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Enjoying God Ministries  
Romans #33  
September 12, 2021

## **Everyone and Everything is Groaning (even God)**

### **Romans 8:18-27**

I hardly need to remind you of the devastating and destructive power of what we call nature or the material creation. In the past few months, we have witnessed Hurricane Ida, as well as ravaging fires throughout the western United States, accompanied by record-breaking high temperatures. As I recall, one day this summer it reached 130 degrees in Death Valley.

And then there were the torrential rainstorms and flooding that hit areas of Arizona and many of our southeastern states. We who live in Oklahoma are all too familiar with the threat of tornadoes. I do not want to minimize at all the damage inflicted by F-1 or F-2 tornadoes that pack winds of 100 to 150 mph. But the tornado that swept through Moore, Oklahoma, in 2003 recorded winds of nearly 320 mph. The scale by which the power of tornadoes is measured was shattered.

When another F-5 tornado struck Moore in 2013, I remember my conversation with Andrew Burkhart, who now serves as pastor of Frontline Church in Moore. He said that when he returned home to find out how much damage they had suffered, he couldn't find his street or neighborhood or anything that he could recognize as familiar. The land had quite literally been scraped clean of all signs, trees, homes, or anything that might tell him where his home once stood.

More recently we saw how Haiti was struck by a 7.2 magnitude earthquake, the result of which was thousands of lives lost and tens of thousands of people displaced and now homeless.

Severe flooding in Germany and India, together with famine in various parts of Africa, all bear witness to the fact that, as Paul says in Romans 8, the creation has been "subjected to futility" (v. 20). The natural creation itself is portrayed as "groaning" from its bondage to corruption. Whether it is disease or a pandemic or climate change (whatever you may think of that) or monsoons or hurricanes or earthquakes or crop failure, there is no escaping the fact that *the world in which we live is suffering greatly from the consequences of the fall of Adam.*

Although the imagery Paul uses in this passage in Romans 8 initially strikes us as somewhat odd, on further reflection I completely understand why he says what he does. He talks about our hope for the redemption and resurrection of our bodies in terms of groaning. I can certainly identify with that. But he also speaks of the natural, material creation as groaning in anticipation of being delivered from the curse imposed in the aftermath of Adam's original sin. But it is even more odd when he speaks of God the Holy Spirit groaning as he intercedes with God the Father on our behalf.

Today we will look at the first of these two groanings, and I will devote an entire message to vv. 26-27 next week.

But before we go any further, I need to say something about the use in Scripture of figures of speech. There are countless examples of this. Symbolism is rampant in the Bible. Typology is everywhere, especially when we look at how the NT makes use of the OT. There are similes and metaphors everywhere. One thinks of Jesus himself saying things like, “I am the light of the world” and “I am the good shepherd” and “I am the door,” as well as his declaration when he instituted the Lord’s Supper, saying of the bread, “This is my body” and of the wine, “This is my blood.”

There are multiple examples of what we call anthropomorphisms. This is when God describes himself in human terms. Think of the statement that God parted the waters of the Red Sea with a blast from his nostrils. Or consider those many texts where it speaks of God extending his hand or his right arm to accomplish some great miracle.

But there is one particular figure of speech that concerns us today. It is called *personification*. In personification, some dimension of the material creation is described as if it were a thinking, feeling, choosing person. You may recall in the OT that the mountains are said to clap their hands and the seas roar in praise of God. Fire and hail and snow and mist are described as “fulfilling his word” (Ps. 148:8) in obedience to his command. Here are just a few more examples.

“The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy; the meadows clothe themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy” (Ps. 65:12-13).

“Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth” (Ps. 96:11-13a).

“Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together” (Ps. 98:8).

I could go on citing dozens of similar statements. The principle in each case is the same: *the inanimate world is portrayed as if it were animate. The non-thinking processes of nature are portrayed as if they could think and feel and make meaningful choices.*

### *The Groaning of the Material Creation (vv. 19-22)*

But today we come to what may well be the most graphic and comprehensive example of personification in the Bible. The entire material creation, all of nature is described as “groaning” to be set free from the judgment that has been placed on it. The creation is here said to wait “with eager longing” for our redemption, because then it also will be set free and glorified.

The first thing we need to do is determine precisely what Paul means by the word “*creation*.” He uses it no fewer than five times in this one paragraph: explicitly in vv. 19, 20, 21, 22 and implicitly in v. 23.

Let’s begin by making sure we understand what he does not mean by the word “creation.” He does not mean the holy or elect *angels*, for they were not subjected to vanity and corruption. He does not mean *Satan or demons*, for they do not long for the day of redemption. He does not mean *Christians*, because we are distinguished from “creation” in vv. 19, 21, 23. He does not mean *mankind in general*, because it cannot be said of them that they were subjected to futility by a will other than their own. He does not mean *unbelieving mankind in particular*, for they, like Satan, do not long for the day of redemption.

Thus, all rational creation is ruled out. In referring to the “creation” Paul is not thinking of any being that thinks or that is shaped in the image of God. By “creation” Paul means ***the earth, nature, non-rational creation, both animate and inanimate; the flora and fauna of nature***. He is talking about the material world in which we live, that surrounds us. Paul says several things about “creation.”

**First**, we have to take note of creation’s current defilement and suffering. To make sense of this, we need to go back to the Garden of Eden and the story of Adam’s sin and its consequences.

(17) And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; (18) thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. (19) 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” (Gen. 3:17-19).

This is what Paul means when he says in v. 20 that “the creation was subjected to futility.” By “futility” he means the inability and ineffectiveness of something in attaining its goal. The material world in which we live is unable to properly fulfill the purpose for which God brought it into existence. The material world was originally designed by God not only to draw attention to his creative genius and power but also to provide a place for men and women to live and thrive and enjoy the good gifts of God.

But creation is prevented from accomplishing this goal. It wasn’t the fault of creation itself. Notice that Paul says in v. 20 that this “futility” was not imposed “willingly.” By this he means that creation didn’t want it or will it or do anything to deserve it. The judgment that God brought to bear on the material world, the judgment that resulted in this futility, was ***the act of God in response to the sin of Adam***. This futility or judgment is described again in v. 21 as “bondage to corruption.” The material world is enslaved to environmental devastation and plagues and destructive earthquakes and horrific tornadoes and pollution.

The second law of thermodynamics, also referred to as the law of “entropy,” teaches us that the universe is tending toward disorder and depletion of energy. And we know from Scripture that this is no natural phenomenon or quirk of nature. It is intrinsic to the universe because of God’s judgment consequent on the sin of Adam. It is one element in the “futility” to which the material creation was subjected.

“Sam, are you saying that tornadoes and earthquakes and hurricanes and pandemics and crop failure are expressions of divine judgment against the earth?” Yes! That does not mean we have the freedom to say that a particular natural disaster is God’s response to a particular sin. The entire earth is deserving of these natural disasters. They are each and every one a wake-up call to sinful and rebellious people. When you hear of an earthquake in Haiti or wildfires in the west or plagues in Africa, you should immediately pause and recognize that these are expressions of the futility to which the earth has been subjected and they are designed by God to call all people everywhere to repent and to turn to Jesus. The meaning or significance of these natural calamities is that sin is horrible and hideous and deserving of judgment.

However, as bad as it may seem, this futility or judgment imposed on creation was not without hope. In other words, the corruption of nature was not the final word. God judged and cursed the natural world in the hope that it would one day be set free from the consequences of Adam’s sin. Even in the act of judging and cursing creation there was a promise of ultimate deliverance and redemption. At present, the forces of nature seem to work against themselves and against us as well. But as someone has said, “this frustration produces what might be called a symphony of nature in a minor key but with the expectation of a glorious finale.”

**Second**, Paul tells us in v. 19, once again making use of personification, that creation “waits with eager longing” for our redemption and resurrection. This verb translated “waits with eager longing” has the sense of someone stretching the neck or craning forward, hoping to catch a glimpse of something. Someone has described it as if the material world is standing on tip toes, looking with anxious expectation for its deliverance from the curse and its entrance into the original purposes for which God made it. It’s a beautiful picture, to say the least.

The imagery takes on yet a different and additional light in v. 22. There Paul says that “the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.” In other words, *the material world is here likened to a pregnant woman in labor*. She groans and cries and suffers as she awaits the moment when her child comes forth. Her travail issues in a new life. This is very much what the material world even now, until the return of Christ, is experiencing. Its groaning under the present burden of sin and death is in anticipation of the new life it will experience when God redeems it.

**Third**, for what does the material creation groan and wait in eager expectation? What is it looking forward to? For what does it labor and suffer in anticipation? The answer is given in several places. In v. 19 Paul says it waits with eager longing “for the revealing of the sons of God” (v. 19). What does this mean? What is the “revealing of the sons of God”? The answer is given in numerous places in the NT, none more explicit than 1 John 3:2-3.

“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3).

John is talking about the appearing or the second coming of Jesus Christ. Yes, we are God’s children right now. We are his adopted sons and daughters. But our sonship is veiled and hidden and not yet fully and publicly seen or proclaimed or manifested in its fullness. I can’t count the number of times I’ve been told,

“Sam, you don’t look or talk or act like a child of God.” And that grieves me. But I understand that as long as I live in this corrupt and decaying body and struggle with indwelling sin, that will continue to be the conclusion that some may draw. But it won’t always be this way! When Jesus appears and transforms my body to conform to his glorious body (Phil. 3:20-21) I will be “like him” (1 John 3:2)! You will be “like him”!

We will not be made the sons of God when Christ appears. We already are. Again, don’t make the mistake of thinking that this is gender specific. Women are the sons of God just as men are the bride of Christ. It’s an issue of relationship, not gender. But what we already are is not always or consistently seen to be as such. When Christ returns the whole universe will see us for who we really are, right now. It will be revealed, disclosed, proclaimed, and made known with unmistakable clarity and conviction.

This “revealing of the sons of God” (v. 19b) is what Paul elsewhere describes as our glorification or our final resurrection. Hear his words:

“(51) Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, (52) 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. (53) For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:51-53).

“(20) But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, (21) who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Phil. 3:20-21).

So, when Paul talks about “the revealing of the sons of God” (v. 19) and “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (v. 21) and “the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (v. 23) he is talking about what will happen when Jesus comes back. We will be changed forever. We will be raised to a new life with a glorified physical body that is wholly and eternally free from sin. And this is what the material creation is groaning for and hoping for and anxiously awaiting. Why? Because when *we* get fully and finally redeemed, *it* will be fully and finally redeemed.

If you’re wondering in what sense the material creation will be redeemed and glorified, you need only read a few texts of Scripture. For example:

“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:6-9).

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind” (Isaiah 65:17).

If you want a detailed description of what a redeemed earth and a material creation set free from the curse will look like, read Revelation 21-22!

You can already see from this, even before we get to v. 23, that the destiny of the children of God and the destiny of the material creation are tied up together. ***Just as mankind and the material world were united in the fall into sin and the curse which came upon both, so also they will together be redeemed, together delivered from bondage to the corruption that we all see and feel and under which we suffer.***

*The Groaning of Christians, the Children of God (vv. 23-25)*

The reason for our groaning is once again the work of the Holy Spirit. This is one more among the many activities or ministries of the Spirit that are mentioned in Romans 8. In this case, the Spirit stirs our hearts and souls to long for the final redemption of our bodies.

Here Paul attributes this inner spiritual ache to the fact that we have “the firstfruits of the Spirit” (v. 23). Often times Paul will use a commercial metaphor when speaking of the Spirit and refer to him as the “earnest” or “down payment” on our future inheritance. But here he uses an agricultural metaphor and describes the Spirit as the firstfruits of the full harvest which is yet to come. The point is that we have in the Holy Spirit a taste in advance of the feast that is yet to come. We have him completely in our hearts, but we do not yet experience the fullness of the blessings of salvation that he will bring to us when Jesus returns.

There are three things to note.

**First**, Paul says that we “groan inwardly” for the day when the reality of our adoption as the children of God will be fully and finally consummated. This is not so much a groaning under the burden of sin, although that is involved, as it is a groaning for the glory of life in the new heaven and new earth. In other words, it is not the groaning of disappointment and frustration, but the groaning of anticipation and expectation. These groans are not death pangs but birth pangs. They are not in anticipation of the end but of the beginning.

***Thus we see the natural, material creation and the spiritual, human creation joining together in a virtual chorus of groaning, a symphony of sighs, as it were, as we together agonize in anxious expectation of that final day of redemption.***

So, let me ask each of you today. Do you groan and long for the coming of Christ? Do you live each day in heartfelt anticipation of his return and the glory and bliss of the new heaven and new earth? Here is how the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformer, John Calvin, put it:

“If heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile? If departure from the world is entry into life, what else is the world but a sepulcher? And what else is it for us to remain in this life but to be immersed in death?” (*Institutes*, III.ix.4).

18<sup>th</sup> century Puritan pastor and theologian, Jonathan Edwards, agrees:

“‘Tis abundantly represented in Scripture as the spirit and character of all true saints, that they set their hearts upon, love, long, wait and pray for the promised glory of that day” (V:376).

**Second**, when that day comes, what exactly will happen? Paul mentions here that this will constitute our adoption, that is, the full revelation and disclosure of our identity as the children of God. But at the heart of that experience will be ***“the redemption of our bodies”*** (v. 23b).

Our bodies need a lot of things: food, rest, exercise, washing, etc. But more than anything else, we need our bodies to be fully and finally redeemed. By “redemption” I think Paul is referring to that time, yet to come, when we will be so utterly transformed that we will never again think a sinful thought or feel a sinful impulse or yield to a sinful temptation. Yes, the “redemption” that he has in mind is also physical. Our bodies will be forever set free from any susceptibility to disease. No more Covid! No more diabetes or heart disease or head colds or arthritis or shingles or cancer of any sort. I don’t know how God will do it, but do it he will.

Paul has already referred to this in Romans. In 7:24 he expressed his desire to be delivered “from this body of death.” He was even more explicit in Romans 8:11 where he said that “if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” And then again, in Romans 8:17, he promises that if we suffer with Christ, we will also be “glorified with him.”

Let me pause a bit here and answer a question people frequently ask me. They say, “Sam, what about my mom and dad who were believers but were cremated? What about those who died centuries ago and whose bodies have totally decayed and decomposed? If their bodies have been altogether destroyed, how will God redeem and resurrect them?”

I have no idea! But I know it will happen. The God who has Genesis 1 on his resume, the God who has the power to call the entire material creation into existence out of nothing, the God who has created trillions and trillions of stars and holds them in place without the slightest drain on his energy or strength, is certainly capable of reconstituting the decomposed or destroyed bodies of human beings. If God created and sustained your body in the first place, knitting you together in your mother’s womb, as David describes in Psalm 139, he can certainly re-create and restore your body a second time. Don’t ever forget Paul’s statement in Philippians 3:21. There he tells us that Jesus will “transform our lowly body [and I would also say, our decomposed body] to be like his glorious body, ***by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.***” This is the “power” of an omnipotent God. This is the power by which Jesus subjects demons and all of creation to himself. This is the power by which he holds all things together (Col. 1:16-17). This is the power that will also one day redeem our bodies and complete our adoption as God’s children.

**Third**, although we are truly saved by faith in Christ, we are not fully saved. As you've heard me say on numerous occasions, we are saved three times or in three ways. We were saved when we were justified or declared righteous by God by faith in Christ. We are being saved even now as the Spirit sanctifies us. And we will be saved when we are fully and finally glorified, which is what Paul is saying here in vv. 23-25.

We are saved by faith but also "in hope" of the future complete restoration and resurrection of our entire selves, body, soul, mind, spirit, will, and emotions. Our present salvation includes the hope of the future glorification of the body.

Hope, of course, is a unique experience in the life of the believer. As Paul says, you don't hope for what you already possess. I don't live in hope of being justified. I'm already justified. I don't live in hope that the Holy Spirit will dwell within me. He already does. But when we set our minds on the redemption of our bodies as well as the redemption of the entire material creation, we hope for it, we wait for it, we look forward to it with heartfelt expectation.

But note carefully what his hope does. It produces "patience" (v. 25). Don't ever let your longing for the return of Christ produce impatience or frustration. Yes, I'm angry about the condition of our world. I'm angry about the ways I continue to sin. I'm angry when my body doesn't respond the way I want it to. I don't like pain any more than any of you. But when we set our hope on seeing Jesus face to face and being brought by his power into the fullness of our salvation, it should cultivate patience and endurance in our souls.

#### *The Groaning of God the Holy Spirit (vv. 26-27)*

The personification of the material creation as groaning under the curse of sin is one thing. The description of you and me as groaning in anticipation of the redemption of our bodies is beautiful. But to suggest that God himself, the person of the Holy Spirit, also groans is almost more than we can understand. What this means, and how it affects our prayer lives, is deserving of an entire sermon. So come back next week!

#### *Conclusion*

When you read in Revelation 21-22 of the glory and blessings of the new heaven and new earth, you may be led to wonder, "How can I possibly grasp something so wonderful, so exalted, so transcendently beautiful?" God knows this, and that is why when our bodies are redeemed, he will provide us with new capacities and minds and affections to enjoy all that he has prepared for us.

In the meantime, embrace the groaning of your heart for the redemption of your body and of the material world around us. This is the hope we have because of what Christ has done. And it is this hope that will sustain us as we continue to witness the futility and decay to which all things have been subjected.