

## GROANING FOR GLORY

### Chorus of groans

When someone groans, it's not a pleasing sound. When you hear a groan, you know that someone is either hurting or exhausted. You wouldn't think you're listening to something beautiful. If you hear three groans at the same time, you'd be inclined to cover your ears.

In Romans 8:18-30, we hear three groans: the groans of creation, the groans of God's people and the groans of the Holy Spirit. Yet in this passage, the groans harmonize to create a beautiful song. The suffering of life causes you to groan, if only in your spirit. But you too, if you belong to Jesus Christ, are part of the chorus, and your groans enhance the song of Romans 8.

This passage, with the exception of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, has influenced my worldview more than any other. Give me one chapter to study and teach, and I'd pick Luke 15. Give me another chapter, and I'd choose Romans 8. Paul's audacious vision of what God is doing in the world has sustained me and stirred my imagination. "On a Clear Day, You Can See Forever" was the title of a Broadway musical. It would be also be a good title for Romans 8:18-30, a passage in which we can see God's plan for his people and his creation.

Paul is expanding on his contention in verse 17 that we are heirs with Christ "if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him." As such, Paul frames the passage with words concerning glorification in verses 18 and 30 and fills it with words concerning suffering.

So, how can groans be beautiful?

Romans 8:18-30:

*<sup>18</sup>For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup>For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. <sup>23</sup>And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. <sup>24</sup>For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.*

*<sup>26</sup>In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; <sup>27</sup>and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. <sup>28</sup>And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to purpose. <sup>29</sup>For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be*

*conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; <sup>30</sup>and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.*

## **Creation groans**

Present suffering would seem to contradict the promise of future glory. Paul, however, believes that suffering is not only integral to future glory but also unworthy of comparison to future glory. The degree of suffering, no matter how severe, is not nearly as bad as the glory is great.

Glory concerns the true—and impressive—nature of someone that demands recognition. In particular, rulers were said to have glory. Our true nature, which is currently hidden in Christ, will be revealed, first of all to us, so that we might assume our God-ordained place as rulers over the earth alongside Christ, our king (Colossians 3:1-4).<sup>1</sup>

Our future glory is so great that even subhuman creation can be depicted as waiting for it with great eagerness. Future glory involves the “revealing of the sons of God.” Our true nature will be revealed not only to us but to creation so that we perfectly bear the image of God and reflect his splendor as his sons—as his kings and queens who rule wisely over creation.

Why is creation so eager? First, because it wants to be a witness to greatness. But second, and more importantly, the revealing of the sons of God bears upon creation. When humanity rebelled against God, he subjected creation to futility. The ground produced thorns and thistles and became subject to decay. When humans fell, creation fell. If humans ignore God’s revelation of himself in creation so that they do not honor the Creator but instead become “futile in their speculations” and even worship creation, then creation too will experience futility (Romans 1:20-23). The rulers of creation became foolish and therefore unable to rule wisely. Humans are unable to bring God’s justice, peace and love to every corner of creation, so creation is frustrated. Therefore, creation is out of harmony with its Creator. Earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes and other natural disasters are indicative of this. Creation can be futile—devastatingly so—in its power.<sup>2</sup>

But it is hopeful, because it knows, based on God’s promises, that its current state is not its final state. It will not be discarded; it will be renewed. We suspected as much, didn’t we? The crash of a wave, the colors of a sunset and the grandeur of mountain peaks speak to our hearts of eternity. In Romans 5-8, Paul has reworked the Exodus story to show that the people of God, having been released from sin, are moving through the wilderness of this creation toward the new creation. Now he says that creation, in bondage to decay, awaits its own exodus. It too wants “the freedom of the glory of the children of God”—that is, the freedom it will experience when God’s children are glorified. Creation wants to be a new creation. It will become a new creation when humans begin ruling it with godly wisdom. Creation, which is worshiped by humanity to the detriment of both creation and humanity, will be liberated when the sons of God worship their Creator.

Therefore, creation is on tiptoe, craning its neck in anticipation for the sons of God to be completed, for the church to be the church, for you to be you. The purpose of our salvation is not, as often supposed, that we might escape this world but that the world, including all creation, might be healed.

In Harry Middleton's book "The Earth Is Enough," he describes growing up in the Ozarks under the tutelage of two old men, Emerson and Albert, who would meet monthly with the local pastor, Conrad Biddle. The two men were devoted to the land they inhabited, farmed and enjoyed, but they had no interest in God—hence the title, "The Earth Is Enough." The pastor, who enjoyed a wonderful friendship with the old men, implored them to be reconciled to God so that they could go to heaven. One day, Albert told the pastor:

*I like this world. It's home. Why would I want to spend eternity somewhere else, skipping about in a white dress and strumming a harp? What kind of a Paradise is that, anyway? Perhaps the only thing that is eternal is eternity. This harp business really bothers me, brother Biddle. You know I'm a harmonica man. Is there a place in heaven for a man that plays the blues? What's Satan's side of all this? What's he offering? Does hell have a blues band?*

One evening, Albert took the pastor by the arm and led him out his back porch and down to the creek. The author remembers:

*A film of yellow moonlight shimmered on the water. A coyote howled in the distance. Albert stopped, put his big hand on Biddle's bent shoulders, and said softly, "Welcome, brother Conrad, to the Kingdom of God. You stand at heaven's gate. Won't you enter?"*<sup>3</sup>

Biddle had no answer for the two men, because he conceived of the afterlife as having nothing to do with the earth. Paul, on the other hand, believes the afterlife has everything to do with the earth. He would affirm the men's devotion to the land. Everything that the two old men loved about it will remain—and be enhanced.

Paul explains both the present and future states of creation by not only depicting it as a person but as female. Creation is like an expectant mother. The different parts of creation groan together in painful anticipation. Creation wants to give birth to a new creation.

### **God's people groan**

In harmony with creation, we groan because of our sorry but hopeful condition. This condition is made evident to us by the Holy Spirit, who is described as "the first fruits of the Spirit." For Israel, the first part of the harvest was the guarantee of more to come. In the same way, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives guarantees our glorification, which is sometimes imaged in the scriptures as a harvest.

Although Paul said in verses 15-17 that God has already adopted us into his family, the full implications of our adoption have not been realized. Therefore, Paul can say that we wait eagerly for our adoption, which involves the redemption of our bodies. Our bodies, just like creation, are subject to decay. As people, we've been redeemed. God has already effected the new Exodus. But our bodies have not yet been redeemed. Therefore, we wait for a bodily exodus. Our bodies will not be destroyed; they will be resurrected. They will be both similar and dissimilar to the bodies we have now. They will be human bodies, animated by the Spirit and suited to the new age (1 Corinthians

15:45-49). We are, therefore, in N.T. Wright's memorable phrase, "a shadow of our future selves."<sup>4</sup>

Paul is speaking of the dignity of the human body, not to mention the dignity of creation. Everything that God created is good. Nothing God created is to be trashed. Because creation and our bodies are destined for redemption, we should not exploit them but instead treat them with the dignity God assigns to them.

All of us who have believed the gospel did so in the confident hope that this world and everything in it—what we already see—is not all there is. God saved us for something beyond what we can see now, something beyond this age. The suffering, decay and death of humans in this world led us to want something more. Embracing the gospel, we now hope for what we do not see: our inheritance, which consists of the new creation, and our new bodies. Even our best moments here are just that—moments. They pass as quickly as they come and leave us wanting. Our hope is not simply that we can get new bodies so that we can be relieved of whatever we don't like about our current versions; our hope is that our renewed bodies will enable us to fulfill God's purpose for us in the new creation. The greatness of our hope, made evident to us by the Holy Spirit, inspires both patience and eagerness in the face of suffering. It is worth waiting for.

We may like to think that the Spirit would enable us to live groan-free lives. On the contrary: We groan precisely because we have the Spirit. The Spirit gives us a taste of the future, the first fruits, which cause us to long for the full harvest. We live in the wilderness with a taste of the Promised Land. Suffering, therefore, is a sign of hope.

### **The Spirit groans**

For now, though, we experience weakness, which includes suffering. It also includes incomplete knowledge. We "know" that creation and we ourselves want for something more (verses 22-23), but we don't know what the content of our prayers should be. We don't know what to pray for in order that God's purposes might be advanced, culminating in the glorification of the people of God and the birth of the new creation. In the end, we have to admit that we're not that smart. We can't begin to factor in, let alone anticipate, all the variables. In short, we're not omniscient.

Paul allows us to see the consummation of the new age. We can peer into the future and see the finished painting. But we don't know how the Artist will apply the brush strokes. With incomplete knowledge, we may be inclined to prefer a particular brush stroke that would ruin the painting if it were applied. Or, to use another metaphor, we may be inclined to pray for the removal of an obstacle that God would use as a stepping stone to advance his purposes.

So the Spirit helps us in our sorry but hopeful—and ignorant—state: He "intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."<sup>5</sup> God himself searches our hearts with his Holy Spirit. We don't even know what's in the depths of our hearts, but the Spirit does. He must see something beautiful there, for he brings what he has found to the Father. At the bottom of your heart the Spirit of God finds not dirt but gold.

The Spirit, knowing the intricacies of God's will, is able to intercede before God in a way that we can't. The Spirit unites our pain and hope with the purposes of God. Whereas we may be ineffective in prayer, because of our ignorance, the Spirit is not.

When my mother was dying, I was in so much pain that I couldn't pray. But I've never seen so many answered prayers in my life. Others prayed for me. I have to believe, based on this text, that the Spirit interceded for me as well.

Creation groans. As the people of God within creation, we ourselves groan. Where is God? So far away that he can't hear the groans? Hearing the groans, but unwilling, or perhaps unable, to respond? As Paul might word it, may it never be! We groan and hope that God will hear the groans. In actuality, God is searching our hearts in order to groan with us. Where we are frustrated, he works deeply. The Holy Spirit enters the depths of our hearts in order to add his own harmony to the chorus of pain and hope.

As the wilderness people of God, each of us is, and all of us together are, the tabernacle of God, his dwelling place.<sup>6</sup> What took place in the tabernacle? People prayed. So we pray. And we find that the Spirit is not only residing in us but also interceding for us. We also find that our hearts play host to the dialogue between the Father and the Spirit as the Triune God resonates with our pain and hope in order to work out his eternal purposes for humanity and creation. From within us, God is groaning to God. We are not only the dwelling place of God, we are also the groaning place of God. We are the place where the Spirit is expressing God's agony and love for a wounded world.

Words fail us, but God doesn't. We are weak, but he is strong.

### **God's good purpose**

We may not know what to pray for, but if the Spirit is interceding for us according to the will of God, we can know that "God causes all things to work together for good." The Spirit's effective intercession prompts God to make something beautiful of the ugliness of this world, particularly the suffering in it.<sup>7</sup>

God turns even evil into good for "those who love him," who are also defined as "those who are called according to his purpose." These appellations for the people of God were first applied to Israel of old. Those who love God, in Spirit-inspired response to him, have fulfilled the most important part of the Mosaic Law, demonstrating that the Spirit dwells in them and that they are members of the new covenant people of God. (Deuteronomy 6:5, Romans 2:29). The new people of God, like Israel of old, are called according to God's purpose (Exodus 19:5-6).

Verse 28, however, leaves us with two questions: 1) What is good? 2) What is God's purpose? Combining the two questions leaves us with one question: What is God's good purpose? The preceding context would lead us to conclude that it has something to do with the glorification of God's people and the liberation of God's creation. Such a conclusion is borne out by verses 29-30, where Paul explains why we know that God causes all things to work together for God.

We can be confident of the fulfillment of God's good purpose because of God's disposition and actions toward us: He foreknew us, he predestined us, he called us, he justified us and he glorified us. Each of these dispositions and actions is like a link in an unbreakable chain that ensures the success of God's good purpose.

God's foreknowledge of us, which preceded not only our birth but the foundation of the world, is his loving disposition toward us. Our knowledge that God causes all things to work together for good is based on God's foreknowledge. The next link is predestination, in which God determined to put his loving disposition toward us into action. He did so through his effective call of us in the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14). In

justifying those who responded in faith to the gospel, he declared them to be his people. Our future glorification is so certain that Paul can say, in a rhetorical way, that those who have been justified in the present have already been glorified.

What is God's good purpose, the success of which is guaranteed? It's that we might become "conformed to the image of his Son," which will further result in Christ's being "the firstborn among many brethren."

Since sin invaded the world, humanity has not borne the image of God as it once did: "For all of have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). But the Son of God bears the image flawlessly (2 Corinthians 4:4, Colossians 3:15). God will bring to completion his plan to restore us as his image bearers so that we, like Christ in his humanity, perfectly reflect the glory of God and reign over his creation with wisdom. God uses everything that happens to us now, particularly suffering, to bring about this good purpose.

The most powerful "image" of the Son of God depicts him hanging on a cross. It tore Christ apart—quite literally—when he sought to bring the pain of the world and the love of God together. If we are to be conformed to the image of God's Son, we will suffer in many ways, but particularly as we suffer as he did: going to places of pain—sometimes in person, sometimes in prayer—in the name of love. And if you feel that you are being torn apart, like God is pulling in one direction and the wounded world is pulling in the other, you're in good company. The cross, as God's Son died on it, became the image of God's love for a wounded world. Now we are bearing that image along with him.

By suffering ourselves, we will know "the fellowship of his sufferings" and will be "conformed to his death" (Philippians 3:10). We "suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him." Even now, we are being conformed to the image of God's Son (2 Corinthians 3:18). We're becoming more human, if you will.

What, then, does God finally ordain for his Son and for us as his children? He wants Christ to be the "firstborn among many brethren"—that is, he wants his Son to have pre-eminence in his family. When we have been so thoroughly conformed to the image of God's Son so that even our bodies look like his after his resurrection, then our adoption will be complete. God wants his Son to have many brothers and sisters with whom to share perfect family fellowship in his new creation.

To our ears, the groans sound like groans. We must remind ourselves that the Maestro isn't finished yet.

### **Bowing and rising in worship**

God takes the groaning of creation, the groaning of his people and the groaning of his Spirit and he creates a new world. We suffer and groan, but because of Romans 8, we do so with patience and eagerness, knowing that God's purpose is being worked out for us, our world and our part in the world. To see behind the scenes into what God is doing, to understand where everything is headed, to believe that God will redeem every evil and to appreciate that we are bound together with all creation and the Holy Spirit in God's plan to bring healing to the cosmos is to find ourselves compelled to bow in worship before our Creator and Redeemer.

Bowing in worship, we know we cannot stay there. We must also rise in worship. Knowing how the story ends is no reason to sit around and wait for it to end. Knowing how the story ends, we know what the story is about. We know what we're about. One

day, in a great and grand and eternal adventure, we will bring God's justice, peace and love to every square inch of creation. That's what we will be doing. That's also what we should be doing.

This is the divine mandate and the human dream, what God calls us to and motivates us to do. Indeed, he gives us the Spirit, the first fruits of the new creation, to empower us to bring his justice, peace and love to the world, both creation and the people who inhabit it. The new age has broken in to this age. The kingdom of God is among you. God places his church in the middle of his creation that it might be a sign of the future. In some way, the future is now so that what we do in this world impacts the new world.

Can we hear the groans, both of creation and our fellow humans? Then it is incumbent on us, as the church of Jesus Christ, with the Spirit's direction and empowerment, to do something. Some will be sensitive to the groans of the environment. Others will be sensitive to the groans of the poor, the weak or the hurting. Some, feeling what the rest of us can't comprehend, will be drawn to the arts and connect us more deeply with pain and hope. Some will be unable to do anything more than pray, which means that they're capable of great things. With God, all things are possible. All of us, if we're sensitive to our essential humanity, will want to do something. Because each of us is unique, we each express the divine mandate and human dream differently. That means that whatever it is God is calling you to do, it's something no one else can do.

I have a friend who had a painful relationship with his father. In his 40s, as a single man, he saw a television feature on the orphans of Romania. He prayed, "Lord, if you want me to go there and love those babies, I will." He discerned that the Lord wanted him to do precisely that. He moved to Romania to be near an orphanage. He spent most of his days holding babies. Yes, William groaned because of a painful childhood. But he became so sensitive to the groans of children that he could hear them from across an ocean. He who essentially had no father, he who had no children of his own, became a father to dozens of children who had been abandoned by their parents. To love those babies the way he did—it's something only he could do.

A few years ago William came to visit me. He spoke of the squalid conditions in Romania. As we were walking in downtown Palo Alto, we entered the courtyard of a gorgeous, Mediterranean-styled hotel. I asked him what he thought of it. I half-expected him to launch into a tirade against Western decadence. Instead, with eyes and voice that conveyed deep longing, he turned to me and said, "My eyes delight in it." William, I think, was groaning: for himself, for those babies in Romania, for the world. But he had not lost his capacity to appreciate beauty. In fact, it had been deepened. He was groaning not just in pain but in hope. He was groaning for a new world, a beautiful world, a world that would delight his eyes and his heart.

We are the wilderness people of God, suffering and groaning, praying and laboring, on the road to the Promised Land, knowing that God is accomplishing his beautiful purpose. We do so as a family, together with our Brother, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

## **Hear the song**

Creation groans. We groan. The Spirit groans. We're all groaning to give birth to a new world. Together, at the direction of the great Maestro, the voices harmonize to sing

the song of the new world. If you listen carefully to Romans 8, you can hear that song. And if you can hear it, you can tune your life to it.

If ever a performance came close to penetrating the heart of Romans 8:18-30, it's the musical "Les Miserables," based on Victor Hugo's novel. Near the end of the first act, the revolutionaries, hoping to create a new France, set up a barricade and sing:

*Do you hear the people sing?  
Singing the song of angry men?  
It is the music of a people  
Who will not be slaves again!  
When the beating of your heart  
Echoes the beating of the drums  
There is a life about to start  
When tomorrow comes!  
Will you join in our crusade?  
Who will be strong and stand with me?  
Beyond the barricade  
Is there a world you long to see?  
Then join in the fight  
That will give you the right to be free.*

Their revolution, however, barely lasts the night. Through it all, their song is transformed in the finale. Beyond the grave, to the same tune and with some of the same words, they sing not just of a new France but of a new world. It's no longer "the song of angry men":

*Do you hear the people sing  
Lost in the valley of the night?  
It is the music of a people  
Who are climbing to the light.  
For the wretched of the earth  
There is a flame that never dies  
Even the darkest night will end  
And the sun will rise  
They will live again in freedom  
In the garden of the Lord  
They will walk behind the plough-share  
They will put away the sword  
The chain will be broken  
And all men will have their reward.  
Will you join in our crusade?  
Who will be strong and stand with me?  
Somewhere beyond the barricade  
Is there a world you long to see?  
Do you hear the people sing  
Say, do you hear the distant drums?  
It is the future that they bring*

*When tomorrow comes!*<sup>8</sup>

May we hear the song and join the chorus so that the world may know that a new world is coming.

Scott Grant / 7-9-06

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<sup>1</sup> God created humans in his image, as his representatives on earth in order to have dominion over it (Genesis 1:26-28). God put the first man in the garden “to cultivate and keep it” (Genesis 2:15).

<sup>2</sup> In the story of Israel, the fate of the land is tied to the faithfulness of the people (Leviticus 26:3-4, 43; 2 Chronicles 36:20-21).

<sup>3</sup> Harry Middleton, *The Earth Is Enough*, © 1989 by Harry Middleton, Simon and Schuster, New York. Pp. 228-29.

<sup>4</sup> N.T. Wright used this phrase during a lecture at the Regent College Pastors Conference in May 1999.

<sup>5</sup> “In the same way” the Spirit helps our weakness. The last reference to the Spirit was in verse 16. Paul seems to be saying that the Spirit, who “testifies with our spirit that we are children of God,” helps us in a similar manner by interceding for us.

<sup>6</sup> The Spirit intercedes on behalf of, literally, the “holy ones,” who are akin to God’s holy tabernacle, in the wilderness, and later his holy temple, in the Promised Land.

<sup>7</sup> The words “all things” in verse 29 are also used in connection with the suffering of God’s people in verses 35-37: “But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer.”

<sup>8</sup> Lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer, *Les Miserables*, © 2005 Cameron Mackintosh Overseas Limited.