the one that we follow. There's image and communion now under sin.

Okay? We saw the beauty of image and communion before sin last week. And now we're seeing the horror of image and communion being corrupted by sin.

It is truly horrible. So the place of mission. So the place of mission. God is going to not only deal with those people he made, but he's going to deal with the whole of creation.

So much so that Habakkuk says that the knowledge of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. That doesn't sound like a negative statement to me.

[27 : 38] That sounds like a world full of optimism. And that's spoken by someone who is naturally a pessimistic. Okay? And here I am being corrected by scripture to say that's not how it's going to end.

In the end, everyone's going to know. The whole world will know the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In the fullness of time, all things in heaven and on earth will be united in Christ Jesus.

And we will be like Christ Jesus because when he comes, we will see him as he is. 1 John 3. 1 John 3 makes it abundantly clear that we become like Jesus when we see him.

That is finally, totally become like Jesus. And why do we become like Jesus in 1 John 3? 1 John says because you'll see him as he is. You become like what you worship.

You become like the one you focus on. So all the way through scripture, this idea of what you're devoted to, you become like, is true because that's the way God created us.

[28 : 46] But it's a beautiful thing that has been corrupted by sin. And so that's where the idols creep in. It's a corruption of that image and communion and becoming like what you worship.

So the mission of God is the whole world, the whole universe, heavens and earth. But when it comes to the image of God and communion, this is where the focus is on you.

It is absolutely clear that people must have the new birth. The focus of God's mission in terms of his accomplishment in Christ is, of course, everything in heavens and on earth.

But most importantly, the necessity of the new birth. It is absolutely necessary that people are born again. If they're to escape the coming judgment and if they're to be restored back into the image and, of course, have communion with God.

The gospel takes care of both. Or rather, the accomplishment of Christ that we learn in the gospel takes care of both. He takes care of the image of restoring people back.

[29 : 56] He takes care of the communion. And once he's taking care of those two, he's taking care of the judgment. Okay? And in the cross, Christ is taking care of all of that.

The judgment comes upon him and not upon us. And we receive this righteousness restored back into the image and communion with God. We get to enjoy all of those blessings because of what Christ has accomplished.

So here's the exhortation. If we're to understand the mission of God, which I believe we all do, then we need to really look down hard into Scripture to understand where all of this is going.

Where is God taking the world? And where is God going to take the world long after I'm gone?

Because I know where I'm going when I'm gone. But what's going to happen after I'm gone?

And why should I be concerned about it? Well, God understands the human heart better than anyone else in the world. He understands that the heart can be deceitful above all things.

[31 : 03] And it's impossible for humans to judge other humans because we can't even judge ourselves accurately. God says the heart is deceitful above all things.

God is saying you don't even understand yourself that well. God says the heart is deceitful above all things.

So I want to finish with this as a final, as it were, consideration. You ought to enjoy the world. You ought to enjoy all the things in the world.

Going to the beach. Going for walks. Okay? Driving your car around the countryside. Taking your dogs for a walk. Riding your bike. Whatever it is.

You ought to enjoy all of it. Taking up art classes. Painting a seascape. Whatever it is. You ought to go out and enjoy the world. It's thick and beautiful for you to just take hold of.

[32 : 23] Go and take nice holidays if you can. And if you can, enjoy the world that God has got around you. Just go out and enjoy it. But don't enjoy it too much.

Because remember, the world that's out there that still contains God's common grace, where there is plenty of good things out there, though corrupted by sin, they can still be enjoyed.

But don't enjoy it too much because that's the mission field. That is what God is about to change. And the grace that God gives us enables us to see that that is about to happen.

The grace that God gives us is a grace that enables us to do what God wants us to do in this fallen world. And the grace that we receive in the Lord Jesus Christ is so that our lives would actually produce the very thing that God wants to see in our lives.

That's why God gives us his grace. So here's the warning. Enjoy the world, but not too much. And be careful of a dangerous attitude, one that we see in Scripture.

[33 : 37] Hezekiah developed an attitude, or at least an attitude that was revealed in his life. He's living in the world and he's enjoying it, and why not? There's peace.

But then he's told that it's not going to be quite so good for his children. Your sons are not going to enjoy the peace that you do. In fact, you will enjoy peace, but your sons are going to enjoy anything but peace.

In 2 Kings chapter 20. And after hearing those words, this is what he said. The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good. The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good.

It goes on to say, for he thought, why not, if there will be peace and security in my days? Here's the attitude. Here's the attitude.

Well, when I'm gone, who cares? I won't be around. As long as I've got peace in my day, who cares what comes next? I don't think any of us can afford to have that type of attitude.

[34 : 48] That as long as I can sort of make it through this world, enjoying the peace that I do, I'm not really too concerned about what comes after me. No, no, no, God says.

That's really quite a sinful attitude. And that's the attitude being displayed. It's the person who doesn't care about what will come after them. As long as I get to disengage into the peace that I currently enjoy, I'm not too worried about what my children have to face.

I'm not too worried about what my grandchildren have. It's not my problem. Utterly sinful to have that type of attitude and to think that way. But it's not sinful to enjoy that peace.

It's not sinful to enjoy the peace. It's not sinful to enjoy the world. But it's absolutely awful to take on that attitude of thinking, well, as long as I have it good, I don't care about what comes after me.

So enjoy the world, but don't enjoy it too much. It's God's mission field. And God uses us to declare the very message of accomplishment.

[35 : 57] And the message of accomplishment is the gospel. That Christ Jesus, in the fullness of time, will unite all things because of his life, death, and resurrection.

This is not something that we are to be disengaged in, but rather engaged in mission. Amen. Amen.