

# GROANING FOR GLORY

SERIES: BOUND FOR GLORY



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Romans 8:18-27  
Third Message  
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*Romans 8:18-27*

When someone groans, it's not a pleasing sound. 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 8:18-27, we hear three groans: the groans of creation, the groans of God's people, and the groans of the Holy Spirit. Even so, the groans harmonize to create a beautiful chorus. The suffering of life causes you to groan, if only in your spirit. Have you suffered? Are you suffering? If you belong to Jesus Christ, you are part of the chorus, and your groans enhance the song of Romans 8.

Paul's audacious, Spirit-inspired vision of what God is doing in the world has sustained me and stirred my imagination. I once preached Romans 8:18-30 to a church of no more than a dozen people in India, and it was one of the most powerful preaching experiences of my life. Paul sees—and allows us to see—God's plan for his people and his creation.

Paul is expanding on his contention in Romans 8:17 that we are heirs with Christ “provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” As such, Paul frames Romans 8:18-30 with words concerning glorification in verses 18 and 30 and fills it with words concerning suffering.

How is it that we who believe in Christ suffer with him, or share in his sufferings? The word translated “suffer” conveys deep emotions. It can convey passion, deep desires. One of the ways that Jesus suffered was by being denied something that he wanted deeply.

When he came to Jerusalem, he lamented, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37) Jesus wanted to gather Jerusalem, but Jerusalem didn't want him. He wept over Jerusalem, Luke tells us (Luke 19:41). He desperately wanted something good, and he suffered for wanting it and for not getting it.

One of the ways we suffer with Christ is by wanting something good and not getting it. For example, I know so many people in this church who want desperately for their loved ones to come to Christ or return to Christ. They're suffering with Christ, who also wants their loved ones to come to him.

So, how can groans be beautiful? This week, we will consider the groans of creation, the groans of the people of God, and the groans of the Holy Spirit. Next week, in Romans 8:28-30, we'll see how the groans harmonize to create a beautiful chorus.

## Not worth comparing

**Romans 8:18:**

**For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.**

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>

Even if you suffered nonstop for a hundred years, what is that compared to eternity, years that never end?

## Creation groans

**Romans 8:19-22:**

**For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the**

**creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.**

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 also to creation so that we perfectly bear the image of God and reflect his splendor as his sons and daughters—as his rulers who rule wisely over creation.

Why is creation so eager? First, because it wants to witness greatness. Second, and more importantly, the revealing of the sons of God affects 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 thinking” 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 creation, so creation is frustrated. Therefore, creation is out of harmony with its Creator. Earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, droughts, and other so-called “natural disasters” are indicative of this. I’ve been to places, as have many of you, where you never see sun, moon, or stars through the polluted skies. A pandemic indicates that creation is out of harmony with its creator.<sup>2</sup> Creation is groaning. Can you hear it?

## **Creation hopes**

Yes, creation groans, but it is also hopeful, because it knows, based on God’s promises, that its current state is not its final state. 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. Our Japanese maple, now in full bloom, speaks to me every day, especially as I work on these Romans 8 sermons in our backyard. Especially now, as we shelter in place, as people long for nature and are more appreciative of what they experience in nature, creation speaks to us.

One family in our church, the Thongs, was transfixed by hummingbird activity in their backyard this spring. Michelle writes of their experience:

*The Easter season was a heavy, uneasy one with shelter in place and news of Covid-19 progressing. It was difficult for us to feel any tangible sense of joy and hope until God brought us the hummingbird. We enjoyed watching the mother bird building her nest and resting right outside in the patio. Her nest was right on top of a light bulb. Our focus and attention quickly turned to the little humming bird babies on the Easter Sunday. Daily we watched them eat and grow: Albert set up a webcam so we could watch their every move without scaring them. We read a lot online and we were amazed how beautifully and wonderfully they were created.*

*When the big day came, they fluttered their fledgling wings and took off—leaving us to wonder whether they were strong enough to cope with the real world. We were excited and yet heartbroken at the same time. We watched the nest for the next two days, secretly hoping they would return.*

*Since that day they have returned and visited on a few occasions—giving us the reassurance that they are doing well. We praise the Lord for he is the creator of all things, including hummingbirds, and that he cared so much about us to bring his beautiful creation into our lives when we longed to be out there in nature but couldn’t. When we were lost, he drew close to us in a very tangible way.*

Creation speaks to us of transcendence: it speaks to us of its creator; it speaks to us of eternity.

## **Like a mother**

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 corruption, 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 and daughters 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.

Paul explains both the present and future states of creation by not only depicting it as a person but also 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. Some of you (mothers!) can relate to this illustration better than the rest of us. (This is an interesting text for Mother's Day, don't you think?)

The pandemic then, of all things, is a sign of hope: it's a sign that creation will give birth to a new creation.

Creation groans, but it groans hopefully. We also groan.

## We groan

**Romans 8:23-25:**

**And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.**

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 firstfruits 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 pictured 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 corruption, including corruption by viruses. 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. Instead, they will be redeemed; 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>3</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.

## Special hours

When shelter in place began, I decided to take advantage of special morning shopping hours for those who are more than sixty years old (I'm *slightly* more than sixty). When I was about to enter the store at 8:30 a.m., one of the workers stopped me and said something like, "Excuse me sir, this is only for people sixty and over." I said something like, "Oh, thank you, but I'm more than sixty." He apologized and let me through (he didn't need to apologize!). I was thinking about this text and also thinking, "Hey, I won't be needing that new body for quite some time!"

A few days later, I shopped at another store during regular hours, and when I was checking out, the checker was kind enough to inform me that if I wanted to come back some other day, the store had special hours for its more "experienced" shoppers, those with a little more "wisdom." I thanked him (but didn't feel much like thanking him!). Well, I guess I'll take that new body right about now.

Jack Kerouac writes in *On the Road*, "The one thing that we yearn for in our living days, that makes us sigh and groan and undergo sweet nauseas of all kinds, is the remembrance of some lost bliss that was probably experienced in the womb and can only be reproduced (though we hate to admit it) in death. But who wants to die?"<sup>4</sup>

There's the groaning, with a little nonsense thrown in, but where's the hope?

## We hope

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. What we hope for 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 firstfruits, which cause us to long for the full harvest. We live in the wilderness with a taste of the Promised Land. For the people of God, suffering is a sign of hope.

## Pointing to heaven

Professor and writer Gary Selby writes not only of groaning for what's been lost but also of groaning in a hopeful way:

*I have a sweet recollection from when my boys were small of the time we went sledding on a hill behind one of those big-box stores in the town where we lived. Over and over we would climb up the hill, pile onto the saucer, and laughing with glee fly down again. Looking back, I miss that moment dearly, and it is painful to realize that whatever other good comes to me in my life I will never go back to that time. It's gone forever. I am learning to embrace it, to give thanks for the glad moment and for my rich memory of it, even though the remembering is tinged with sadness. But I also realize that the experience and the memory are pointing me to heaven, and to the eternal life that I will know there. And so I look back, but in order to look ahead, with hope.*<sup>5</sup>

There's the groaning *and* the hope.

Creation groans. We also groan. As God's creation and God's people both groan, where, pray tell, is God?

## The Spirit groans

Romans 8:26-27:

**Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. 27 And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.**

For now, we experience weakness, which includes suffering. It also includes incomplete knowledge. We “know” that creation and we ourselves want for something more, 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>6</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 the Father's will, is able to intercede before the Father 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.

During our March 15 worship service, I prayed that the Lord would stop the spread of the coronavirus immediately. I even sensed a call to pray this way. I know that God will vanquish it eventually—indeed, one day

he will vanquish everything evil—but I asked that he would do so that day. He did not answer my prayer—at least in the way I wanted him to answer it. What do I do with that?

## Where is God?

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.

How good does it feel when someone comes to you and stays with you in your pain? The Spirit is with you in your pain and never leaves you.

As the wilderness people of God, each of us is, and all of us together are, the tabernacle of God, his dwelling place.<sup>7</sup> What took place in the tabernacle? People prayed. So we pray.

Moreover, 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. How often do you not know what to pray for? Be encouraged: the Spirit knows. He intercedes for you.

When I prayed that God would stop the spread of the coronavirus immediately, I trust the Spirit was searching my heart, going to a deeper place than I can go, finding things there that I wasn't even aware of and bringing them to the Father. I trust that the Spirit is doing the same thing in my heart right now and in the hearts of all those believe in Christ. I trust that God is making and will make something beautiful of the Spirit's intercession.

## Moment of recognition

What comes of all this groaning? Romans 8:18-30 is clear: God takes the groaning of his creation, the groaning of his people, and the groaning of his Spirit and he glorifies his people and he glorifies his creation. Together, at the direction of the great Maestro, the groans harmonize to sing the song of a new world.

If you listen carefully to Romans 8, you can hear that song. And if you can hear it, then you can dance to it. In the present, you can dance to the music of the future. You can groan, but you can also hope.

I have a friend who began suffering from dementia about twelve years ago, when he was about fifty. Don, who was best man in my wedding twenty years ago, lives on the Central Coast, and I try to visit him every six months or so. In recent times, I've wondered if he even recognizes me anymore. Don and I have shared such rich times together since we came to Christ as teenagers, but now all he can do is sit by as I talk to his wife and son and look on quizzically.

I groan. Julie groans. Their children groan. Who knows whether Don even knows enough to groan?

Normally, I'd be visiting him right about now, but like the rest of you, I'm sheltering in place. On Easter Sunday, though, Julie put Don in front of their television, and they tuned in to the PBC livestream worship service. Julie took a photo of him while he was watching the service and texted it to me. She said that when Don saw me on the screen—to preach about the resurrection of Christ, which portends our future resurrection—he smiled and pointed at me.

I texted back one word: "Awesome!"

To me, Don was not only pointing at the guy he recognized on the screen, and somehow summoning up the good times we've shared, he was also pointing to the future, to the time when God will make all things new. On that day, Don will be all he was and then some. He was looking at me. He was smiling. He was pointing. It was almost as if he were telling me, "Can you see?"

By all means, groan. But don't forget to hope!

## Endnotes

- <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> N.T. Wright used this phrase during a lecture at the Regent College Pastors Conference in May 1999.
- <sup>4</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (London: Penguin Classics, 1999)..
- <sup>5</sup> Gary Selby, *Pursing an Earthy Spirituality: C.S. Lewis and Incarnational Faith* (Downers Grove, ILL: IVP Academic, 2019), 178.
- <sup>6</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>7</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.