

Creation Groans

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In the year 77 AD a man named Pliny set out to do something that had never been accomplished before. To write a book containing all available knowledge of the time.

The worlds first Encyclopedia, titled, *Naturalis Historia*, it was quite an accomplishment. When it was finished, it contained 37 books organized into bound volumes.

It contained information about the various types of plants and animals known to the Romans. Details about the architecture if aqueducts, instructions on how to prepare a solution that could dilate a person's eyes, the correct way to launch a spear from the back of a horse, as well as information about all 7 planets, and explanations for every form of weather from rainbows to tornados.

As you might imagine, given such an undertaking, the pace of the text is quick the descriptions are often scant and the author's own commentary is kept to a relative minimum.

That is except for one section. Book 33. Mining.

Here Pliny seems to really linger in details about the Roman method for extracting Gold from the Earth. And it seems to horrify him.

He wrote: The method of obtaining gold surpasses even the labors of the Giants!

“By the aid of mine shafts driven to a long distance, mountains are excavated by the light of torches. The duration of the torches burning indicates the times for work, the workmen never see the light of day for many months at a time. Sometimes clefts form suddenly, the earth sinks in, and the workmen are crushed beneath.”

“In order to give way, the very earth has to be attacked with iron wedges and hammers. It was generally considered that there is nothing more stubborn in existence than stone—except now indeed we have found something even more stubborn: the greed for gold.”

In closing he says: “The miners seem to gaze upon the collapse of nature as if they were conquerors. And all to satisfy the demands of luxury.”

When I first read Pliny’s words on mining, I felt like I had met a kindred soul, from ages and ages ago. Another who saw with clear eyes what harm greed was doing to the Earth, and shuddered.

It gave me a whole new view of Rome. That empire that I learned all about in Middle School. Somehow it never occurred to me that, of course behind those colossal building projects aqueducts and coliseums. Those vast armies, with weapons and shields. The coins and the lavish food and drink.

Of course, the Earth itself must have suffered for all that. And indeed it did.

Now nothing that the Romans did could compare to the damage we are doing to the Earth now.

We are stripping the planet of its resources and polluting it to an extent that Pliny could not have imagined.

Right around the same time that Pliny was working away at his *Naturalis Historia*, Paul wrote his letter to the Romans.

The letter is something of a theological treatise, laying out what Paul considered to be the basics of the Christian message. And the short passage that we heard today comes right near the middle of the text, and is something of a rhetorical turning point.

Up until now, Paul has been talking in words that would be quite familiar to us, about how individual people are captive to Sin. He sets up a contrast between those whose allegiance is to the present order of things, and those who he calls “Children of God” who have been reborn through baptism into a new life.

His rhetoric crescendos, saying that we have all been captives of the way things are. The habits that turn a blind eye to the poor, that ignore the cries of the oppressed, that give a wide berth to the demands of the empire.

He tells us though that Christ has set us free from this order, to live in a new way, to be free from fear, and to live in righteousness working together to create a new kind of community, for the glory of God.

And I think the vast majority of Christian theology has been formed as a reflection of those ideas. And at the same time, the vast majority of Christian theology seems to have stopped reading there.

But Paul continues.

He says: “And it’s not just us. Creation itself was subjected the order of sin and death.”

“Creation” Paul writes. “Has been groaning. Has been waiting. For the Children of God.”

All creation groans. The Earth. The planet. Is, Paul says, is in “bondage to decay.”

Paul traveled around a lot. He spent most of his life on the roads between the great cities. And he spent a good deal of time in prison. He saw the outskirts of Roman life. The places left hidden behind the veneer of great feasts and triumphant processions.

And I believe too that he saw the scarred Earth, that had been torn open by Roman greed. And he knew, in that moment, that the power of evil in the world was not just enslaving people, but enslaving the very planet, for it's own purposes.

It is not just people that are captive to the way things are. It's everything. All of creation. The very Earth.

So it turns out this problem is much older. And much deeper. Than perhaps we had realized.

Although Roman tools could not do the damage we have done. Their same logic lives in our minds as well. The Earth is here for us. To do as we please. A resource to supply not only our need, but even for our greed.

You may have heard, as I have, some voices in this struggle against climate change and environmental destruction that have very little

hope. They have seen the data. They have experienced the political impasse firsthand. And they have all but resigned themselves to sounding an alarm that none seem to hear.

But Paul's letter, for all the pain it expresses. Begins. And ends. With hope.

"I consider that the suffering of the present time do not compare to the glory that is coming" He says. "Creation," he says, "will be set free from its bondage and will obtain the freedom of the children of God."

That is to say that the very same way that Christ has made us heirs of God's love, children of God, transformed, freed from the present order, set to make a new way.

In the very same way the world itself will be freed from the present order of things, given the same freedom that we find as Children of God's love.

Creation is waiting. Paul says. "Waiting with eager longing for the Children of God"

Why, because it is the children of God who have been set free from the logic of the way things have been. The children of God who have been liberated from bondage to the futile view that the earth is nothing more than a trove of riches for our benefit.

The children of God, who have learned that they owe allegiance to God alone, and who have been given courage by Christ's deathless love to defy even the most powerful empires in the world.

The children of God, who have awoken to the fact that the logic of the empire is a lie. And who know that the Earth is God's.

We groan inwardly, Paul says, seeking God.

All creation groans too. Paul says. But not just any groan.

“All creation groans *in labor pains*”

Not, a groan of complaint from the sidelines. Not a self-indulgent groan of frustration. Not the hopeless groan of giving up.

A creative groan. The groan of hard-won new-life.

Scripture says, what’s missing is us. The children of God. The one’s who have been set free from seeing the world through the eyes of greed.

Us. The ones who have been freed to know that first and foremost Earth is God’s beautiful creation.

Us. The ones whose Lord defeated even death, so that we need not be afraid, even to do difficult things, make challenging changes, face up to hard truths.

What's missing is us.

The Earth is waiting for, is longing, is expecting, us.

