

Groaning and Glory

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[0 : 00] Well, hands up, those of you who've been staying up late to watch the Tour de France. I suspect there might be some of you there, although I can see some of you are not willing to admit it.

I have been, not right to the end, but certainly for some of the start. And one of the things I love is the lovely and amazing scenery of the French countryside. But the other thing I love as well to watch is the amazing feats of the riders.

And particularly those with the mountaintop finishes. That's when the riders finish the race at the summit of a mountain, often having ridden for hundreds of kilometers and having climbed elevations of 2,000 or 3,000 meters.

I just don't know how they do it. So take a look at one of the photos of this finish. I think it captures perfectly the elation of the winner crossing the line. I think that was Roman Bardet in 2017.

Sadly, actually two days ago he had a fall and I think he had a small hemorrhage in his brain. So that's how grueling these races are. But look at the other riders just behind him.

[1 : 14] They're grimacing faces as they strain for the finishing line. They're in pure agony, aren't they, after the torques climb. And yet they keep pushing to get to the finish line.

It reminds me of our passage tonight where Paul talks about the groans of the Christian life. And yet in anticipation of that glorious moment when we cross our finishing line in jubilation and glory.

Now remember last Sunday we talked of our new life in Christ where we are freed from sin and death. And yet this new life, our new life, resides in a body that's subject to death.

And so in verse 17, our last verse from last Sunday, which is on the slide, notwithstanding our inheritance as heirs of God and so co-heirs with Christ, Paul reminds us we are to share in Christ's suffering in order that we may also share in his glory.

Yes, just as Jesus wasn't spared suffering before he was glorified, neither are we as co-heirs. But now in the rest of chapter 8, Paul offers comfort for us to endure this suffering.

[2 : 34] First in verse 18, he puts it into context. So on the next slide, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

If ever you thought your suffering was too much to bear, whether it's physical or emotional, then Paul wants us to see that there's nothing compared to the glory that awaits us.

Yes, it may be hard to imagine given what you're going through right now, but so confident is Paul in God's promises that he says this with great confidence.

In fact, he even recharacterizes them, the sufferings, as mere groanings, deep longings for something better, albeit in agony.

And so in the first point on the outline, Paul sets out our present groanings for a glorious future. As we look at this passage from verses 18 to 27, we see a threefold groaning.

[3 : 40] The first is the groaning of creation, where there is hope amidst decay with creation. That's the next slide. So continuing in verse 19, we read, For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Many of us love the great outdoors.

When we look out over a valley from the mountaintop or stand by the beach as the waves roar, we're awestruck, aren't we, by the splendor of creation.

And yet, these are the very forces that bring about what Paul likens to the pains of childbirth. The bushfires we witness, the erosion of coastlines, droughts or floods and the destruction that ensues,

all these are groanings of creation longing to be freed from decay.

[5 : 02] All mothers know about going through the agony of childbirth, but they see, don't they, the joy ahead of them of the child that is about to be born.

And so, creation endures its decay in groaning because it waits for this new birth as the new creation. Now, you might wonder why God has made this like that.

And the reason is because God has designed physical creation to sympathize with the human condition. And so, Paul has set up creation to sympathize with us.

As Christians, we groan because of the sin we see in the world. It's the sin we see in our own selves. As Christians, we long for a world of perfection and glory.

Well, creation, which Paul speaks of as though it were a person, is groaning with us in hope as well. But Paul uses quite amazing language here.

[6 : 10] For he says, Now, if you've been part of our congregation for a while, many of you might have seen this photo of me many years ago.

Alyssa and I were living in London, the year of the Queen's Golden Jubilee. And we lined Pall Mall, or Pall Mall, however you want to pronounce it, for her parade. The next slide actually shows her in her royal carriage passing.

Now, I think we must have turned up like five hours before time, just to secure a good spot. And then we waited eagerly for her to arrive. Every time there was a chair somewhere down the street, we would crane our necks to see if it was the Queen.

Alas, it was merely, more often than not, a loud, boozy crowd that was just getting a bit too excited. But then finally, when Her Majesty did come past, you know, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun.

There was jubilation, wasn't there? As she was revealed in her full glory with that golden carriage. Now, I don't know about you, but most of us were just happy to be just by the sidelines when a big event like this occurs, aren't we?

[7 : 33] We're just happy to be part of it. But you know what? Paul informs us that as children of God, we will actually be the royalty on that day of glory.

Christ will be at the head, but we will follow behind. Creation, as glorious, as awesome, and awesome as it is, will actually be on the sidelines, cheering us on as co-eds.

As Paul says, the glory, the crowning glory, will be revealed in us. I don't know about you, but just let that sink in for a moment.

Because that will help you to understand why any suffering now is nothing compared to that glory. And so, we're too are called to focus, just as creation does, on that hope.

Even though we're encouraged to groan as children of God, we're encouraged to look beyond the now to the hope of that glory, even as we groan.

[8 : 42] But Paul does go on to now talk about our groaning, the second groaning in this passage, or as we wait for the redemption of our bodies.

That's the next point. So, verse 23, not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. Now, using the word firstfruits here is again an image of hope. It's an indication of a bigger and richer harvest to come. We have the Spirit now, but we will blossom into full-blown airs with perfect and glorious bodies then.

That's why in verse 15 last week, Paul can say that we've already received the adoption to sonship. We have the Spirit now. He enables us to cry, Abba, Father.

He empowers us to say no to sin. Those are great things as adopted sons. But they are just signs that more is to come.

[9 : 54] You see, we're like Prince Charles or William. We're heirs of parents. One day, both of them will ascend to the throne, not all together, one after the other. But while the Queen is still on the throne, they haven't got the full powers of the monarch, do they?

They can't offer knighthoods. They can't dissolve parliament. They can't ride in that golden carriage unless it's with the Queen. Likewise, we're already adopted to sonship in Christ.

We're certain to ascend into our inheritance. But not just yet. In the meantime, our full status as heirs are shrouded, hidden, as it were, in this decaying body.

And that, by its nature, is what hope is all about, isn't it? It's unseen. It's future-oriented. Or as Paul says now in verse 24, on the next slide, for in this hope we were saved.

But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they've already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

[11 : 05] It's not easy to wait patiently in groaning, is it? And yet, that's God's will for us.

He saved us in hope. He doesn't liberate us from decay right now, right here and now. And later on in the passage, we'll see why.

But if that's God's will for us, then we do need a different mindset, don't we, to our suffering, to our groaning. We need to embrace it, don't we?

We need that kind of mindset because that's what we need to be spiritually resilient, to thrive as Christians in the midst of decay, in the midst of suffering.

Now, I know many of us are really groaning inwardly at the moment, aren't we? It's all heightened by this whole stage four restrictions in Victoria.

[12 : 06] But one positive to take out of it, I think, is that it should make us long even more for the new creation. It should actually be strengthening our hope in God, shouldn't it?

But here's the thing, though. We need to remember that even once we get out of lockdown and the signs are promising, we just have to be patient, we need to realize that even then, groanings will still be part of our Christian life.

Groanings were there before COVID, and it will be there after. Because perfection in this world, perfection for our own life in this world, will never be the goal of our hope.

Others in the world may lament the state of the world, but only Christians will place our hope in the right place. Not in a utopian dream for this world, but for Christ's return.

And so here's a provocative question I put to my growth group from St. John's on Monday night. If you say you are a Christian, and yet you're not groaning, then ask yourself, is there something wrong with your faith?

[13 : 26] If you're not groaning as a Christian, is there something wrong with your faith? Yep, that's right. Groaning ought to be a feature of our Christian life. It ought to be there.

Even when things are going well, there ought to be a level of groaning. Because it's a sign of your hope in future glory. It's a sign that you know, this isn't the best life.

This isn't the best that life will be. You know, if you went to Courant, there will be books, I think, on the shelf that have titles like, Your Best Life Now. Please, don't bother reading them.

I don't mean we become fatalistic, or we don't do anything about making this world a better place.

No, we're called to do good. But never in the mistaken belief that we can eradicate all suffering now, or rid this world of all injustice.

Because our liberation, our freedom, our true freedom, our total freedom, will only come when Christ returns. And so we need to be realistic.

[14 : 36] Even when we do solve one problem, recognize and realize that others will emerge. And some problems will never go away. And it will make us groan.

But that's okay. It shouldn't lead us to despair or depression. But rather, to hope instead. Now what's more, God empathizes with us.

Because as we see now, we have His Spirit to groan with us, in verse 26. So on the next slide, in the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

You see, as humans, when we think we can solve a problem, we tend not to pray, do we? If, however, we know what to do, but we feel powerless, then we do pray.

But what if we are at a loss to what to do? What if we can't even begin to fathom what's happening? Then we may long to pray, but we don't know how to pray, do we?

[15 : 50] We're lost for words. And all that remains, often, is that deep groaning or sighing. We want to see things made right, but where do we even begin?

Well, that's when God's Spirit intercedes on our behalf with wordless groans. We have help through intercession by the Spirit.

Now, it actually puzzles me because I think, of all people, surely the Spirit must know how to pray. Don't you think? After all, He's God. Why then is He interceding for us with wordless groans?

Why can't He use words? Well, I think He can. But I think it's, Paul talks about it in terms of wordless groans because He's actually identifying with us in our weakness.

It's a kind act of condescension on His part. Often, parents would do that, too, with their sick child. You know, when they wake up in the middle of the night moaning in pain, a parent will simply hold

them and moan softly with them as well.

[17:10] There may be words of reassurance, maybe some medicine to help with the pain, but after a while, the parent simply groans and moans with them to soothe and comfort them.

Now, of course, the Spirit isn't simply a human parent, but Paul says this on the next slide, for he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

So the Spirit is not just doing that to comfort us, although that's what He does, but rather, God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit are all one.

They are of one mind. And so, in one sense, no explicit words are needed. The Father knows the Spirit's mind and the Spirit knows the Father's will.

Again, just by way of now, it often happens when, you know, with that scenario that I talked about, a husband may come in, the father may come in, and as the wife is holding the sick child, and often they would just give each other a knowing look, and the husband would know, yep, he needs to head off and get a hot water bottle or something to bring back for the child.

[18:22] So, these wordless groans may be a comfort to us, but they're also effective as prayers to God. You see, the Spirit's groanings, even though they are wordless as such, go straight to the very depth of the Trinity.

God knows, and then God acts, based on the intercession of the Spirit. And so, here's where we come to the second half of the passage, which we'll go through slightly quicker, because even though our lives now are full of suffering and groaning, it is being shaped by God's will and secured in God's love.

That is, God is using it, and God knows what's going on, and He's using it for His purpose. He's acting out of His love for us. What we've been going through is part of God's plan from the very beginning.

Paul has just said that the Spirit intercedes for us in accordance with God's will, and then immediately He tells us, in verse 28, what God's will is. So on the next slide, we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

For those God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those He predestined, He also called.

[19:48] Those He called, He also justified. Those He justified, He also glorified. It's such a famous verse, isn't it? Verse 28. But what a difference, don't you think, when it's read in context?

For the good that God is doing is in the midst, in the midst, not in the absence of suffering and groaning. God's will for us, His purpose, is to be conformed to the image of His Son.

We're predestined, Paul says. God decided that from the beginning we will be conformed to Jesus. And what God predestined, He ensures is glorified.

And that's why when you read verse 30, all the verbs there, predestined, called, justified, glorified, they're all in the past tense. It's as good as done already. Even glorified is as good as done.

And so if you want to know what the glory to be revealed in us looks like, then you need look no further than His Son, Jesus.

[20:56] God's purpose is to gather a huge family of brothers and sisters all reflecting His Son's glory. Even as Christ's glory is shining on them.

But that glory is Christ's character. This is what the new creation will look like. Brothers and sisters, when we get there, this is the new humanity.

Well, in fact, actually, the new humanity starts now. Even though in our decaying bodies, God is already gathering this new humanity but doing the work of conforming each and every one of us into the image of His Son.

But to get there, we have to traverse this path of suffering, don't we? just as Jesus did. And I think part of the groaning is not just longing to be freed from suffering, but that groaning is also to be like Jesus, to long for His character, for His patience, for His humility.

as we look at ourselves, we go, oh, I wish I was more like Jesus. But that is why we need these testing and these trials, because that is the process by which God uses to make us like Jesus.

[22:16] I mean, just take patience as an example. How do you develop patience? Just think about it. only by learning how to wait, right? Enduring suffering, practicing perseverance.

There's no other way to be patient. There's no other way to learn patience, is there? You can't learn patience through instant gratification, can you? And if Jesus, who was sinless, still had to go through suffering, then how much more us, the rest of us, imperfect humans, how much more do we need this suffering or testing in order to become like Jesus?

But yet, there is one more thing that God assures us with, and that is His love. Paul says that His love will sustain us as His children.

Even as we go through these fiery trials, God's love will ensure that we will then be conformed to His Son. And so, in the final part of this passage, Paul launches into a series of rhetorical questions, all of which assures us that nothing separates us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

So, as I read it again, I just want you to soak it in and just feel and still experience the full force of what Paul is saying. What then shall we say in response to these things?

[23 : 46] If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one.

Christ Jesus, who died, more than that, who was raised to life, is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

As it is written, for your sake we face death all day long. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. Now in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us, for I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any paths, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

First, let me say something about that quote. It's from Psalm 44, which we read earlier. Paul quotes it because that psalm puts the question, how can God possibly let the righteous suffer?

[25 : 12] So in verse 17, all this came upon us though we had not forgotten you, the psalmist says. We've done the right thing, God, yet we are suffering. Yet for your sake we face death all day long, verse 22.

We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. That's the verse that Paul quotes. But then, even though we didn't read it, just take a look at how the psalm ends.

It ends with a cry to God. Rescue us. Rise up and help us. Rescue us because of your unfailing love. And so this is exactly what Paul is echoing here as well.

God has already proven his unfailing love for us. He has already sent his most precious son to die for us. And why would he do that if he didn't love us?

Having given us his precious son, then why would he not give us all things along with him? Of course he will. But perhaps he loves us but he's not powerful enough.

[26 : 20] Well, Paul says, rubbish. He is the ultimate judge. He alone is the one who justifies, Paul says. And what's more, his own beloved son now sits at his right hand interceding for us.

Just get that. Earlier we read his spirit intercedes for us by our side, in our weakness. Now we read that the son is doing the same thing but by God's side.

I mean, we've got the Trinity all on our side, don't we? Spirit by our side, son by the side of the Father. What more can we ask, Paul is saying?

And so while the decay and the groaning of this world may rail against us, nothing, absolutely nothing will separate us from the love of God provided we're in Christ Jesus.

It's pretty clear from that verse, isn't it? And that's the key, isn't it? It's not, nothing will separate us full stop. No. It's nothing will separate us in Christ Jesus provided we take refuge in his son, provided our hope and our faith is in Jesus.

[27 : 34] Even as we're going through this suffering and Christ, we're being made like Christ. Nothing will separate us from the love of God provided that we're in Christ Jesus.

Friends, I wonder what you might be groaning over right now. Is it the pandemic? Is it over the uncertainty caused by it? Is it over how poorly you think the government is performing as a result of it?

I don't know. But whatever it is, if you are in Christ Jesus, then nothing will separate you from God's love. Nothing will thwart his purpose to make you like Jesus, to glorify you.

And even as you groan and you're right to do so, channel that groaning into the right direction. not into despair or depression, no, channel that groaning into hope, into patience as you wait, and into prayer, even if you don't know what to pray.

Because the Spirit, as you groan, is interceding on your behalf. Let's pray. Father, what can we say that you do not already know?

[29 : 05] You search our hearts, you know our thoughts. Thank you for your Spirit who intercedes for us. Assure us to know of your unfailing love, even as we endure suffering in order to be conformed to and glorified with your Son.

And in his name we pray. Amen.