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## PRACTICING THE RESURRECTION | GROANING TOGETHER

May 18, 2025

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Let me remind you that during this Easter season we are considering how we might “practice the resurrection,” to borrow a phrase from the poet Wendell Berry. In other words, our aim is to try to better understand and apply the implications of the resurrection of Jesus to our lives. And if that’s the goal, then there’s no better place for us to look than Romans 8, which forms the heart and the center of Paul’s greatest letter. So we’re taking a deep dive into Romans 8, drawing inspiration from N.T. Wright’s book “Into the Heart of Romans.” And as a reminder, Tom Wright himself will be back to bring this little series to a conclusion on June 1.

Well as we’ve made our way through Romans 8 thus far, we’ve seen that Paul has led us to some of the highest points in Christian theology. Justification: There is not now, nor will there ever be any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Adoption: If we are God’s children, then heirs — heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ. But heirs of what? Heirs of the New Creation. And then three, glory: Paul says, for I consider the present sufferings of this time do not even compare with the glory that will be revealed for us. All of creation, even now, is standing on tiptoe with eager longing, just waiting to see God share his glory with us. Because what that means is that when God shares his glory, he’s going to share his loving, wise, responsible rule with us over an entirely renewed cosmos.

Now, these are simply astonishing, breathtaking promises. But the passage that is before us today reminds us that while these promises are as good as done — they are absolutely guaranteed — nevertheless, we live in the gap. We live in the gap between promise and fulfillment. Now, C.S. Lewis had a striking way of describing this position. He said that God has promised us a crown. God has promised that we will share in his rule over the New Creation. And yet while we are waiting for those promises to be fulfilled, we have to remember that as it was for Jesus, so it is for us. The cross always comes before the crown, and tomorrow is quite literally a Monday morning.

So the question is, how are we supposed to live in this tension between God’s promised future and our present reality? Paul sums up our whole experience here and now with an evocative and emotionally expressive word; he likens our experience in that gap between promise and fulfillment with the one word “groaning.” We’re groaning, aching, moaning, sighing, waiting for these promises to be fulfilled. But we’re not the only ones. What’s wild about this passage is that Paul tells us that the creation itself is groaning with us, and so is God’s very own Spirit. So I’d like us to look and see what we can learn from Romans 8 as we consider: 1) *The groaning of creation* (verse 22), 2) *The groaning of the Church* (verse 23), and 3) *The groaning of the Spirit* (verse 26).

<sup>22</sup>For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

<sup>26</sup>Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. <sup>27</sup>And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

*Romans 8:22-27*

## **The Groaning of Creation**

Let's consider the groaning of creation first. Now, let's think: Why does Paul use this word "groaning"? What does it mean to groan? Well, it's defined as a deep, inarticulate sound. To make a loud cry, a sigh, or a moan caused by pain, anguish, grief, or despair. In other contexts, this Greek word for groaning is used to describe the groans of a soldier dying on a battlefield, moaning as he succumbs to his wounds. Now, we could imagine how we might use this word to describe us — perhaps to describe our own experience of suffering — but what's amazing is that Paul applies this term to the groaning of the subhuman creation.

Now notice, Paul doesn't use the word "nature." He's not talking about mother nature. He doesn't treat nature as something that is independent and has some kind of external existence separate from God. So no, he's not talking about nature; he's talking about creation. He's talking about the whole realm of space and time which owes its existence to the good creator God. So he's talking about the created order, and that includes not only living organisms — plants and animals — but even inanimate rocks, hills, and plains. And he's telling us that even creation itself, all of creation is groaning together under the crushing weight of life in this fallen world.

But notice in verse 22 that Paul qualifies this groaning. He says that "the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now." So he likens the groaning of creation to labor pains. Now obviously this is something I could only know about secondhand, but I will never forget the day that I became a dad for the very first time. My wife Ashley went into labor. We went to the hospital. Things were not necessarily progressing all that quickly, but I have this distinct memory of the nurse coming into the labor room and telling us, "Everything's fine; you've got nothing to worry about. The only time you ever have to worry is when all the alarms suddenly go off, and the nurses and the doctors suddenly rush into the room." And then that's precisely what happened not long after.

Something was wrong. The heart rate of the baby dropped. They were worried maybe the umbilical cord had gotten wrapped around his neck. And so all the alarms go off, the nurses and doctors flood into the room, and then they whisk Ashley off to the operating room. And it was the first time it actually hit me that, "Wow, this is serious.

This might not end well.” And I was terrified. Thankfully everything was fine. They performed an emergency C-section, and then within moments — literally moments — we were now new parents. And because of the joy of this baby that had just been born into the world, it’s almost as if we completely forgot the trauma of what we had just been through... almost.

And you know what? That’s what Jesus says, too, in John chapter 16. He talks about how the experience of a Christian in this life is like that of a mother going through labor pains. He says a mother experiences sorrow and she experiences anguish when she knows that the hour for the delivery of her baby comes. But Jesus says then she forgets her anguish. She forgets her anguish for the joy of the child that has just been born.

Now, what Jesus is telling us there in that passage is something actually quite amazing, because when he says that the mother forgets her anguish, it’s not as if the pain goes away. Right after a mother delivers a baby, it’s not as if the pain simply disappears, especially if you just had an emergency c-section. The pain doesn’t go away. It’s still there. But the joy is so great that the joy and the pain coexist. They overlap with one another. They exist in the same moment, but the joy is so much greater than the pain that it overshadows it — it overwhelms the sorrow. And so it’s almost as if the mother forgets the anguish altogether.

And what Jesus is telling us, and what Paul is telling us here, is that it’s not just us but it’s the whole creation groaning as if in the pains of childbirth, just waiting. But waiting for what? See, what we’re waiting for is God’s new world to be born. We’re waiting for God to usher in, fully and finally, the new creation. And so in the meantime, we are just groaning in pain and anguish. Creation itself is groaning, because creation has been, as we saw last week, subjected to futility and frustration. The created order is in bondage to corruption and decay, not because of anything that the created order did but because of what we did as a result of humanity’s rebellion against God. Even the ground is now cursed to produce thorns and thistles rather than becoming all that God had originally intended. The original creation was meant to become even more: even more beautiful, even more glorious, even more spectacular under the stewardship of human beings. But now that plan has been thwarted and frustrated because we human beings turned our backs on God.

But when Jesus ushers in the New Creation, well then despite all the pain, the anguish, the sorrow, the trauma that we’ve endured, the joy will be so great it’ll overwhelm the sorrow, it’ll overshadow the pain. And the Psalms provide us with some beautiful, powerful, evocative descriptions of how the created order itself will respond when the Lord returns to judge the earth, meaning when the Lord returns to put right everything that once went wrong.

It’s startling how the Psalms put this. Psalm 96 says that the seas will roar. The fields will exalt. All the trees of the forest will sing for joy. Psalm 98 tells us that when the Lord returns, the rivers will clap their hands and the hills will sing for joy together. Now if you stop and you ask me, “What does that mean? What would that be like? What does it mean for the rivers to clap their hands?” I have no idea! I have no idea, but I sure want to find out. Don’t you?

## The Groaning of the Church

So it's not just creation, it's not just the created order that is groaning together, but also the Church — we ourselves. And that brings me to my second point. Now some people might tell you, well, if you just have enough faith, then God will bless you and make your life go well. If you just have enough faith, then God will bless you with health and with wealth, with great careers and strong relationships. In other words, if you just have enough faith, you can avoid suffering.

But if anyone tells you that, they're selling something. Because I'm sorry, it just doesn't work that way. And as it was for Jesus, so it is for us. God does not take us around suffering; he takes us straight through it. We can't avoid suffering. There's no other way. Jesus never said it was going to be easy. But that's why I so appreciate the Bible, because the Bible is so much more realistic, so much more emotionally honest than everything else that we might find out there. Here Paul tells us in verse 23, even we ourselves, even Christians, even those who have the firstfruits of the spirit, are groaning inwardly.

Think of the kinds of moments when we would groan. When we receive a terrible diagnosis, we might groan, "It's cancer." We might groan when we hear news of a terrible tragedy. "There's been an accident." We might groan when we discover that we've lost someone that we love with all of our heart. "They're gone." See, we might let out a long, agonizing scream. We groan to express our grief and our pain and our anguish.

And I have to tell you that one of the unique privileges of being a pastor, one of the very reasons why I entered into ministry is that as a pastor you often experience the most human moments with other people. You're often there. You're sharing in some of people's highest joys — birth, marriage, celebration — as well as their lowest griefs — death, despair. And so as pastors, we experience higher highs and also lower lows. But I have to tell you, it is such an honor. It really is. It is such an honor and it's such a privilege when other people share with you their groanings, their inward groanings.

And many of you have done that. Many of you have shared with me your groanings of frustration when you experienced setbacks or disappointments at work or at school or in life. When you haven't been recognized for your achievements or you've been passed over for promotions or programs that you'd set your heart on. Or as you're struggling to just figure out how you're supposed to follow God in your life. Many of you have shared with me your groanings of pain as relationships with loved ones have frayed or faded away, leaving you even more isolated and alone. Or you've shared with me those groanings of when you've been horribly misunderstood or mistreated in the past.

And some of you have shared with me the groanings of sorrow as you're battling a sadness that you just can't seem to be able to stop or to control. Or the sorrow you feel over a loved one who you seem to have lost to addiction or to some kind of disorder; no matter what you do, no matter what you say, no matter how hard you try, you just can't seem to reach them. It really is an honor to hear the groanings of another person and to share in those groanings with them.

But what I want you to see today is just how utterly realistic and emotionally honest the Scriptures are in describing the experience of pain and suffering even in the life of a Christian. See, on the one hand, you could say that Christians do groan just like everybody else; but on the other hand, we groan like nobody else. See, on the one hand, our experience is universal as human beings, so we groan just like everybody else; but on the other hand, we groan like nobody else for two reasons: 1) *What we already have* and 2) *What we're waiting for*.

### **What We Already Have**

See, on the one hand, we groan like everybody else, but on the other hand, we groan like nobody else because of what we already have. And what do we already have? Paul says we already have the firstfruits of the Spirit. Do you realize what he's saying? "Firstfruits" is an agricultural metaphor, but you could think of a vineyard out in California, and the first few grapes that ripen will give you a taste of what the wine for that whole year will be like. So firstfruits are not only the indicator but the promise of what the full harvest will bring.

And what Paul's telling us here is that the moment that we put our faith in Jesus, God plants a little bit of the life of the future in our lives now. Because when we put our faith in Jesus, God's own Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, dwells within us. We have the firstfruits of the Spirit, and the Spirit is not only the indicator but also the promise of all that God is going to bring into our lives when his promises are consummated. And that's why Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." So the life of the future has already broken into the present. It's operative. It's active in our life now through the indwelling spirit. So we already have the Spirit of God dwelling within us.

### **What We're Waiting For**

But not only that. What changes the way in which we groan is not only what we already have but also what we're waiting for. And what does Paul tell us that we're waiting for? He says we wait eagerly for: 1) *our adoption* and 2) *the redemption of our bodies*.

#### *Our Adoption*

Now yes, of course, it's true that we've already been adopted. The moment you put your faith in Jesus, you are adopted into God's family. You become his beloved son or daughter. Already now, the Spirit assures us of the depth of the Father's love for us. It's the Spirit that enables us to call out to our Heavenly Father as our Abba, our papa, to enjoy such intimacy with the Creator God of the universe. And yet at the same time, we long for deeper, richer experience of that child/father relationship.

#### *The Redemption of Our Bodies*

So we're waiting for the fullness of our adoption, and then Paul says we're waiting for the redemption of our bodies. And of course, we've already been redeemed. The work of Jesus has finished. We've been redeemed in and through his life, his death, and his resurrection. Yet we have not yet experienced the redemption of our bodies. There's a greater promise still to come. God has promised to do for us at the end of history what he did for Jesus in the middle of history — to raise us up with new physical bodies to enjoy life with him in a new physical world.



So we groan just like everybody else, but we groan like nobody else because of what we already have and because of what we are waiting for. But if that's true, then what are the implications of that? Well the British pastor John Stott said that we're called to live in this tension between the already and the not yet. Between what we already have taken possession of and what we have not yet experienced in its fullness. What we already have (the Holy Spirit) gives us joy, and what we're waiting for (the fullness of our adoption and redemption) gives us hope. But meanwhile, the present suspense gives us pain. And that's why we groan. We groan with discomfort and longing in that tension between the already and the not yet.

So the question is, how are we supposed to live in this in-between time between promise and fulfillment? And Paul here tells us that we're called to wait, but he tells us that we're supposed to wait in a very particular way. He tells us that we're supposed to wait eagerly (verse 23), and that we're supposed to wait patiently (verse 25). To wait eagerly means to wait with expectation — to have a settled assurance deep within our bones that we know that God is going to keep all of his promises. But what does it mean to wait patiently? The word patience literally means longsuffering. So to wait patiently means that we are steadfast even in the midst of our trials and our temptations and our struggles and our suffering. We're steadfast.

So we wait eagerly and we wait patiently. And we're not supposed to wait so patiently that we lose our expectation, nor so eagerly that we lose our patience, but rather both at one and the same time. So together with the whole created order, we groan. We groan as we wait eagerly and patiently for God's promised future. But the good news is that we're never asked to do this alone. No, because God has given us his Holy Spirit, and his own Spirit groans together with us.

## **The Groaning of the Spirit**

This brings me to my third point. In verse 26, Paul says, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray." You know, the fact of the matter is that we live in a chaotic, confusing, and complex world, and the weakness that we suffer from is that we often have no idea how to make sense of the plight of others or even of ourselves, and therefore we don't have a clue how we should pray. Half the time we don't have the words. We've got no idea how we could possibly pray. But that's where the Spirit comes to our rescue. You see, the Spirit of God comes alongside us to help us in our weakness. And in verse 27, Paul tells us that the Spirit knows exactly what we need, even when we don't.

The Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. But notice that Paul says in verse 26 that the Spirit himself intercedes with groanings that are just too deep for words. Now, what does that mean? Some of our charismatic brothers and sisters have wondered, well is he talking about speaking in tongues here? I don't think so, and let me show you why.

See, when Paul does speak about speaking in tongues in other places, he's talking about Spirit-given language, but that's not what he's referring to here. Here he's talking about inarticulate groaning — sighs that are too deep for words. So I don't think he's speaking about speaking in tongues. And in addition to that, elsewhere

where Paul talks about speaking in tongues, he says that not all speak in tongues. This isn't a gift that everyone enjoys. But here in Romans 8, he's talking about all Christians. He's talking about universal Christian experience. So it doesn't matter who you are, it doesn't matter how you're gifted for ministry, it doesn't matter what your spiritual gifts are. For all of us, the Spirit himself intercedes with groanings that are too deep for words.

The point is that the Spirit helps us to pray for ourselves and for others when we just don't know how. And we can take comfort in the fact that sometimes the situations we face are so challenging, so complex, so chaotic that even the Spirit groans with sighs too deep for words. We can take comfort from the fact that sometimes even the Spirit is lost for words, and yet the Spirit is still interceding on our behalf. So when we don't know what to say, when we don't know what to pray, all we can do is groan together. And you know what? There's a word for that. It's called lament.

Sometimes all we can do is lament the sad, sorry state of the world in solidarity with those who are suffering. Tom Wright would say that this really is the essence of this passage. This is what this passage is all about. Sometimes all we can do is lament the sad, sorry state of the world in solidarity with those who are suffering.

So we've considered the groaning of the whole created order, the groaning of the Church, and the groaning of the Spirit. But let's press to a close by just thinking through some of the practical implications for this.

What are we being told here? Well we've already said that one day God is going to share his glory with us. He's going to restore us to our original vocation to be his image-bearing representatives who join him in his wise rule over the New Creation. But you see, what Paul wants us to understand here is that once we're filled with God's Spirit here and now, we're called to do that work now through prayer — specifically in the form of lament.

You see this passage is ultimately about our vocation, our calling to be God's image-bearing representatives over the New Creation, but that's not something that we wait to exercise. We anticipate that responsibility now. We don't have to wait for God to fulfill those promises in the distant future. No, our calling to represent God's purposes in the world begins now. It begins right now, in the present, by the Spirit, through prayer. That's what this passage is all about.

Now look, when you consider the tragedy and the pain of the world in which we live and of our individual lives, it's natural for us to ask, where is God? Where is God when I receive that diagnosis, when I receive that terrible news, when I lose that relationship? Where is God? Is God neglecting us? Has God abandoned us? And the answer is no. You know why God has not abandoned us or our world? Because he has you.

You see, the moment you put your faith in Jesus, the Spirit of God is dwelling within you, which means that wherever you go, God's Spirit is there. You can't escape his presence. Where could you flee from his presence? Wherever you go, his Spirit is there, and his Spirit is there *in you*, in the Church. It really is true what Mother Teresa once said, that

God has no body on earth right now apart from your body. God has no hands. He has no other feet. He has no other eyes or ears. He has no other tears than yours or mine.

This is why, if we're going to be true to this vocation to be God's image-bearing representatives in the world now in anticipation of that new creation, it means that in our lives now, as tragic and sad and sorrowful as they may be, God will deliberately lead us to the places where the world is in pain. Just like Jesus, he's not going to lead us around suffering; he's going to lead us to suffering. He's going to lead us to those places where the world is in pain and ask us to stand right there and intercede on behalf of the world through prayer — through our lament, if nothing more.

And even if we don't have the words to speak, we can trust that the Spirit will intercede on our behalf, working in and through us, because we're there. That's why, if Christians do have the Spirit of God dwelling within them, we have to be people who are *there*: in the school, in the neighborhood, in the office building, in the living room, at the kitchen table, at the hospital, in the courthouse, in the homeless shelter, in the prison, in the refugee camp, in the war torn battle zone, in the funeral home, at the graveside. We can't ask, "Well, where is God?" He's in us. And so we have to go to the place where people are hurting, and then God will share and bear the sorrow and the pain that they are enduring by sharing it and bearing it through his people — through us.

That is at least in part God's answer to the problem of suffering now. Do you realize that the first place in the Scriptures where the word "groaning" is used is Exodus 2? God's people groan under the oppression of the slavery that they experience in Egypt, and the Lord hears their groaning, he remembers his covenant, and he chooses to come down. He comes down to rescue his people, and then centuries later his people are groaning because they are in bondage to the ultimate enemies: sin, evil, and death. And what does God choose to do? He comes down in the person of Jesus to rescue us from our slavery.

And Jesus was true to his vocation. He was true to his calling, and that leads him to the Garden of Gethsemane where he prays, he intercedes, he offers prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, and Jesus is true to his vocation, and so it leads him to the cross. And on the cross, he lets out one final agonizing scream, and then he groans a loud cry and commits his spirit into his Father's hands before breathing his last.

In a similar way, if we're going to be true to our own calling as his image-bearing representatives, then it means that we too will be led to gardens of Gethsemane our own, where we too will be asked to intercede on behalf of others, even in the midst of our anguish and our grief. And we may not have the words; all we can do is utter a moan or a sigh. But we can trust that the Spirit will intercede on our behalf with sighs too deep for words. And that is, at least in part, God's answer to the problem of suffering. The point is that he comes down. He came down ultimately in the person of Jesus, and he continues to come down in and through you and me, those who are indwelt by his Spirit.

That's why, many years ago in his book "Making Sense of Suffering," Peter Kreeft put it like this. He said,



It is, of course, the most familiar, the most often-told story in the world. Yet it is also the strangest, and it has never lost its strangeness, its awe, and will not even in eternity, where angels tremble to gaze at things we yawn at. And however strange, it is the only key that fits the lock of our tortured lives and needs...He didn't give us a placebo or a pill or good advice. He gave us himself.

He came. He entered space and time and suffering. He came, like a lover. Love seeks above all intimacy, presence, togetherness. Not happiness. "Better unhappy with her than happy without her"—that is the word of a lover. He came. That is the salient fact, the towering truth...He did the most important thing and he gave the most important gift: himself.

It is a lover's gift. Out of our tears, our waiting, our darkness, our agonized aloneness, out of our weeping and wondering, out of our cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" he came, all the way, right into that cry...

He came into life and death, and he still comes. He is still here. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). He is here. He is in us and we are in him; we are his body...

Since we are his body, we too are the bread that is broken for others. Our very failures help heal other lives; our very tears help wipe away tears; our being hated helps those we love.

See, Jesus comes down into our groans and makes them his own so that together we might groan with others through the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. He leads us to the place where the world is in pain so that God might be present in and through us.

*Let's pray.*

*Father, we thank you for the emotionally honest and realistic word that we receive from your Scriptures. We acknowledge that the whole creation is groaning together, that we are groaning inwardly, and that even the Spirit of God groans together with us as we await a whole new world to be born — the new world that you have promised. And so help us, Father, to be people of joy and people of hope, even in the midst of the pain that we endure as we exist in this tension between the promised future and the present reality, between what is already ours and what has not yet come in its fullness. Help us therefore to be the people who intercede on behalf of others, if nothing more than through our lament, so that you might be present in the lives of those who are hurting. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*