

Hoping and Groaning

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 8:22-25

I want to talk about hope tonight, and I want to do that by reading a paragraph from the middle of Romans 8. Before I read that paragraph, I want to put these words in context. Romans 8 starts out as positive as any place in Paul's writings. Romans 8 starts out with a joyful proclamation of the new life we have in Jesus. *"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because the law of the Spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and death!" "Our old self is gone! The Holy Spirit is in our hearts, changing us! We are not slaves to fear, we are God's children!"* That's the tone up to verse 16: Freedom! Life! Adoption! It's a very sunshiny portrait.

But starting in verse 17, the tone changes. Paul has been talking about the shining sun of the new day, but now he acknowledges the persistence of clouds. Listen and you will hear the cloudiness in our passage. *"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."*

Here's a really interesting thing about this passage, something that will illustrate what I want to say about this text. Verse 23 says that we *"groan inwardly as we await our adoption as sons (and daughters)."* In that verse has the adoption happened or is it something in the future? It's in the future. It sounds like our adoption is something we wait for. Now go back to verse 15. Let me read what it says there: *"The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship (and daughtership), and by him we cry 'Abba Father.'"* Now...in verse 15 does it sound like the adoption has happened or is it in the future? Now Paul's talking like adoption is in the past, like it's all done! Paul! What's going on? Are we groaning because we are waiting for our adoption? Or are we crying Abba Father because we've been adopted already? Which is it?

The answer is both. It's both of course. We are both God's children, and we are not yet God's children. This world belongs to God, and yet we do not yet see everything under his feet. And until you understand how it can be both, you won't fully understand what Christian hope looks like and feels like. I called this message 'Groaning and Hoping' because in these verses Paul says something interesting:

he makes groaning a part of Christian hope. Christian hope doesn't just sing, Christian hope doesn't just clap and dance, Christian hope groans. Christian hope certainly has joy in it. We know that we have been forgiven in Jesus. We know that our sins have been paid for. We know that we will rise again on the last day. We know that Jesus will come back and make everything new. So there's lots of sunshine. But Christian hope also knows what it's waiting for. Christian hope knows and feels the things that are out of place. Christian hope knows and feels the hurts and injustices of this world, and Christian hope knows and feels the things that will never be fully put right until Jesus returns to make all things new.

So, Christian hope sings for what it already has and it groans for what is not yet here. If you are really going to get your hope right, if your hopes are going to be healthy, it's really

important that you get the groaning part right. C.S. Lewis talks about this in *Mere Christianity*. Lewis is really good at showing both sides of our hope. Lewis points out that our highest and best human hopes leave us unsatisfied. He uses vacations as an example. You are locked in the grip of a Michigan winter and you are totally worn out. You are short-tempered with others and you're short-tempered with yourself. You dream of going south to some beach-side condo. You feel sure that if you could just walk barefoot on a beach, dressed in your shorts and your t-shirt with the sun on your face all your restlessness would vanish. You feel certain that if you could just sit down in a beach chair, immersed in the warmth and the sound of the waves, you would feel that deep sense of fulfillment, a fulfillment that you cannot feel when you're surrounded by slush and gray skies and potholes. So you book that spring break trip! You go to Marco Island. You go to Orange Beach. You spend a week and it's good and it's fun and it's relaxing...BUT...it doesn't quite get rid of all your restlessness. It can't fulfill all the hopes you have. Everything seems outwardly perfect, but there is a part of you that is unsatisfied, that still groans for something more.

Another great example of this is the sports fan. The really serious sports fan groans for his team's success. He dreams of Michigan winning the college football playoffs, and he spends hours watching his team on this pursuit and he spends hours talking about what Jim Harbaugh needs to do to make it happen. When his team wins – like it did in 1997 – it's wonderful! It's great. He high-fives his friends and he buys a championship hat. BUT... does the victory give him the happiness he expected? Is he fulfilled? No. The excitement wears off very quickly. The longing and the groaning that he thought was for a Michigan championship turns out to be for something else. This is a universal dynamic. All human beings know this feeling. All human beings know about this ambient restlessness.

Lewis talks about that: *“The longings (he uses the word longings but he could just as easily have said groanings) that arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of [vacation in] some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning can really satisfy.”* There's a reason none of these things really stop the groaning and the longing. Because that leftover restlessness is the call of heaven. We are groaning for our eternal home. We are groaning for our new selves. We are groaning for the day when the love of God will completely fill us and we will be changed. No condo rental, no national championship, can hope to fill that void and stop that groaning. As Lewis puts it, *“most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts would know that they do want, and want acutely, something which cannot be had in this world.”* In this life Christian hope will always include groaning.

I said this groaning was universal, that everyone knows this feeling of getting the thing we want and still feeling restless. Lewis points out that a lot of human misery is caused because people don't know what to do with this feeling. He identifies three ways in which people deal with their leftover restlessness.

The first he calls “The Fool's Way.” On this path a person assumes that in order to stop the groaning, in order to get rid of the leftover restlessness he just needs more of the thing that didn't quite give him satisfaction. More national championships! Better condos on a higher-class beach. Lewis says this person *“goes on all his life thinking that if only he had tried another woman, or went on a more expensive holiday, then he really would catch the something we are all after.”* There are lots of people who try to deal with their groaning in this way. Most of us have probably been guilty of trying this path at one time or another. But it doesn't give us

fulfillment and it creates massive misery along the way. Divorce. Addiction. Excessive and manic spending.

The second way of dealing with our groaning Lewis calls the way of the disillusioned 'sensible man.' The sensible man tries to deal with this restless longing by repressing it. He doesn't see it as the calling of the heart's true home. He doesn't see it as a desire of God, he sees it as immaturity, a foolish romantic urge that responsible people must grow out of. Sometimes this way looks like a kind of grim stoicism where life is all duty and survival. Sometimes people in this camp become fearful and hesitant. They know their deepest desires will be disappointed so they live a safe, moderate life where they keep their dreams as small as possible. They deliberately keep themselves from hoping too much. They keep their hopes small and careful and that way you will never be disappointed. This way doesn't do as much damage as the way of the fool, but it takes the joy out of life.

The third way is the Christian way. On this path our hopes are as high as they can be. We don't just hope for a national championship or a condo on Marco Island. We hope for eternal life! We hope for justice in the whole earth! We hope for a love that breaks the bounds of our understanding! We hope for all things made new! Not only do we hope for these things, we stoke these hopes! We stoke them by creating beautiful buildings with stained glass windows. We stoke these hopes by singing gorgeous anthems that stir the soul both with their beauty and with their heavenly visions of the New Creation. But even as these hopes soar, we know that we will not receive them in this life. We know that in this life our hope for these glorious things will be experienced as groaning. And so, just as Paul describes in Romans 8, in this life, deep hope is a glorious mixture of the highest dreams and the deepest groans. It is hoping and groaning together, all of it filled with the Spirit, who groans along with us, who leads us in these hopeful groans. Listen to Paul again. "*We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not have, we wait for it patiently...and the Spirit helps us in our weakness*" interceding for us with wordless groans.

Thanks be to God for his special brand of hope. May the Lord of all hope make his Spirit to overflow in us. May the Spirit teach us to hope and groan.

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