

Future Hope in a Groaning World

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[0 : 00] Well, let me tell you why, whoever you are here today, whether this is your first Sunday ever in church, whether you're thinking through this whole Jesus business, or whether this really is your umpteenth time in a church setting like this, let me encourage you, whoever you are here today, to listen to this, to put your mind like we do in our phones, put it on do not disturb mode, and listen to what God says to us through his word, because this passage holds out to us the thing that our world today so desperately longs for.

Go ahead, if you've got it there, put your finger on verses 24 and 25, and as you're doing that, let me try and get us under the skin of this passage so that we feel its electrifying pulse.

Let me take you to one of the most incredible sounds in the natural world, and it's a sound that birds make. It's a phenomenon really called the dawn chorus, and it happens when the birds, despite it being the early hours of the morning, and despite it being pitch black outside, they come out to sing. And boy, do they sing. Now there's a few theories amongst people who study these things, why they do it. Some people reckon it's to do with mating season. Other people reckon it's to do with kind of turf wars. Birds are kind of marking their patch, telling people that they're up, and they're at it. But there's another theory, that when the birds sing at the dawn chorus, what they are in fact doing is singing to encourage the other birds round about them, who are scared, who are worried, who are hiding, who are cold, and who are so desperate for the warmth and life that the rising sun will bring, that it's coming soon. Now I always wonder whether God has weaved these things into the pattern of his creation to capture the imaginations of human beings and awaken their hearts to things that are true about him. So if you've got your eyes on the prize of verse 25, what's the word? The word is hope.

Now let me ask you, where are you on the hope scale today? You know, I was reading a survey that was carried out in 2022 that asked people in our culture the biggest question that they have today about life. And it was a question that was asked, in their words, against the backdrop of the three Ps, pandemic, poverty, and Putin. Three things that have kind of brought home to us, haven't they, in recent years, the frailty and the unpredictability of life? And so the survey asked people this question. Do you know the question that topped the list? Ten years ago it would have been, what happens after I die? But the question that topped the list was really, will everything be okay? I wonder how you're feeling about the future this morning. What about your future? As you sit here today, and what are we as a culture? We're in the middle of a mental health crisis. We've just had a new government in power who we were reflecting the other day as a staff team, probably for the first time in many, many generations, who are coming into power and not saying things can only get better. Actually, they're saying things are going to get worse and they might get better.

[3 : 44] And you think, thanks, Keir. Maybe you're in a job that's turning out not to be all that you hoped it would be. It's always why the BBC put their prime shows not at eight o'clock on a Saturday night, which they did a decade ago, but they now put them at nine o'clock on a Sunday night, if you noticed that, line of duty, death in paradise, because they recognize the appeal of people, giving people a distraction from thinking about the Monday morning blues, something to talk about on Monday morning to take your mind off things. How are you feeling about your future? How are you feeling about the planet's future? Are you hopeful about that? Climate change, natural disasters. It's a well-documented statistic, isn't it, that one of the reasons that many people in Gen Z are not planning on having children is that they can't face the thought of bringing them into a world that's full of pain.

Can I make an observation? Our world loves to throw the hope word around like confetti, but never before have we been more crippled as a culture with anxiety.

See, what is Romans chapter eight? What are these verses, friends? They are God's dawn chorus to us. God is singing here. This is all about where he has taken the story of us. This is all about where he's taken about the story of the planet, the universe, and everything in it. The scale of this could not be any greater this morning. And what we'll see is that this is both refreshingly realistic as well as being wonderfully optimistic. Now, if you're a note taker, if you like headings, if your mind's organized like mine, we've got two things to see in this passage this morning. It's a two-point sermon with three subheadings underneath, and I'm kind of getting away with it.

Here's the first. The first thing we need to see is that this is telling us about the reality of a groaning present. Now, groaning, as you read it in this passage, groaning is not moaning, right? Groaning is this painful, and he defines it there for us. What's the word? Not moaning.

It's longing. It's longing. It's a painful longing that a new day would come. In fact, the best analogy that Paul can think of to help us feel it, did you get it in the passage there, verse 22, is the image of childbirth. Now, you play that card carefully, but he's the apostle Paul when he gets away with it.

Childbirth. And it's the perfect analogy, isn't it? It's the perfect illustration of what he's trying to get them to understand. Now, three things Paul says are groaning. Real quick, follow with me. Verse 19, creation's groaning. God created this planet goods. And again, for some of us, this might be brand new. This is the first time we've heard this stuff. God created this planet goods. And in the beginning, the Genesis account one and two, creation is defined by what is there.

[6 : 54] So you have beauty. You have perfection. You have splendor. You have potential. It's defined by what is there. It's defined by what isn't there. Suffering, sin, death, evil. It's not there.

In the beginning, Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. In fact, the two bookends of the Bible, Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, Revelation 21 and 22, there is no suffering, sin or death. Hold that thought.

God creates this world. He puts human beings over it to steward it. And that's a big part of the answer to the question, what do Christians think about the environment? We'll see in a moment why we aren't panicking. But equally, we see here why we are not passive. We care about creation.

We care about recycling. We care about natural disasters. Because this world displays and declares still God's glory to the watching world. I always love it how God, when he tries to help us understand who he is, what he's like, he uses creatures, doesn't he, so often? Like the lion.

As the lions go extinct, don't they? We won't be able to get that image. That's why we care about creation. Displays and declares God's glory to the world. And yet, at the same time, the Bible tells us that this creation is broken. It is not firing in all cylinders. Because of the first human beings that God made, Adam and Eve, because of their sin, which is their heart turning away from God's.

Verse 20 in the text, God has subjected human beings ever since who've happily followed suit and this world to futility. That's the word there, futility. You can think of that as meaning frustration.

[8 : 52] And we see that frustration in our natural world every time we see a natural disaster. We feel it every time we read of an alarming climate change statistics. And we experience it every time our work doesn't quite deliver the lasting satisfaction that we hope it will. And so Paul says, verse 21 there, creation is groaning. Right? Groaning, not moaning. Groaning, longing to be free. It's a painful cry.

It longs to be free. And human beings, we're groaning too. Do you see it? Our bodies, the end of verse 23, our bodies are groaning. Groaning, not moaning. Groaning, a painful cry, longing to be free.

We know the sin that plagues our hearts, the mistakes that we keep making, the people that we keep hurting. And the same is true of our physical bodies. Yeah? We wear and tear. Let's never waste the opportunity of letting a common cold be our teacher. Every sneeze, every yawn, every sore knee, every eye infection is teaching us something about ourselves and our bodies.

Now some of us are suffering or we've watched people go through excruciating things when it comes to our bodies. Cancer, dementia, eczema, depression. And what's true of creation is true of our bodies that we long for the day when we're finally free.

And let's pause there for a moment. Do you see what this is? This is permission to admit to ourselves and to each other that life, this side of glory, park that word, we'll come back to it, is absolutely brutal at times.

[10 : 58] And that is strangely freeing, is it not? It's biblical to put our hands up and say, life is really, really hard and I'm hurting. And you turn to the gospels and you'll see that the people that run to Jesus are those that fall at his feet, desperate for help and love.

And Jesus specializes in showing grace and love to groaning people. Groaning should be one of the most natural things that we do as Christians. And I take it that's why Paul can talk of verse 23 of the inwardly dwelling spirit as the first fruits of the new creation.

In other words, the spirit who lives inside the believer. It's almost as long as we get that this is not our home. One day this will be over. What that is, these groanings that we have are in part our longing for the perfect world that we were made for.

In other words, this is a healthy kind of homesickness we feel. And the spirit living in the very heart of the believer is groaning, verse 26.

And I think that's meant to greatly encourage us. When we don't know what to pray, when we don't have the energy, the spirit intercedes for us. Do you see, dear believer, how committed the triune God is to your prayer life?

[12:30] We're going to think next week about how Jesus intercedes for us. Do you see how the Father hears, the spirit intercedes and Jesus intercedes? The triune God could not be more committed to you.

I love it that God in his words gives us language to understand our experience. Groaning. Do you not feel that word today? But our God does more than that. He gives us a person to help us understand our experience.

The claim of Christianity is that the author of history has written himself into the story. Jesus comes. Jesus dignifies the human body by taking one.

The one fully God takes on our form. And if you've ever wondered if your body is a precious thing, then Jesus taking a body should confirm that to you.

Jesus knows what it is to lose one of your best friends and cry at the news of their death. Jesus knows what it is to be rejected by people, even your own family, because of the message that you stand for.

[13:39] Jesus knows deep anxiety. Jesus knows what it is to be betrayed by a friend. Jesus knows what it is to suffer and even to die unjustly, even to death on a cross, as he dies for the sins of his people.

What the incarnation tells us is that we have a God who has not stayed at a distance, but we have a God who knows the reality of our groaning present.

And it's only because of that, and this is where it gets brilliant, that we can know the certainty of a glorious future.

Now, if you've switched off, come back in at this point, because you've got to see how the next 10 minutes are panning out, okay? If you've got the text here, you will notice that the word glory comes at verse 18 and verse 13.

Now, that's a bookend to the suffering sandwich that's in the middle. And the word suffering, I think we need to take it widely.

[14:42] I think this is specifically suffering for being a Christian, for following Jesus. But I take it as well that it's generally suffering as a Christian because we live in this world.

What Paul's trying to convince us is that it is worth persevering and trusting God through it all because what it will ultimately lead to is that which is incomparable.

Now, you make a statement like that, and you've got to be able to back it up, yeah? What will be revealed to us?

What is the freedom that creation, our bodies, are both longing for? This is Paul talking about the new heavens and the new earth.

And this is what Christians believe. And this really is something that is pretty unique to Christianity. We are body and soul human beings, both precious and created by God.

[15:49] But when we die, our bodies go to be in the earth. But if our trust is in Jesus, our soul goes to be with him in heaven, if you like.

That's what it is to be united to him. We are there with him. Our bodies are in the ground. Friends, in heaven there is not a harp in sight, as far as I can tell. We are with the one that we love.

But Jesus, who is now in his resurrection body, in heaven with God, is going to one day return and usher in the new heavens and the new earth.

In other words, heaven is not the final game. It's not the final resting point. When Jesus returns, those who have rejected him will be punished.

Evil will be banished. And our bodies and souls will be united together again, except it won't be the same. We will have our new resurrection bodies that are based on Jesus'.

[16 : 46] Lots to take in. But that is wonderful. Body, soul reunited in our resurrection bodies.

Now what that means is that when Jesus walked out of the tomb that first Easter Sunday, once crucified, now alive, he was doing more than just pulling off a neat stunt.

He is not some kind of divine David Blaine. What he does in that moment is he brings in the dawn of a new age. It's almost as if when he walks out that tomb, he throws a rope back in and says to all of creation and all of those down the generations who will trust in him, grab on because when I return, one day I'm pulling you and I'm pulling all of creation out with me.

Grab hold. So what this is telling is in the new heavens and the new earth is that one day courtrooms will be empty. And one day police will be redundant.

And one day the Royal Ed will be surplus to requirements. And one day funeral directors will be out of business. If you're a doctor here today, if you're in the medical business, you will be out of a job.

[18 : 08] The redemption of our bodies means that even though it might not be in this life, one day, one day, you will be fully and finally healed.

I always think Disney does this best. In the Beauty and the Beast.

Have you ever watched that? The Beast, the castle in which he lives and everyone in the castle, Chip, Mrs. Potts, Lumiere, all of them, they're under this curse and they sing this song, don't they? We'll be human again. We'll be human again. We'll be, I even wrote it down, knickknacks and whatnots no more. There's this longing, isn't there, that the day is going to come where the curse is going to be lifted.

And they watch the rose, don't they? This countdown that they need true love's kiss to come. And it comes and in an instant, everything is transformed. And you get that scene in Beauty and the Beast where everything goes from black and white to 3D color.

[19 : 12] It's the same, but it's not the same. It's the same, but it's totally different. It's totally beautiful in a way that the former thing just wasn't the case.

And perhaps that's how we should understand that line Paul says there at verse 28. That all things God is working together for the good of those who love him.

Now that is one of the most misunderstood and abused verses in the Bible. I think one of the problems is that our Western brains are conditioned to think good as meaning comfortable.

We instinctively, we think short term with this promise. We think short term with most things. But it seems to me in our lives that God is way more concerned about our character than he is our comfort.

So it is absolutely true that the God who loves us and who is for us in Christ is so committed to us that he will use every single circumstance, whether good or bad, to form us more into the image of Jesus because he loves us.

[20 : 26] That's absolutely true. And how many of us can testify that God, through our lives, did the most profound work in our hearts, not despite, but through the darkest periods of our lives.

And yet we need to see that verse 28 here is holding hands with verse 29. And the image of his son language there that Paul uses, I think is much more likely a reference to the fact that our bodies one day will be in the image of Jesus' resurrection body.

So if that is the good that God is working all things towards, those who love him, then he invites us today to take his loving hand and play the long game with his promise.

And that's why we can wait for it with patience. And this is what God has done. He has chosen us in eternity past.

Get your head around that. It's why at a moment in time he called us to himself as we responded to Jesus, which are always two sides of the same coin. But if you look at the very last words of our verses this morning, you'd almost expect the phrase there to say, if this is about what's ahead, you'd almost expect him to say, those he will glorify.

[21 : 55] Right? It's how we'd kind of put it in English if I was writing this. But that's not the word, is it? He says, those who he has glorified.

Now, can I get my Greek geek on for a minute? Yeah? Permission? The tense in Greek there is the one that you would use when you're trying to describe the idea of something being a finished deal. Right? It's not up for discussion. Right? It's not up for negotiation. It's a done deal. So that's what he says, isn't it? He has glorified.

So this is a done thing. The God who chose us in eternity past, the God who called us to himself, the God who justified us, is the God who's already got us home in a sense. That's how committed he is to his people.

And what he's saying is that as hard as it gets here, as brutal as life feels, that future is absolutely guaranteed for you if your trust is in Jesus. Guaranteed. Do you know why where we live in Libertin, right opposite our house is a big graveyard attached to Libertin Kirk?

[23 : 04] Right? During lockdown, I was quite literally on the graveyard shift with the kids. We went to the graveyard every day with our hour outside and we learned, Chloe learned to cycle or bike around this graveyard. So I've got to know this graveyard pretty well.

But it's always struck me as a weird thing and I don't know if this is where else in the world that they do this, but churches have graveyards. So many of them attach them. You ever wondered why that is? It was the church's way in years gone past of kind of saying we're not, we don't, we see death differently.

This is not about us disposing of bodies. Actually, what we're doing here is we're investing people's bodies into the ground in anticipation of Jesus returning.

And on that day, these bodies will be like a bag of popcorn when you put it in the microwave. Yeah? Always that wonderful thing when you do popcorn, the first one goes. The first one that's gone is Jesus.

Same? Not the same. Yeah? The first one that's gone is Jesus. What the churches are saying when they do that is one day all of these things are going to pop. Those who trust in him, those who love him, he's going to come back and the whole thing is going to pop.

[24 : 17] Here's a question. What's going to transform Rome? Rent to Roman Christians, right? What's going to transform Rome? What's going to keep Christian believers going there when their neighbors think that they're a cult?

When your pals are being thrown to the lions? What's going to keep you going? I take it as this thought, and we'll see this next week, not to steal JT's thunder, that nothing's going to separate you from him and his love for you.

Because when a city looks at a church and says, despite all the reasons to the contrary, what are they so hopey about? Let me just finish by telling you, where is it?

If you wondered what this is, about an old, scratched, barely still going Casio watch that sits in my office at home. It was given to me by a boy who was in the church that we went to in Louisville when we were over in Kentucky a few years ago in sabbatical in America.

His name was Jack. Jack's one of five children to two incredible parents. Jack is a twin. And though Jack's brother is fit and healthy, Jack, the muscles in his body haven't quite developed.

[25 : 33] And he has great difficulty walking. And Jack uses a specially designed walking frame to get about. And despite many tests over the course of his life, they just cannot figure out why it's happened to him.

But a happier boy you will not meet. And he runs up to me on the last Sunday that we were there. And he gives me his watch and he says, I want you to remember me.

I said, buddy, how could I forget you? How could I forget you? Gives me his watch. I just want you to remember me. And so this watch, two and a half years later, it sits on my, just at the front of my desk in my office.

And every single week I look at it when I'm preparing the sermon. And it grounds me. It sobers me. It stills me. And it reminds me. That because of Jesus, this is not where the story ends for Jack.

And it's, it's not the end of the story for me. It's not the end of the story if you're a believer in Jesus.

[26 : 40] And I knew there was no chance I was getting to that without crying. It's not the end of the story. So do you hear God singing to you the dawn chorus?

If you are that bird this morning who needs to hear him singing, you hear him singing to you. If you're scared, if you're worried, if you are cold, if you're worrying about facing another day, and is it worth it?

Hear him singing to you in these verses that there's a day coming where the sun will rise on the new day. A new day in a renewed earth where you will have a renewed body that's based on Jesus's.

But what makes it even more glorious than that is that the Jesus that we have longed for our whole lives is there. And so Paul says that you can wait with that.

We wait for it with patience. Why don't we pray? And then we'll close our time together. And so Father, I just pray particularly this morning for those who are struggling, for those who really are feeling the sharp end of the groan.

[28 : 10] And Lord, we thank you for portions of your word like this one, that we would just not believe are true unless you tell us. Lord, help us to not place our logic on how this works primarily, but help us hear your voice as our Father who tells us how it works.

And Father, we just particularly pray as well for those who are struggling this morning. We thought about them in our corporate prayer, but we do lift them to you again. Father, maybe those who are well, who are suffering and we know about it, many who are suffering in this room and we don't know about it.

Lord, help us to be the kind of community that groans together. And help us to be the kind of church community that enters into this dawn chorus and does sing to each other about a new day that's coming, that we're longing for, that we're groaning for.

Father, thank you that because of the death and the resurrection of Jesus, that this is our future. So Lord, just thank you for this morning.

We pray that your spirit would be at work in our conversations, in our laughter, in our praying, in our crying together as we finish this morning. Father, thank you for your love for us and we pray in Jesus' wonderful name.

[29 : 26] Amen. Amen.