

Bethel Fellowship Church, Minneota, MN
Todd Mitchell
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Introduction¹

Back when I was a first-year seminary student, I was a chaplain's assistant at a nursing home for a little while. One day, when I met the chaplain, he told me we were going to go visit a man who was dying. He could die any minute, he told me, and in fact this man did die the very next day.

I'll never forget the look on that chaplain's face when he told me that earlier that day there was a social worker there with somebody singing to this dying man, to cheer him up, "She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain." The chaplain just looked at me and shook his head, and we looked at each other in disbelief.

What kind of person would sing a silly song to a dying man to cheer him up? Maybe the kind of person who thinks the most important thing in life, and in death, is to smile and be happy, to be entertained, to be amused. If someone is sad, it is time to send in the emergency entertainment, to get that sad look off his face, and replace it with a nice, comfortable smile.

I've seen this over and over again. I've seen people grieving, only to be assaulted by somebody who thinks the grief is a problem to be solved. "It really could be worse," he says to the weeping man. Or, "It's going to be OK." (Whatever that means?) Folks are desperate to say *something* to that grieving person just to try to make him wipe away his tears, and smile again, so that the world will be a nice happy place again.

Worst of all, I've seen it in our churches. We're confoundedly obsessed with being "in right out right up right down right happy all the time." And then we wonder why our youth, who are groaning inside, walk away from the church as soon as they can. What do we have to offer a world that is screaming in pain and agony and frustration? Cotton-candy Christianity?

Over 70 years ago A. W. Tozer looked at the churches in America and said:

We have simplified until Christianity amounts to this: God is love; Jesus died for you; believe, accept, be jolly, have fun and tell others. And away we go – that is the Christianity of our day. I would not give a plug nickel for the whole business

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of it. Once in a while God has a poor bleeding sheep that manages to live on that kind of thing and we wonder how.²

Have things gotten better since then? No, they have gotten worse. We live in a culture that devotes itself to entertainment, and the Christians have the T-shirts to prove it.

You look at this picture, and you look at the hurting world, and you think, How could this get any worse?

But I'm afraid it does get worse. Because not only have we sugar-coated Christianity, sometimes we have even abused those who don't seem to be enjoying the taste. We have treated people poorly who are sorrowful, telling them there is something wrong with them. (After all, if you're right with God, you would have no sorrow!) We have mocked those who sing "mournful chants" because they aren't singing the carefree, happy songs we are.

We should be honest with what the Bible says about sorrow. To my Christian brothers who mourn, I say, with Christ, Blessed are you who mourn! To those of you who are sorrowful, I say, with Christ, Blessed are you who are poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven! And to those who have no idea what I'm talking about, who wonder why a person should ever be sorrowful, why a person should ever mourn in this world, I say, with James, "Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom!" (James 4:9b)

I say this because it is not normal for a Christian to go through life without groaning. Quite the contrary! It is *normal* for a Christian to *groan* in this life, because this world, and our lives, are not what they should be. We are waiting for something better, and the wait is hard.

That's what we see in Romans 8:18-25. The whole creation is groaning, and so are Christians – we "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons." Please open your bibles to Romans 8. Beginning in Romans 8:18, reading from the English Standard Version:

Romans 8:18-25 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. 19 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 decay 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. 23

² A. W. Tozer, *Tozer on Worship and Entertainment: Selected Excerpts*, ed. James L. Snyder (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1997), 110.

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.

This morning I will focus on vv. 22-25, where we see:

- Christians groan with the whole creation
- Christians wait eagerly for adoption as God's children
- Christians endure because they have faith

I. Christians Groan with the Whole Creation

Take a look at v. 22: "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now." The whole creation groans, and we groan inwardly with creation – but we do not groan alone.

A. All creation groans

All creation groans. That's what Paul said, in v. 20: "The creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it." Creation has been in "bondage to decay" ever since mankind first sinned in the Garden of Eden. The very ground we walk on is cursed. The paper that our hymns are printed on is cursed.

We live in a world of death and decay. But death is not natural. Decay is not natural. All around us the world is bent, distorted. All of this futility, vanity, decay, and death is because of sin. The repulsive, rotting corpse, the bloated animal on the side of the road, all the horrors of a fallen creation, are God's divine judgment upon sin. It is a righteous judgment. It is a just judgment. We demanded the horror of sin, and we got exactly what we asked for.

And it hurts. It hurts so bad that creation "groans!" Do you see that in v. 22? Here Paul is describing creation as if it has the thoughts and feelings of a human being. He is helping us imagine just how bad things are for creation. And creation "groans."

What does that mean? What is Paul trying to say here? Well, think about it. When you hear somebody groan, you know that he is really hurting.

If your shoulder hurts, you can say, "My shoulder hurts." And everybody will know that you have some pain. Or, if you stub your toe, you might even let out a yelp. And everybody will know that you have some pain. But

when you groan, and groan, and groan – that’s when everybody comes to find out what is wrong with you. When you groan, that’s when people know you are suffering really, really badly.

You mothers can understand v. 22 better than any of us, because Paul compares it to childbirth. When a mother is having a baby, she groans. She doesn’t just let out a yelp, and then the pain is over. No, the pain goes on, and on, and on, and it gets worse, and worse, and worse.

That’s the way it is for creation. Really bad pain that keeps getting worse. But it is not a hopeless pain. It is not a pain filled with rage nor frustration. It is a hopeful pain, a pregnant pain, a pain filled with eagerness and longing.

The mother having a baby looks forward to the moment when her child will be revealed. She knows that the sufferings of her labor are not worth comparing with the delight of cradling her baby. And so it is with creation. “The whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.”

The childbirth that creation is longing for is the revealing of God’s glorified children. We’ll come back to this when we get to the end of v. 23. But in that great day, when we return in our glorified bodies with King Jesus, who will rule the world, the curse on the earth will be greatly lifted. And then, at the end of the Kingdom, after Christ’s great triumph, God will remake the heavens and the earth completely.

But for now, creation is “groaning together in the pains of childbirth,” and so do we.

B. We groan inwardly

Take a look at the first part of v. 23: “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly.”

Christians groan. In fact, when you become a Christian, you may actually groan even more. Christians groan not only because of suffering and death in this life, but because they love what God loves and hate what God hates. They groan terribly when they see sin in the world – and even in their own lives.

How can we not be sorrowful to see God’s creation despoiled by sin? Once upon a time, Christians knew about groaning. Advent was especially a time of groaning, looking forward to a burst of joy at Christmas. Once upon a

time, Christians had mournful chants in the middle ages. Fundamentalists and Evangelicals don't, but they did. Why do you think that is? It isn't because Fundamentalists and Evangelicals are smarter or wiser or more faithful. The moment you think like that, the giant trap of your own pride has snapped closed upon you.

Once upon a time, the Psalmists and Martin Luther and Isaac Watts wrote songs that were full of sorrow. I want to take a few minutes to talk about this. The Psalmist wrote:

Psalm 102:3-5 ³ For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. ⁴ My heart is struck down like grass and has withered; I forget to eat my bread. ⁵ Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my flesh.

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther, after he became a believer, wrote the hymn, "From Depth of Woe I Cry to Thee." Martin Luther "got it." And so did Isaac Watts, who wrote:

God of my life, look gently down,
Behold the pains I feel
But I am dumb before Thy throne
Nor dare dispute Thy will³

and:

Death, like an overflowing stream
Sweeps us away; our life's a dream.
An empty tale, a morning flow'r,
cut down and wither'd in an hour.⁴

Two hundred years ago, we were singing those songs in America – in a minor key! Now, those were not the only songs they sang. Most songs were not sorrowful. But they still sang them. They sang them, because they groaned.

We don't sing them because we don't groan. I showed an early American hymnbook to a Christian once, and after seeing some of these songs of groaning, she exclaimed, "These songs are depressing!" and she handed it back to me like it was a hot potato.

³ Isaac Watts, set to the tune "POLAND," by Timothy Swan, in *The Sacred Harp*, #86.

⁴ Isaac Watts, set to the tune "MORTALITY," by Daniel Read, in *The Sacred Harp*, #50.

For over a century, American Christians have been avoiding groaning like a drunk avoids detox. We've sterilized our worship services to kill all the groaning, and vaccinated them against any groaning with a big dose of frivolity. It's worse today than ever, but even in his day Tozer saw it:

In these times religion has become jolly good fun right here in this present world, and what's the hurry about heaven anyway? Christianity, contrary to what some had thought, is another and higher form of entertainment.⁵

This is why a Christian who groans like the Psalmist, and the Apostle Paul, and Martin Luther, and Isaac Watts, has more in common with a rock band like Linkin Park than the Christian crooners of today.

Back when I first preached this sermon 15 years ago, Linkin Park was a popular rock band that sang songs of despair, and rage, and frustration. Listen to their songs, and you will hear them literally screaming in agony. Now, they don't know where to go with their pain. They don't know Jesus. But this they know – they are groaning inside.

No wonder so many people have loved Linkin Park. Because they are groaning inside, too. And so do I. The Christian Crooners have little to offer us. They don't seem to know anything about groaning, which makes us wonder if they are really quite sane. How can we be looking at the same world? How can we be seeing the same reality? How can we even be sharing the same hope?

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not recommending rock bands like Linkin Park, because they groan in the wrong way. They don't groan like a woman in childbirth, full of hope and longing. They groan like dying men condemned to hell.

My point is this. The music and the art and the literature of American Christianity today is of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans. When we have something to learn from a rock band like Linkin Park, we truly are in ruins.

Why all this talk about music? Because we are talking about groaning. We are talking about emotion. We are talking about feelings. And music is the most important way we express and shape our feelings. Yet many of the so-called "gospel songs" I grew up with remind me of Dick Van Dyke tap-dancing with a cane in one hand and a straw hat in the other.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 131-132.

Close the door on the music of both the Christian crooner *and* Linkin Park, and open up your mind to a better way. The music of true joy knows what it is to groan, and to groan with hope.

If you are a Biblical, sober-minded Christian, if you see this world for how it really is, if you really open your eyes and see how God's creation is in tatters, if you see how God is mocked, if you see your own sin the way you should, if you are hoping for something better, then you *will* groan.

Do not fear the groaning. Because you do not groan alone.

C. We do not groan alone

Now Paul is talking to Christians, here. If you are not a Christian, then it doesn't apply to you. You don't have the firstfruits of the Spirit. You have no hope. If you don't have faith in Christ, then all you have to look forward to is the wrath of God. The pain you have here is nothing compared to the pain you will know then. But if you will turn to Jesus Christ, he will give you hope in the midst of the pain. Simply look on Christ and live!

But if you are a Christian, then you do not groan alone. You groan with the Spirit, because you have the firstfruits of the Spirit. See that, in v. 23? And we see in v. 26 here in Romans 8 that the Spirit himself groans with us. You do not groan alone. If you are a Christian, God is with you.

Do you know what it means to have the firstfruits of the Spirit? Look back at vv. 15-16:

Romans 8:15b-16 you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

And because of that, we don't groan hopelessly – we groan hopefully! See how much it really matters that we don't groan alone?

But what does Paul mean by "*firstfruits* of the Spirit?" Firstfruits are just the first part of a full harvest. It is a privilege to receive the firstfruits. But what about the rest of the harvest? The rest is still in the future. Not the rest of the Spirit—if you are a Christian you either have the Spirit or you don't—but something else.

The answer is in the last part of v. 23: "We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as

sons, the redemption of our bodies.” That’s what is still future! Christians wait eagerly for adoption as God’s children!

II. Christians Wait Eagerly for Adoption as God’s Children

But wait! If you’re a Christian, aren’t you *already* adopted as God’s child? Didn’t we just see that in v. 16? The answer is, Yes. We are already adopted as God’s children.

A. We are already adopted as God’s children

Verse 15 says we have *already* received the Spirit of adoption as sons, and v. 16 says that we are *already* children of God. But how can this be true if v. 23 says we are waiting eagerly for adoption as God’s children?

Which is it? Are we *already* adopted as God’s children, or are we *not yet* adopted as God’s children? Does the Bible contradict itself here?

No, the Bible is not contradicting itself. The answer is that we are *both* already adopted *and* not yet adopted. That’s how we can be *already* adopted and *look forward* to being adopted.

B. We are not yet adopted as God’s children

How can this be? How can adoption be *both* already *and* not yet? The answer is that there are different stages of adoption.

When our son was born in Guatemala City, our phone rang here in Minnesota. We had been waiting to adopt a child from Guatemala, and a man named Antonio here in Minnesota was helping us. He called us on the phone and told us that a baby boy had just been born, and he wanted us to confirm that we would adopt him.

Of course, we said yes. His next question was what we wanted to name our son. We named our son Antonio, after him. As far as we were concerned, he was instantly our son, at the moment we named him.

But we did not get to meet him for another five months. It took that long for the legal paperwork to work its way through the court system down there in Guatemala, and to get his passport and visa. But then, five months after we had named him, we finally met him in person, and held him in our arms, and welcomed him into his new home.

It is the same way with you, if you have faith in Christ. You are already God’s child, but you are still waiting for the last stage of your adoption.

That's why Paul says, here in v. 23, "we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."

C. We wait eagerly for the redemption of our bodies

Do you know what that means? Do you know what "the redemption of our bodies" is? It is the *glorification* of our bodies. Today when you die, your body is buried in the ground. If you have faith in Christ, then your spirit goes to be with God, but your body waits for the resurrection, when it will be glorified.

Glorification is what we are supposed to be looking forward to. "For in this hope we were saved," Paul says at the beginning of v. 24. Glorification is what Paul keeps bringing up in this chapter, Christians, ever since v. 11, where he said that God will "give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you." And glorification is the last part of that beautiful, "golden chain" of vv. 29-30. It is the "good" that we read about in v. 28.

If you have faith in Christ, then you are already named as God's child. But you are not yet in your new home. One day, you will be. God will give you a glorified body, and then, your adoption will be complete. That's what we're waiting for, because then, when we are saved in soul *and* in body, God will be most glorified.

Christian, as you groan inwardly, this is the hope God gives you, not modern psychology, not self-help books, not positive affirmations for the day. Don't forget Paul's point in this paragraph! He's saying, the sufferings of today are nothing compared with the glory of tomorrow. So suffer well!

The goal is not to stop suffering. The goal is not to stop groaning. The goal is to endure the suffering by longing for the glory to come. Christians endure the suffering because they have faith in that still-future, still-invisible hope.

III. Christians Endure Because they Have Faith

Look at v. 24. Paul says, "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?" Our hope is for what we cannot see!

A. Our hope is for what we cannot see

All this talk about the afterlife and resurrection and glorified bodies is foolishness to the world today. People think like scientists, and all this talk about supernatural things sounds like silly superstition to them. You can't

prove these things scientifically. None of us have ever actually seen a resurrection. None of us have seen a glorified body.

No, I don't hate scientists. My own undergraduate degree is in Chemistry, and I still benefit by it. But our hope is not based on scientific observations. Our hope is not based on what we can see or smell or taste or touch or hear, but on *faith*.

Our hope is for what we *cannot* see. Our hope is *not* for what we *can* see.

B. Our hope is not for what we can see

What we *can* see is what makes us groan, because everywhere we look, we see creation in bondage to decay. We who are Christians see it for what it really is, because we see everything on this earth in light of what we *can't* see. In other words, we look at everything through the lens of faith.

The things in this world are only shadows of the unseen reality. We don't hope in the shadows. We hope in the true reality, which is invisible to the most powerful microscope and the most powerful telescope. Only the sight of the soul can see it.

By faith, we believe in unseen truth. And our faith is what makes us endure.

C. Our faith is what makes us endure

It makes us endure because it makes everything clear to us. We don't flinch at the pain, because we know the pain will come. We don't run away from the pain because we know what it is leading to.

When a nurse gives a shot to a child, what does she say? She tells him the truth. Whenever I got a shot when I was a child, the nurse warned me, "This is going to hurt a little bit," before she gave me the shot. Sometimes she would say, "This will be like a mosquito bite," or, "This is going to sting." Why did she do that? She did it because she wanted me to endure the shot. She didn't want me to be startled and jump when she put the needle in. So she told me the truth. She was honest with me about the pain, so I could prepare for the pain and endure the pain.

It's the same way in life. To endure, you need to know the truth. And the truth is that in this world, we groan. It hurts. But "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us," as Christians. That's the truth, and that's what we need to hear.

If we lie to Christians about the pain of living in this world, we aren't helping them prepare for the pain. And if they don't prepare for the pain, then how will they endure the pain? If we ignore the reality of sorrow in this world, then, when finally the reality comes crashing into our lives, as it does over and over, it is devastating. All we can do is sit and quiver and wait until we can forget it for a little while longer, and get back to the business of loving our lives here on earth.

But if we are honest about the pain, and point to the unseen hope that all this pain is leading to, then we can prepare for the pain, and endure it in a way that glorifies God. Honesty leads to preparation leads to endurance. This is the life of faith, standing on the threshold of eternity and fixing our eyes upon Truth, knowing that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

Conclusion

To recap:

- Christians groan with the whole creation
- Christians wait eagerly for adoption as God's children
- Christians endure because they have faith

Do you know what it means to groan? I hope you do, and I hope you groan in the right way, and for the right reasons. I hope you groan in hope as a Christian, and I hope you groan because you long for the glory of God.

Oh, to have a tender heart and cry out to God from the depths, like David did! I would not trade a day of it for 10,000 of the days of the anemic Christianity of so many back-slapping, grinning Christians I have met over the years. Happy, happy, happy, yet seemingly, utterly *joyless*!

Every single giant of the faith that I have studied suffered with sorrowful, inward groaning: Paul, Luther, Spurgeon, Brainerd, to name a few. Dependent men. Humble men. Deeply emotional men. Blessed men. Sorrowful yet *truly joyful* men!

How many Christians are content to know their Lord without tears? So many Christians seem to think that the Christian life here on earth is one of bliss. But the notion of joy without sorrow is one of the greatest hoaxes ever played on Christians by the devil.

Reject the lie. Pursue joy in God that is true joy! Reach for and grasp hold of and never let go of the joy that can only come through faith in the unseen Truth, the joy of knowing that your sufferings in this life are the sufferings of childbirth.

One day, our suffering will be over. God will reveal the sons of God, and magnify his name by redeeming creation itself. This is our great, joyful hope, Brothers and Sisters.

And if one of you listening does not know this joyful hope that we have in Jesus, I invite you right here, right now, to turn once and for all to Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us all say with Paul, with confidence and joy as we groan inwardly, that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”