

## **From Groans to Glory: Our Bodies** **Romans 8:23-24**

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Do you like your body? Do you look at your body and groan a little? Do you have aches and pains you didn't used to have? Are you better looking this week than you were last week?

Do you view your body as part of God's saving plan for your future? Do you view eternity as living with a glorified version of your present body? Do you view your future in a perfect body, in the perfect place, with our perfect Savior?

How many of you would like me to explain why I'm asking all these questions? Our text in Romans will make that clear, but I'm concerned today for the unintentional heretics among us. What heresy? It is a heresy to believe that the material world is inherently evil. Why? Then Jesus didn't have a real human body. It is a heresy to not believe in a physical resurrection of the body. Why? Then Jesus wasn't resurrected. It is a heresy to believe that God saves our souls but not our bodies. Why? Then huge sections of Scripture are just plain wrong. Might you be the unintentional heretic I'm referring to?

I hope today to expunge these unintentional heresies and in doing so free all of us to live as full-blooded earthlings now anticipating an eternity of earth dwelling in our extremely made-over bodies on the fully-renewed paradise known in Scripture as the new earth. We were introduced to this last week in Romans 8:

*"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 corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." (Romans 8:19-22 ESV)*

When God cursed the ground because of Adam's sin, he cursed all of creation. It was paradise lost. The result was death for us and in the animal world. Violence. Pollution. Disease. Nasty bugs like mosquitoes and the flu. Creation was cursed. I wish that our young people got this and when they go to the doctor and the doctor says, "Here's why you feel bad," they respond, "Actually, no, I feel bad because God cursed the earth."

Jesus removed the curse on the cross and, along with us, creation is included in this final redemption. It will be free someday when Jesus returns and renews this cosmos. Creation is no longer what it was. But creation is waiting for its redemption. For now, it groans. Someday, glory. Paul continues with this groan to glory theme by applying it to the physical bodies of Christians.

*"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. For in this hope we were saved. 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, we wait for it with patience." (Romans 8:23-25)*

Creation is groaning, and we also are also groaning. Groaning "inwardly." What groan is he talking about? Our groans are whenever we experience the painful dissonance between the way things are and the way things will be. The brokenness now and the perfection to come.

We all have this sense that things ought to be a certain way. All too often they are not. Our marriage isn't what it should be. Our government isn't what it should be. Our children aren't what they should be. And our bodies are not what they should be nor what they will be.

*"Our lives consist of groans. We groan because of the ravages that sin makes in our lives, and in the lives of those we love. Also, we groan because we see possibilities that are not being captured and employed. And then we groan because we see gifted people who are wasting their lives, and we would love to see something else happening. It is recorded that, as he drew near the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus groaned in his spirit because he was so burdened by the ravages that sin had made in a believing family. He groaned, even though he knew he would soon raise Lazarus from the dead. So, we groan in our spirits – we groan in disappointment, in bereavement, in sorrow. We groan physically in our pain and our limitation. Life consists of a great deal of groaning." (Ray Stedman)<sup>1</sup>*

Can you relate? You may think groaning is a bad thing. Only Christians can truly groan. Our groans prove we are looking at life through the gospel. A backward glance to the cross and forward to our final redemption.

Groaning is the Christian response to Satan still being the king of this world. Groaning is the Christian response to suffering in the world around us. Groaning is the Christian response to seeing the presence of sin in our lives. Groaning is the church's response in community as our fellow Christians experience trials and suffering. In the next section Paul says the Holy Spirit groans. Creation groans. Christians groan. God groans. Groaning is a very Christian response if it is done right and for the right reasons.

## **How Christians Should Groan and How This is Helpful for us in the World**

### **Inwardly**

*"And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly." (Romans 8:23)*

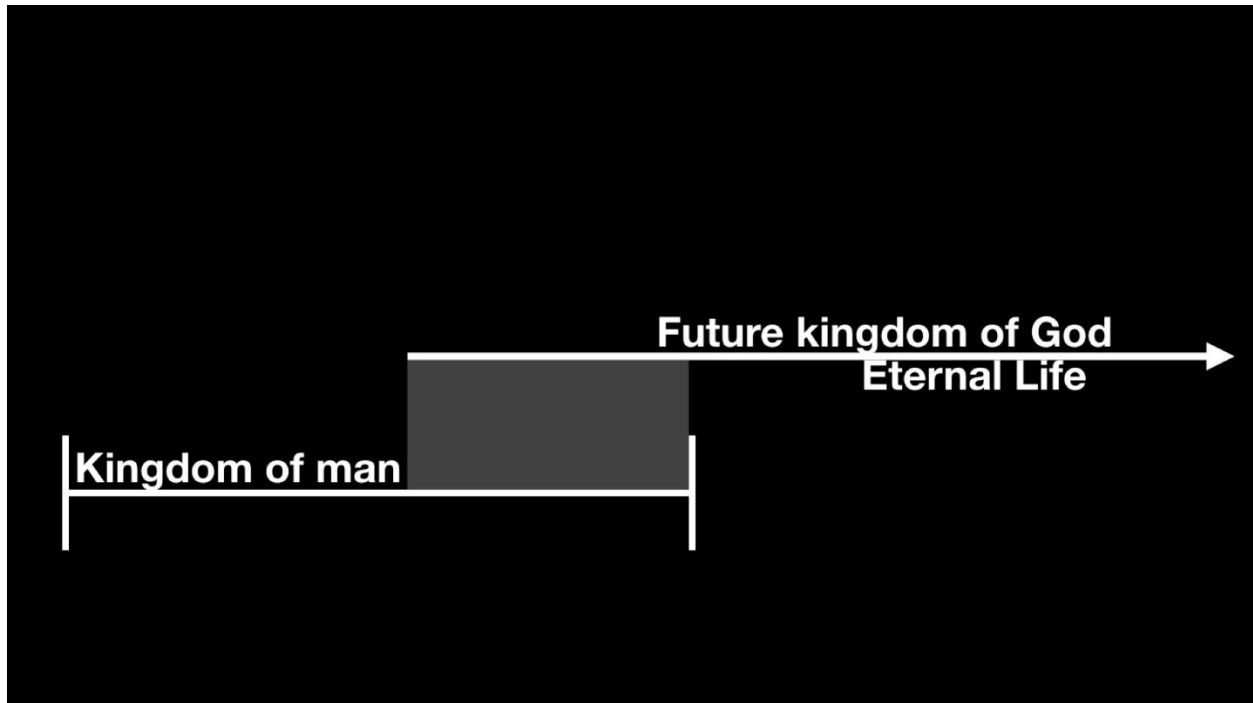
Christians aren't the ones walking around sighing all the time. We aren't the Eeyore at every party. No. Christians should be the most optimistic people in the room. But our joy is not a denial of suffering or pain, it is joy in spite of the pain. Groaning as we await glory. Romans 8 tells us how.

We groan *inwardly*. How? Notice the clause prior, *"we...who have the firstfruits of the Spirit."* We have learned so much about the Holy Spirit in Romans 8. He is the indwelling Holy Spirit. He is the agent of our adoption. He is the guarantee and seal of God's grace to us. Here he says, *"the firstfruits of the Spirit."* "Firstfruits" is a harvest term. This worked well in the agrarian society of the first century. Everyone understood this. Here in Indiana we get it pretty well too. Firstfruits were the first produce of the harvest. The first grain. The first corn. The first grapes. Firstfruits were exciting because it indicated that there was much more to come.

Here, the Holy Spirit is the firstfruit of God's saving work in us. He's the firstfruit, not the last fruit. He is the start, not the finish. But his presence in us is meant to encourage us that God has much more in store.

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Stedman as quoted by R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven*, p. 161.



We live in this overlap of ages. The present age is passing away. It is the age of the curse and death. The future age is already here but not completely. We live with the tension of already having eternal life, already having the Spirit of life, the life of the age to come, but having it in the midst of the chaos, pain, and destruction of this broken world. What is the Christian response? Deep, theological, redemptive groaning.

Realize that the only way we can groan is by the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> Were it not for the Spirit, we wouldn't and couldn't groan. To us this world would be all there is. There would not be anticipation of anything being better; certainly no expectation of redemption.

Many of the philosophies popular in the world around us are man's attempt to create the new earth without the cross and without the Spirit. Utopic visions of man in perfect harmony, perfect health, perfect wealth, perfect government underly everything from utopic socialism to utopic capitalism. Mankind always wants to fix his own problems his own way and these are mostly modern ideological versions of the Tower of Babel. Humans never change.

Then Jesus rocks your world and the Holy Spirit comes and dwells within you. Now rather than thinking man can fix the world, I see in Scripture a future time when Jesus is going to fix the world. This is not to deny our need to be salt and light representations of God's new kingdom. In the words of one pastor, "*Followers of Jesus care about all human suffering, especially eternal suffering.*"<sup>3</sup> (John Piper). So, we feed the poor, fight for the unborn, welcome the stranger, improve societal conditions, etc. But as we do, we groan. We groan inwardly because there inside us is the powerful presence of God representing what is to come. He is a foretaste of future glory.

<sup>2</sup> See James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 1-8, Volume 38A*, p. 474.

<sup>3</sup> John Piper, *Cross: Unrivaled Christ, Unstoppable Gospel, Unreached Peoples, Unending Joy*, p. 200.

Growing up in a good Dutch family meant that nearly every Sunday we had roast for Sunday lunch. Mom would put the roast in before church and we would come home insanely hungry. The door to the house would open, and the smell of the slow cooking roast was overwhelming. It made you want to eat the air. We would quickly change clothes and head for the kitchen. There Dad would be cutting the roast. When he wasn't looking, we would sneak a little piece of meat off the edge. It tasted so good. It made the taste buds water anticipating the real meal. The full portion. The final feast.

God has given us a foretaste of the feast to come. The Holy Spirit. We are living in the time between the foretaste and the full meal.

### **Expectantly**

*"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."* (Romans 8:23)

Adoption? I thought we were already adopted into God's family. Doesn't 8:16 say the Holy Spirit is testifying to us that we are God's children? Why would I wait for something I already have? As with many aspects of salvation there is a past, present, and future. We were saved when Jesus died for us. We are saved when we trust and believe. We will be saved when God welcomes us into our eternal home. Past dimension. Present dimension. Future dimension.

Adoption follows this pattern as well. We were adopted into God's family the moment we believe in Jesus. If you are a Christian today, you are already a child of God. However, do we presently have everything God has in store for us? No. We don't have our inheritance. We don't have presence with God. We still have indwelling sin. There are future adoption benefits to come. Like all children, we wait with "eager anticipation."

My daughters will pester Jennifer and me for weeks before something they are excited about. "How many more days till Christmas?" *Three weeks.* "How many days is that?" *21.* Fifteen minutes later, "How long until Christmas?" *I just told you.* 10 minutes later, "I wish today was Christmas." And so it goes for everything! Family vacation, ballet lessons, or a trip to Chick-fil-A.

While we groan at the pains and sufferings of this world, we are like children weeks before Christmas. So, our groans are not nihilistic or fatalistic. They are hopeful groans. Expectant groans. Hope in the midst of our sufferings and longings.

### **Redemptively**

*"We wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved."* (Romans 8:23-24)

What we are waiting for is the redemption of our bodies. The word for "redeem" means to *buy back*. To pay the ransom. It is used to describe what Jesus has already done on the cross paying the price for our sins. But like adoption, redemption has a past, a present, and a future.

Our bodies were cursed along with creation. *"By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."* (Genesis 3:19)

We saw the same in Romans. *"The wages of sin is death."* (Romans 6:23) Death is final death but also the slow process over our lives of decay. The wages of sin are wrinkles. The greying hair. The loss of flexibility and vitality. The gradual and unalterable decline physically. Who here looks better than they did last year?

I remember the moment when I saw the first wrinkle on my face. I was in an airport bathroom washing my hands, as I turned to go I stopped, and looked back in the mirror and noticed a crease along my forehead I had never noticed before. I've been depressed ever since. From now on I dare you to talk to me and try not to look at it. I've gotten more since. So, have you. I'll try not to stare at your Grand Canyons either.

We wonderfully discover that God's plan for redemption includes our bodies as well. In fact, our bodies are so interwoven in God's redemption that Jesus came bodily, died bodily, and was resurrected bodily. He is right now in a body and will be in a body for all eternity. What do we find from this about the material world? It is not inherently evil. I love this C.S. Lewis quote,

*"There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why He uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it."*<sup>4</sup> (C.S. Lewis)

We Christians are earthlings. We will be earthlings forever. Of all people, Christians should have a high and holy view of physical existence and enjoy what God intended in feasting, playing, marital intimacy, sensory sights, smells, tastes, and a host of other amazing experiences. Everything God called very good is for our enjoyment and will be a part of our eternal enjoyment on the new earth.

But if we die, how can this be? This text is hinting at what 1 Corinthians 15 and other passages make clear, there is a day coming when all Christians' bodies will be resurrected, glorified, and reunited with us. That's what the Bible teaches.

*"I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed."* (1 Corinthians 15:50-52)

Someday all Christians will be resurrected from the dead and given glorified bodies. Scripture says our bodies will be like Jesus' resurrected body. Your body will be a renewed and seriously upgraded version of your current body. A complete and divine makeover. I guarantee you won't be disappointed.

Please get out of your mind that our eternity is some kind of disembodied existence, floating along on a spiritual cloud. Our eternal home will be the new earth. Our eternal existence will be a glorified physical human body.

But we aren't there yet. We live in the old body. We live in the old age. We live in the broken world. It takes faith to see the future as glorious. If we do, we can groan today knowing it will be glory tomorrow. And that's how Paul ends it.

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<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, p. 60.

*"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, we wait for it with patience." (Romans 8:24)*

## **Patiently**

Here's how I'm convicted by this. If you were to look inside my heart, as I get older, there's a lot more frustration than hope and anticipation. How do you feel on your birthday? One day closer to death or one day closer to experiencing the fullness of your redemption?

We joke about it, but this is an area where Christians should be counter-cultural. Are we confident that God is doing to do what he promises? If so, the passing of our life should not be a discouragement. It's one day closer. One year closer. The more my body ages the better the glorified body sounds.

Should we groan? Yes. However, our groans must be redemptive groans. Our groans must be hopeful groans. As we groan inwardly, expectantly, redemptively, and patiently.

This brings me back to the fork. I told this story last week. Spring Break has many coming and going. I'll tell it again. Some years ago, we buried a dear godly man in our community and church. Bob Brown. Bob insisted that as his body lay in the casket that his family put a fork in his hand. Bob was very well known in our community and the visitation and funeral were very large. Everyone who passed by wondered, what's with the fork? When you eat at someone's house, if the hostess is gathering the dishes but tells you to keep your fork, what does that mean? Dessert is coming. The best is yet to come. Bob believed that and the fork was his statement from the casket that his hope was in Jesus and final resurrection.

Bethel Church, *keep your fork*. Our days are quickly passing. In a hundred years, none of us will be here. Paul urges us to see that as a good thing as we wait with eagerness for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

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