

Groaning

Romans 8:18-27

© Jun 16th, 2024 by Rev. Rick Goettsche SERIES: Romans

I am often amazed when I watch young children. It's fun to watch them learn, it's fun to see their energy. One of the things that I find myself most amazed by is the fact that they can fall asleep in the most contorted of positions. Most of us have seen a child fall asleep in a car seat or high chair completely slumped over and twisted into the craziest possible position! What probably the most shocking to me is the fact that they can wake up with seemingly no ill effects from doing so!

I still consider myself to be a fairly young man, but I have reached the stage of life where I can be in pain all day long just from sleeping in the slightly wrong position. If I tried to sleep in the same positions that small children do, I'd be down for the count!

I suspect most of you can relate to this fact. As we get older, our bodies don't seem to move the way they once did. Getting out of bed in the morning or getting out of a chair seems to result in us making more noise than it used to. Usually there are creaks and cracks that accompany such movements, and those are also often accompanied by a groan as we try to overcome the stiffness that has set into our bodies.

This morning, we are going to look at a passage where the Apostle Paul speaks to this tendency toward groaning. He is going to identify the cause of groaning of all sorts. Paradoxically, he shows us that the groanings we see all around us should encourage us to keep going as we look forward to the day when our groanings will cease.

The Glory That's Coming

Last week we saw that if we are to share in Christ's glory, we will also share in his suffering. The temptation would be to get discouraged by this fact, but Paul seeks to change our focus in verse 18.

¹⁸ Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. (Romans 8:18, NLT)

Paul reminds us that no matter what we might face in this life, those things will be eclipsed by what we will experience in the life to come. This is his thesis for the succeeding verses.

We know Paul does not say these things lightly. He had been frequently beaten, imprisoned, and people had tried to kill him and left him for dead. We know he also spent time shipwrecked, snakebitten, and ultimately executed, though these things all likely occurred after he had written these words. So Paul was not saying this flippantly—this was the truth to which he was clinging! He was propelled forward by his confidence that what awaited him would be worth whatever hardships he faced here and now.

Creation

Paul then begins to explain that we are not alone in waiting for this deliverance. He speaks of three groups that groan. The first is the groaning we see in the created world.

¹⁹ For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. ²⁰ Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, ²¹ the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. ²² For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. (Romans 8:19-22, NLT)

Paul says that all creation was subjected to God's curse against its will, and as a result, is eagerly awaiting the day when God will reveal who His children really are. If you're not familiar with this concept, this statement might catch you off guard.

The garden of Eden was a bountiful garden, lush and beautiful. Everything was perfect; it was quite literally paradise. But then sin entered the world through Adam and Eve. Not only were Adam and Eve cursed because of sin, but so were the animals, the crops, and even the ground! Everything we see today is marked by the curse of sin.

We see it in the fact that animals and crops die. We see it in the fact that nothing (except weeds!) seems to grow readily. Anything we want to grow requires hard work and constant tending. We see it in the fact that we experience natural disasters: droughts, floods, earthquakes, storms, and the like. We see it in the fact that everything decays and breaks down over time. Everything is gradually falling apart, even our own planet! None of this was intended to be part of the created order.

Paul describes the inanimate creation groaning, longing for the time when things will be restored to their rightful order. The creation itself didn't ask for this, it didn't do anything to deserve it, and Paul seems to be saying that even the created world knows this isn't the way it should be, and it longs for the time when God will return and restore things to their rightful state.

Paul uses the analogy of childbirth to demonstrate what this groaning is like. In childbirth, a mother groans as she bears the burden of carrying and then delivering the child (note that even this was part of the curse of sin). But even though the groaning may be intense, there are two important elements of it we need to note.

First, the groaning has an end. As the time draws near for the child to be born, mothers are often counting the days until they will deliver, and they are usually even eager for the child to arrive early. They know that the pain of childbearing will not last forever, but there is an end in sight.

Second, the groaning is hopeful. We know the pain and suffering that goes into bearing children. So why do women still choose to get pregnant? And why do some women, knowing exactly what to expect, go through the process multiple times? Because they know where it leads. They know that despite all the pain, suffering, and

frustration of carrying and birthing (and raising!) a child, it is all worth it once they hold that child in their arms.

If we take this concept back to our understanding of creation groaning, we can understand that the groaning is a result of things not being the way they are supposed to be, but that it is also an expectant groaning—longing for the time when all things will be restored. I love the picture of inanimate creation groaning, recognizing that there is a restoration that awaits it. If even creation—the animals, the trees, and the dirt—understands this truth, how much more should we!

Christians

And that leads to the second group that Paul describes as groaning in eager expectation—Christians.

²³ And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us.

²⁴ We were given this hope when we were saved. (If we already have something, we don't need to hope for it. ²⁵ But if we look forward to something we don't yet have, we must wait patiently and confidently.) (Romans 8:23-25, NLT)

Paul describes Christians as groaning in a manner similar to the rest of creation, knowing that the way we are now is not the way we are supposed to be, but also recognizing that there is coming a day when we will be delivered from these bodies of death and instead experience life the way God meant it to be.

Paul says that through the Holy Spirit we have a foretaste of future glory. Because of the Holy Spirit, we experience a glimpse of what it will be like to be set completely free from the curse of sin. We experience a measure of that freedom now, but we still experience the pull of sin from our sinful bodies and the breakdown that comes with being trapped in bodies cursed by sin.

Listen to what Paul says in another of his letters.

For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down (that is, when we die and leave this earthly body), we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands. ² We grow weary in our present bodies, and we long to put on our heavenly bodies like new clothing.

³ For we will put on heavenly bodies; we will not be spirits without bodies. ⁴ While we live in these earthly bodies, we groan and sigh, but it's not that we want to die and get rid of these bodies that clothe us. Rather, we want to put on our new bodies so that these dying bodies will be swallowed up by life. ⁵ God himself has prepared us for this, and as a guarantee he has given us his Holy Spirit. (2 Corinthians 5:1-5, NLT)

When we die, we do not simply cease to exist. We live together with Christ. And we are told that there is coming a day when not only will we be delivered from these sinful,

broken-down bodies and this sinful, broken-down world, but we will live in a new and restored world with new and restored bodies.

Paul says we were given this hope when we were saved. These verses give us a picture of what Paul means when he talks about hope. Sometimes we think of hope as mere wishful thinking—as in, I hope I win the lottery. That is not the kind of hope that Paul is speaking about. Notice the way Paul describes this hope in verse 25—he says it is something we look forward to patiently and confidently. In other words, it is not wishful thinking, but rather a future certainty that drives you forward.

Imagine that you had planned your dream vacation; something you'd been thinking about doing for years, but now you have finally made the plans. You've made all the reservations, you've gotten time off work, and all the arrangements have been made. You've paid all the bills and now you just have to wait for the time to arrive. Each day, you likely find yourself thinking about the day in the near future when you'll be able to enjoy your dream vacation. When your work day seems to drag on, when you find yourself exhausted, you remind yourself that soon you'll be enjoying this vacation you've always dreamed of. It keeps you going in the hard times. And it's not wishful thinking, it's a certainty that you know is just over the horizon. This is the same way Paul describes our hope for our future resurrection and life with Christ.

So, instead of merely groaning about the way things are now, each time we see the imperfection of our world, it should drive us to remember the fact that there is a glorious future that awaits us all. It should propel us forward rather than causing us to despair. We can endure whatever we may face here and now because we know that what awaits will make everything we've endured worth it.

The Holy Spirit

The final category of groaning is somewhat surprising, and a little perplexing.

²⁶ And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. ²⁷ And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will. (Romans 8:26-27, NLT)

Paul tells us that not only does creation groan and we groan, but the Holy Spirit also groans along with us. This changes our perspective a bit on what this groaning is really all about. Sometimes when we think of groaning, we think of complaining. But I think the Apostle Paul may have another sense in mind when he speaks of groaning. Listen to how James Montgomery Boice describes it.

Suppose you are helping someone carry a very heavy load. What is more expressive: a groan as you stagger along beneath it or a great deal of articulate chatter? Suppose your helper is saying, "My, this piano is heavy. They certainly do make pianos heavy, and awkward, too. Probably we should have spent the money and gone ahead and hired professional piano movers. I don't think I want to do this very often. Have you ever moved a piano before?" If you are struggling

with the heavy load, too, that is probably the last thing you want to hear. If someone is chattering away like that, you would probably just want to tell this so-called helper to shut up and lift the piano. A real burden-bearer groans *with* you. I suggest that this is the image Paul is using.¹

Paul's image is that the Holy Spirit groans as He helps us to bear the burden of life. Think about how staggering this truth is! We have brought all this hardship upon ourselves. God would be perfectly just to leave us to the consequences of our actions. Even forgiving us of our sin but leaving us to deal with the consequences of it in our own strength would be a grace greater than we can fathom. But God doesn't stop there. Not only does He forgive our sin, but He continues to help us deal with the mess we have made while we await the day when He will make all things new!

Paul says the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. That has really been his focus through chapter 8, to help us see the power, presence, and activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. He reminds us that we do not have to bear the burden of living in a sinful and fallen world on our own. The Holy Spirit helps us to do so.

But he also speaks of a special ministry of the Spirit that is a bit odd, but wonderfully comforting. He tells us that the Holy Spirit helps us when we pray, pleading for us in harmony with God's will, speaking for us when we don't know what to say, and sometimes even translating for us!

I think of this almost like a parent translating for a small child just learning to speak. You've surely had the experience of having a child come up to you and begin to jabber on. You can tell they are saying real words, but you may not be sure what those words are, and more importantly, you have no idea what the child's point is! Usually, parents are able to translate, and the parent often steps in and explains what the child is really saying. This, I believe, is kind of like what the Holy Spirit does for us when we pray. He knows what we desire and what we need, and He brings our petitions to the Lord when we can't articulate them ourselves.

Some have taken these verses to mean that the Holy Spirit sometimes takes over us and causes us to pray in a special "prayer language" that is unknown to human beings, but that is known to God. While I can't say that doesn't happen, I do not see anywhere in scripture that indicates this is normative or should happen for every Christian. In these verses, however, Paul does seem to give us hope to all Christians that when we pray, we are never laboring alone or in our own strength. We always have a partner with us. The Holy Spirit knows what is best, and He is helping us to pray appropriately, and to plead our case before the Father. What a wonderful promise—one that should embolden us to pray, knowing that we cannot mess it up. We must simply open our hearts to Him—the Spirit will help us when we do.

¹ Boice, James Montgomery. *Romans: The Reign of Grace*. Vol. 2. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991–.

Conclusion

Paul's intention in these verses was to encourage believers as they faced the trials of life. Sometimes the things of life can weigh us down, tempting us to despair or feel hopeless. Paul reminds us that nothing we face in this life is hopeless, because we know where things are going. Let's draw some applications.

First, we should change our focus in trials. Often, when we face difficult times, we are tempted to despair. The longer our trials go on, the more we are tempted to just give up or conclude things will never get better. Paul reminds us that we need to change our perspective. Our groanings as we face difficulties in this life should be like the groanings of a woman in labor. The pain is real, it may be intense, and it may last for quite some time. But the struggles we face will not last forever. And those groanings should cause us to focus on what lies ahead. As you feel your body ache, as you deal with people who are difficult, as you face the manifold frustrations of life, change your focus. Use those difficulties as prompts to think about what lies ahead, and to remind yourself that the pain you feel now cannot compare to the joy that is coming in the future.

Second, we should pray boldly. Prayer is a difficult discipline. Most Christians struggle with praying regularly. There are many reasons for this, but one of the chief is that Satan knows the power available to us in prayer and does everything he can to keep us from it. Often, we struggle because we feel like we're not doing it right, or that we don't seem to pray the way that others do, or we are terrified of saying the wrong thing. Sometimes we aren't sure what to pray for, so we just don't pray for anything. Remember what Paul tells us here—we never pray in our own strength! The Holy Spirit helps us. He translates, He guides us, and He helps us get our hearts in line with the Lord's. Work to develop the discipline of spending time talking with the Lord. I have personally seen the benefit of starting my day in prayer. I've come to see the power of the Spirit leading and guiding me. And now that I've developed the habit, I find it easier than I did at the beginning. You can too, because the same Spirit lives in and helps you! Learn to pray with boldness, knowing you never pray alone!

Finally, we should share this hope with others. Most people recognize that the world isn't right. We have an inherent sense that this isn't the way things should be. The problem is that most people don't know the solution to the problem. They imagine that if we pass better laws, push for social change, try to make environmental adjustments, or elect the right leaders it will fix the problems we see around us. While these are not necessarily bad things, none of them will solve the real problem. The real problem is the curse of sin, which is evident in everything around us. Paul reminds us there is hope! But it is found only in Jesus. Maybe when people around us complain about the way things are, instead of joining in on the complaining party, we should tell them about the way things will be. Paul points to a hope that isn't just for us. It's for everyone. We just need to point them in the right direction. Remember that the messed up world we see around us is temporary—and it should drive us to remember what lies ahead and live in light of the glory that awaits.

© Jun 16th, 2024 by Rev. Rick Goettsche SERIES: Romans