

Sermon 74: Romans 8:23: The Christian's Groaning

OUTLINE

The groaning of the unbeliever

The groaning of the believer

INTRODUCTION

Modern schools of psychology speak about different basic needs or drives that shape a person's life; certain fundamental desires written upon the heart. In one school of thought developed by Abraham Maslow, esteem is seen as one of our basic needs and motivations. A lower form of esteem is derived when others respect you and a higher form of esteem from when you respect yourself. It is held that those with a healthy self-esteem will go on to do good things and not bad, and be helpful in society not a nuisance. These schools of psychology are incomplete because they ignore the spiritual aspect of man. In this particular school the emphasis is on how you see yourself and not on how God sees you. This has had negative effects in all areas of society. One area in particular is education. Because it is believed that children are fragile things that always need to see themselves in a positive light, all forms of failing have been removed from the education system. Today as we look again into God's word we are going to see Paul give us the bible's view on what is going on in the believer's heart. If we were to allow the Scriptures to psychoanalyse us, if it were to test the health of our inner lives what would it be looking for? Paul highlights this for in Romans 8:23 that every Christian has a basic yearning, a pining, a groaning for the new creation.

Today as we look at this verse and consider the deep things of our hearts I want to consider two things. Firstly, we will consider the basic yearning for God in the heart of the unbeliever; secondly, we will consider the nature of this Spirit taught groaning in the believer.

The groaning of the unbeliever

There is no doubt that Paul is considering the Spirit taught groaning of the Christian's heart for fellowship with God in the new creation. However, there does seem to be a softer echo of this in the heart of the unbeliever as well. Ecclesiastes 3:11 speaks about the eternity that God has put into all of humanity's hearts. Romans 1:19-21 tells us that every person has the knowledge of God as creator constantly spoken to them through their senses by creation. Romans 2:15 tells us that every person has the law of God written on their hearts. Genesis 1:27 tells us that God has made us in His image, this accounts for our intellect, creativity, propensity for relationships, communication, love, servanthood, etc. The bible alerts us to the fact that there are certain inbuilt/innate desires and knowledge that we all have. A simple observation of the world will readily reveal that all cultures have marriage which God made us for, family which God made, law and order in society which God gave

us, creativity, and unless untaught through atheistic evolution, every culture has religion. Man is a spiritual, communal, creative, moral being.

However, on account of sin we corrupt the knowledge we have. We suppress it, we ignore it, we twist it for self-serving reasons. We orient our universes to seat ourselves in the centre and arrange God and everything else around ourselves. However even the unbeliever is constantly haunted by these realities of God and life intended in His world pressing themselves upon the conscience and generating earnest groaning and desire. The pain of everyday life gives them a sense of homelessness. The book of Ecclesiastes captures well the picture of man trying to please himself in a fallen world without God, of pursuing every pleasure and finding them all to be futile and ultimately, vanity.

Let me try and get at this through the thought of C. S. Lewis. Joy for C. S. Lewis was a very important thing. The deep inconsolable longing for joy in the human heart was an indication to Lewis of this life with God in paradise is written on our hearts. As Augustine put it there is a restlessness in the human heart until we find our rest in God. He argued that those deep pangs of nostalgia, the deep longing for beauty is an indication of this hunger for God. He used an illustration that went like this, "A man's physical hunger does not prove that that man will get any bread: he may die of starvation on a raft in the Atlantic. But surely a man's hunger does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating, and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist." In other words, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." Our deep pains and our unsatisfied desires betray that our present is a bad fit and we were designed to fit elsewhere. And that desire to be with God is then in sin wrongly attached to other things. We put God's creation in the place of His creation and continue to try and extract eternal pleasure from things that can never give us what God intended to satisfy Himself. Lewis says, 'We are half hearted creatures fooling about with drink, sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot know what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.'

Let me not undersell this 'misplaced' pleasure seeking, it is idolatry. We have in our pursuit of selfish gratification rejected God in all His beauty, glory and sufficiency, and by our pursuing things and not the maker of them we have offered Him the highest possible insult. We have preferred fallen things to a perfect God, the finite for the infinite, the ugly instead of the beautiful, the sinful is proffered over the holy. We have implied that He is miserly, that He is not enough, that He is not worth serving, this rejection of God for things is to place things in the place of God and is idolatry. And there are no sincere seekers in the world who ascend to God by their own desires. All are sinners and have turned from God, there is no one who seeks God. But God sent His Son Jesus Christ to return our wandering hearts to Him. He has come to rescue us from our own way and the inevitable judgement it deserves. Christ came to die the death you deserve so that your sins can be fully paid for and has made a way that you can be restored to the life you were created for. To find your fullest joy satisfied in God; to be in fellowship with Him in a perfect world. Christ died to forgive your sin and rescue you, and He will also be the one who will be a faithful Second

Adam whose rule we will share in. God calls us to abandon our half-hearted pleasures, our mud pies, and calls us to forgiveness and fullness of joy by repenting of our sins and trusting in Christ's work to make us righteous before God.

The groaning of the believer

The text that we are looking at is focused not on the dull misguided searching of our fallen hearts, but rather the intense and informed longing of our Spirit awoken hearts. '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.' We can deal with this verse by answering two basic questions. What are we groaning for, and why do we groan?

Given our current condition of pain, and the fact that God is in heaven, and if we were to die now our spirits would leave our bodies and be present with the Lord. On account of this some have wrongfully assumed that the groaning of the Christian is to be dead or bodiless in the presence of God. However, this notion of the body as a cage that we long to free our souls from is a relic of Greek philosophy and not the teaching of the body. The body is not bad but fallen, and God intends for us not to be perfect without bodies but perfect in them. The groaning that we have is not a desire for freedom from existence in a body, but freedom from sin.

Let's consider the groan as we find it in Romans 7:22-25, 'For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 23 but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.' This is an excellent example of what some of our groaning sounds like. Notice firstly that it is not the groaning of the unbeliever for the unbeliever does not delight in God's law and mourn over the fact that they are constantly having to wrestle with themselves to do it. Secondly, see that Paul locates the problem of sin as residing in His fallen body, that his fallen body continues to supply a foothold for sin to continually war against the new desire in the Christian to obey God. Thirdly, appreciate that Paul feels betrayed by his body and feels wretched and hates himself. Fourthly, he expresses a longing to be free from his wretched condition crying out 'Who will deliver me from this body of death?'

Another way to express this groaning is found in the idea of being a stranger or pilgrim. Our citizenship is in heaven and we are homesick for the new creation. As we experience more and more pain, as we live amongst those who love sin and hate God and pursue vain pursuits, as we wrestle with constant temptation, all of this adds up to make us feel out of place and away from home. This causes us to resonate with certain sentiments in Scripture, Ps. 84:1-3, 'How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.' Psalm 63:1-3, '1 O God, you are

my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.' Ps 73:24-5, 'You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.' When you find yourself to be out of synch with the world and longing for God and a world of pure pleasures, that deep angst for holy fellowship and living; that is the groan of a regenerated heart. A new world and a new body this is what we are aching for.

It is this very issue, the issue of the need for a new body that Paul is speaking to in Romans 8:23. Paul tells us that the answer to question of 7:24 is not a disembodied state for eternity, but rather the receiving of a resurrection body just like Christ's when Jesus comes again to make all things new. Paul uses two word pictures to illustrate this reality of us receiving a new body. Both these word pictures are borrowed from the Roman culture that his readers would have been familiar with. Paul speaks about this resurrection as 'adoption as sons' and 'the redemption of our bodies.'

Adoption as sons might seem a strange way to you to speak of receiving our new bodies when Jesus comes again, for it seems to imply that we are not adopted. However, Paul is not trying to undermine that we are already adopted at the time we are born again. No instead he seems to be referring to the Roman custom of adoption that had a second part to it.

Several years ago I visited the UK and at that time, at every Christmas, it was traditional to show certain movies. I remember seeing several of the old epics based around biblical themes like Quo Vadis, the Ten Commandments and the Robe. Well, the movie the Robe is based on a book by the same title and in the book one of the main characters is a Roman called Marcellus. In important Roman Families there was a custom where sons came of age and were officially acknowledged as sons and heirs publicly. They were always sons but at this ceremony where they are seen as the official heirs they were clothed in a white toga. Although always being a son it was this further act of adoption that seems to be in Paul's mind. It does not undermine the first adoption but openly declares it. When we one day receive our new bodies, we will finally receive our white togas, this wretched body that we presently dwell in, these dirty rags will be replaced with wedding garments that we can attend the wedding feast of the Lamb.

The second word picture is linked to the word 'redemption' and it takes us to the slave market. The price that a slave or someone would pay to set a slave free is called a ransom. And once they have been set free we say that they have been redeemed or have experienced redemption. It is a term borrowed from the world of economics. This word picture is most fitting for the release we will finally experience when we are resurrected in Christ's likeness. It is true that we are already free, that we are resurrected in Christ and have been set free from the law of sin and death. This has resulted in us being able to now overcome indwelling sin and experience transformation into Christ's character. However, we cannot reach perfection this side of eternity and our bodies still die, get sick and are a place

of assault against us, as temptations arise within us. But when Jesus comes again our whole selves including our bodies will be set free from sin. We will experience all the freedom that Jesus won for us and not only a part of it. Redemption then is a most suitable word to describe this climactic release from sin.

The second question we want to answer is this one, why do we groan in this way? Why do we groan for eternal fellowship with God in a new world and a new body? Paul tells us that we groan this way on account of the Spirit, 'but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly.' We can understand very easily that it is the Spirit that is the one who causes us to long more earnestly for new creation realities. Imagine for a moment that I came from another country and I was in love with that country's culture, language, cuisine and customs, and then I came to live inside of you. You would begin to experience a taste and desire for the things of my country. It is this desire that the Spirit gives to us when He renovates our hearts.

The difficult part to understand is why Paul describes the Spirit as 'the firstfruits of the Spirit.' How is the Spirit the firstfruits and what is the significance of this? The word firstfruits has its roots in the OT. Richard Gaffin explains it as follows,

"It refers to the 'firstfruits' offerings of grain, wine, cattle, and the like, appointed by Moses. The point to these sacrifices is that they are not offered up for their own sake, as it were, but as representative of the total harvest, the entire flock, and so forth. They are a token expression of thanksgiving that the whole has been given by God. Thus 'firstfruits' does not simply have a temporal force. It does bring into view the initial portion of the harvest, but only as it is part of the whole..."¹.

In other words think of the firstfruits as the beginning of the main event of the new creation. If I were to ask you, when will the age to come begin? Most people would answer, 'When Jesus comes again.' This however is incorrect. The age to come has already invaded our present time so that there is now an overlap in the two ages. The beginning of the new age and the end of the old age inhabit the same space. The Holy Spirit is in fact Himself the first part of the new creation, the firstfruits that is present to prove that the new age has already begun. The new age has broken into our present experience bringing with it a taste, a starter, an entre of what the New Creation is going to be like. For this reason our salvation is described as being resurrected with Christ, for it is a participation in the new creation power and life. When we meet together as the church the book of Hebrews talks about us tasting of the powers of the age to come in our services. Jesus is described as the firstborn from the dead and is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. This means that the sort of resurrection that will happen to human bodies when Jesus comes again has already had a start in Christ's own resurrection showing an invasion of what we would deem future realities in the present.

What is the significance of this?

¹*Resurrection and Redemption A study in Paul's Soteriology* (Phillipsburg. N.J.: P&R, 2nd ed, 1987), 34

Michael Horton answers the question this way,

“With the descent of the Spirit, we are now in the last days. The clock is running down on this present evil age. The gates of hell will not be able to prevail against the church. The outpouring of the Spirit will guarantee a believing community in ‘these last days,’ one that not only remembers Christ’s completed work, but is actually inserted into the covenantal history (and eschatology) of its glorified head. In fact, as Paul teaches, the Spirit is not only sent *among* believers but *into* them, to indwell them, as a deposit (*arrabon*) of their final redemption. It is precisely because we ‘have the firstfruits of the Spirit’ that ‘we ourselves groan ... inwardly as we wait for the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (Rom 8:23; cf. Gal 4:6). As the *arrabon* (down payment) of our final redemption, the Spirit gives us the ‘already’ of our participation in Christ as the new creation, and it is the Spirit within us who gives us the aching hope for the ‘not yet’ that awaits us in our union with Christ...”²

We are tasting new creation realities now and satan cannot reverse it. The Kingdom of Christ has been inaugurated, we merely wait now for the inevitable consummation.

Let me end with a practical point. Is this your groan? Does your heart pine for these realities or are you locked on the things of this present evil age? DO live with the Spirit teaching you your longings or are you hearkening to the desires of the flesh?

² The Christian Faith, p559-60.