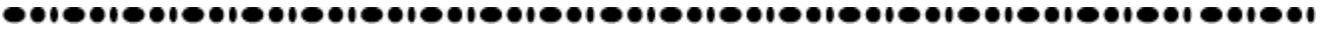


Week One
Reading

GROAN



THE GROAN

Let's quiet ourselves, if just for a moment...

Listen closely to the world around you. It clashes and crashes from one day to the next. There's clutter and clanging and it's seemingly nonstop. Listen closely to this world, but don't listen to the noise; listen through the noise. Listen for something you hear every day and yet may never have heard at all. Tune your ears, and you will hear it. It's a constant behind the noise. It's common, yet we tune it out. Either way we hear it, but we don't hear it. It's there, but it's not. Listen closely.

Listen for the groan.

The groan comes from the most unlikely places. We expect the groan in back alleys and war-torn countries, but the groan is far more pervasive. The groan is heard on both Main Street and Wall Street. It's heard in the halls of academia and on the athletic field. The groan comes from young and old. It's everywhere. It's the constant hum behind the clatter and the clanging of the day.

Mail stacks on top of mail.

E-mail stacks on top of e-mail.

Voice mail stacks on top of voice mail.

The telephone rings. The doorbell rings. The alarm clock rings.

The co-worker has a question. The child has a question. The boss has a question.

The friend needs help. The family needs help. The neighbor needs help.

The baby cries for food. The child cries for comfort. The adult cries for direction. The aged cry from loneliness.

Get in the car.

Get on the plane.

Get the deal.

Get back in the car.

Get back on the plane.

Get back home and do it again the next day.

Don't rest.

Don't evaluate.

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Don't think.

Just keep going.

Just don't quit.

Just go.

It's the waiting, the worrying, the wishing, the wanting.

It's the groping, the griping, the grating, the grappling.

It's the groaning.

We groan.

Why?

THE PERFECT HOUSE

The real estate agent opens the door to what may be the perfect house. You step across the threshold and are awed by what you discover. It's everything you'd ever hoped for but could never really describe. The brick, the wood, the stone—it's all right where you'd want it to be. The rooms are spacious but warm. The layout is interesting and thoughtful. The view is spectacular. The yard is pristine. The neighborhood reflects the house. You mentally place furniture you have or would like to have in each of the rooms. The couch you recently purchased seems made for this house. The table you inherited will fit right where a table should fit. You'd like a piano, and there's a place seemingly made for one.

"This house has character," you quietly comment to yourself.

As you move from room to room, you notice an odd look on the face of your agent. At first you don't say anything, but in time you must. You don't get it. Your enthusiasm, although initially echoed in her voice, is increasingly not mirrored on her face. *This is the house, you think. Why is she not all over this? She's done her job. Why is she not pleased?*

And so you ask.

She pauses before responding.

"Be quiet for a moment. Do you hear something? Listen closely," she says.

Listen? you think.. *Listen for what? The house is empty.*

You pause and listen. You hear a truck turning around a nearby corner. You hear neighborhood children laughing from a yard across the street. A dog barks in the distance. None of it seems significant. It's a little noise, yes, but it's all within the range of normality. *What's she getting at?*

"Do you hear it?" she asks.

"Hear what, that truck?"

"No, not the truck. Listen again."

You listen again. You wait before commenting. And then you hear it. You're surprised you didn't hear it before. How did you miss that? In the enthusiasm for the exterior you missed something coming from the interior of the house. Not the interior rooms where you stand but the true interior, the

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frame, the foundation, the inner-workings of the house sealed off by drywall, brick, and tile. Now that you've heard it, you wait, and you hear it again.

The house groans.

You've heard creaks in houses before, but there's something about this that's ominous. It's not constant. It comes and goes, but you definitely hear something. The agent points to an area in the corner. There's a crack from the joint to the base of the outside wall. She then takes you to the rooms upstairs. The doors do not fully shut because the frames are not square.

"Is this normal settling?" you ask. "Or is there a deeper problem?"

Your real estate agent shakes her head and shrugs her shoulders. She's seriously concerned but evidently doesn't want to dash all hope. You both walk outside to look at the foundation. When you do, the concern heightens. This house that looks externally fantastic has a foundation that appears patched in numerous places all around the base. Something's off—very off.

"Expansive soil," she says. "They're supposed to test for it before they build, and no doubt they did, but somebody messed up. This house is stunning, but it's seriously flawed. No wonder it's priced so well. It may be dangerously overpriced, though. We'll get answers, if you'd like, but in the meantime let's keep looking."

The house you'd just noted for character lacks true character. It's aesthetically appealing and practically appalling. Maybe someone can fix it, but it sure feels like a good firm push would unleash the powers of gravity to finish it off. So much was invested above the ground, why would they not have invested in what went below the ground?

WISDOM

So what's with the groan? Christ gives insight.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash (Matthew 7:24-27).

Christ said that the house falls with "a great crash," not a groan. The groan precedes the crash. The groan is present when the house is painted, the lawn is manicured, and the furniture is creatively displayed. Ignore the groan, suppress the groan, and the crash will follow, albeit delayed. The groan is not delayed. Other signs increase with time: cracks in the walls, doors that don't shut, floors slightly off level, which all intensify the groan. The groan emanates from what we know instinctively and what the signs display.

Instinctively, we know we're vulnerable, so we groan. Even more, the realities of life push against the house giving very real stress and strain on the foundation and all supporting aspects of the house. The extent of the groan, the depth of the groan, the urgency of the groan, depends upon the foundation. Deep down, below the surface, there is a foundation. We know this, and we instinctively wonder if it's going to hold. Will this life hold together? Will this house endure the next wind? Will this life I'm building amount to something I want, something worthwhile? Will I get hit with a health scare, a financial blunder, relational hardship, vocational struggle, or something else that brings it all down? Cracks in the walls support our instincts. We wonder. We worry. We groan.

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So now what? Scripture gives important wisdom.

The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty (Proverbs 22:3, TNIV).

Like most wisdom, it seems obvious, but applying wisdom is different than knowing wisdom. Applying wisdom is recognizing a faltering foundation and taking action. But this kind of action is consistently neglected. Digging up a foundation is costly. It gets pushed off to another day. *Surely it won't all really crash, we think. Surely it will all be okay. It looks good enough. It will hold.*

But what if we were different? What if we were wise? What if we were a people willing to unearth faulty foundations, soft spots, expansive soil, and shifting sand? What if we did this and built our lives on top of a foundation worthy to be a foundation? What would life be like? What would life feel like? What kind of a life might we build? What if our efforts were not put so much toward external character but depth of character? What would come out of our lives? Who would benefit from the security of our "homes"?

If this sounds familiar, it should. Let's briefly consider where we started.

THE HEART

What was our starting place? It's been awhile...

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23).

The heart: that epicenter of existence, that place from which all else flows. What do we desire? What do we trust in? What do we hope in? Most of all, what do we love? When speaking of good and evil, Christ said, *"Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks"* (Luke 6:45). The mouth is no loner. It is a reflection of our hearts. Even more, life itself is a reflection of our hearts.

There's more. Again, it's been awhile. What did we read?

We don't just want it. We want IT.

So what happens? Life can get quite ugly.

She was crafted with eternity in her heart. She claws and climbs higher and higher on that corporate ladder...the next rung...the next box above...the next win...that will be IT. An addiction is born, because she is never quite satisfied. She struggles and strives to get higher and higher, because it is never quite IT.

But it was never meant to be IT...just it.

He is crafted with eternity in his heart. He gropes and gripes from one high to another...the next drink...the next fling...the next one will be IT. An addiction is born, because he is never quite satisfied. He takes good things and puts them on steroids. He struggles and strives as his life is buried by buzzes that are never quite IT.

But they were never meant to be IT...just it.

She is crafted with eternity in her heart. She squeezes and squirms from one relationship to another...the next one...the next relationship...the next encounter...that one will be IT. An addiction is born, because she is never quite satisfied. She cries and craves to get the one that will finally be IT.

But he is never meant to be IT...just it.

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It all came down to two words: Love God. It is a commandment, not just *about* love, but driven *by* love. To love another above God is to make that other into a god. The other may make a great gift, but the gift was never intended for godlike status. Let gifts be gifts and God be God. To worship the gift not only endangers the gift, but it robs us of life.

Let's go back to houses.

ROCK AND SAND

Christ compared two builders. One built on sand. The other built on rock. He stated that building on rock is done by one who "*hears these words of mine and puts them into practice*" (Matthew 7:24). That's interesting. It's interesting because we previously discovered Christ's affirmation that the greatest commandment, the most important command we could put into practice, is the commandment to love God. Put this together and great clarity is gained. The foundation upon which we build is God himself. It's another way of getting after the same truth. To love God with great heart and soul is to have God be the foundation upon which we build.

But we know this, right? We went after it fully. Let's move on to something else. Let's get after a new idea, a new thought.

Not so fast.

Here's where it gets interesting.

THE QUESTION

A question has been lingering. It went unaddressed in our first module. It must be addressed here. We must go toe to toe with a reality. God squares off with this reality. Scripture squares off with this reality. We must do the same.

The reality?

Our hearts are deceptive.

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

Consider the quagmire...

We started with this...

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23).

So the very thing we are to guard "*above all else*" (Proverbs 4:23) is the very thing that is deceitful "*above all things*" (Jeremiah 17:9). The *above all* language found in both passages is not unique to English but is in the original Hebrew, as well. Even more, if it sounds like an impossible task, there's an additional assessment. Not only does it seem that we are to guard, *above all else*, that which is deceitful, *above all things*, but the very next phrase declares the heart *beyond cure*.

What do doctors do when someone is *beyond cure*? Are they aggressive with the frail, elderly man with cancer throughout his entire body? Not typically. Do they labor for this man *above all else*? Not usually. The more typical and usual approach is to bring comfort, not cures, while preparing the family for the inevitable.

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PESSIMISM

Some are put off by this pessimistic view of the heart. Surely the condition's not *that* bad. Surely the heart's not totally *beyond cure*. After all, doesn't Scripture call us to guard it? Would Scripture call us to give ourselves to a hopeless cause? Even more, people do "good," don't they?

The teenage boy steps away from his rowdy friends to help an elderly woman across the street.

The multibillion dollar corporation dedicates a portion of profits to fight the AIDS epidemic.

The long-lost friend sends a note when she hears life has not gone according to plan.

The talented graduate who could demand six figures chooses to dedicate his life to the work of a nonprofit.

Yes, we know evil, but we also know "good." Don't we?

Sure. There's good. But we know there's more to it than that. Scripture describes the heart as *deceptive*. That's interesting. Deception is the difference between appearance and reality. Truth-be-known, at times it's difficult to know what's going on in the heart. Scripture states that "*As the heavens are high and the earth is deep, so the hearts of kings are unsearchable*" (Proverbs 25:3).

The heart is both deep and deceptive. It is vast and sly. That's a deadly combination, which no doubt leads to the *beyond cure* assessment. It's just so vast and deceptive that it's terribly difficult to understand, to comprehend, to tame, to guard.

The young man who helps the elderly woman across the street...genuine love or a setup to bum a buck for smokes?

The multibillion dollar corporation dedicating profits to fighting the AIDS epidemic...genuine concern or good marketing?

The long-lost friend sending a note upon learning life has not gone as planned...true concern or hidden delight in showing her prom queen "friend" that she knows?

The talented graduate capable of top dollar at the top firm but chooses a nonprofit...a good cause or good positioning for a political career?

That tricky heart—it can be so terribly deceitful.

What's true between people, those we see and touch, is ever so true between people and God, whom we don't see and touch. God's statement, recorded by Isaiah, needs no explanation: "*These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me*" (Isaiah 29:13).

We know that.

We've seen it.

We've experienced it.

Dare we admit we've done it?

Lip service is cheap and meaningless. A heart genuinely dedicated is of greatest value and God's true desire.

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GUARD IT?

So now what? Is it just *game on? Fight for it! Do the best with what you've got!*

That might appear wise if it weren't for that one despairing statement. It's been noted. The heart is said to be *beyond cure*. That's cause for pause.

The fifty-year-old man steps into the office of his cardiologist. He's been through a battery of tests. Despite his efforts to read the faces of the technicians, he's not been able to discern the results. Now it's time to get the facts. The doctor seems young to him, in her late thirties, but she's brilliant with a bunch of letters after her name. He enters her office with complete trust in the assessment he is about to receive.

She gives it straight.

"It's bad news. You have severe heart disease. Your heart is *beyond cure*."

She goes on from there. He doesn't hear much. He heard what he needed to hear in those two words *beyond cure*. Questions roll through his mind. What does one do with a heart that is *beyond cure*? How does one live with a heart that is *beyond cure*? He knows the answers. Finally he asks a different question.

"Can I get a transplant?"

The doctor offers a sobered but realistic response. "Maybe."

He learns of lists and requirements. He's willing to do whatever it takes. His current heart is *beyond cure*. Maybe he can get a new heart, a new life, a second chance.

GOSPEL

Scripture speaks of something we call *gospel*. It's a dusty old word with a variety of connotations. Unfortunately, the English word *gospel* fails to capture the saltiness of the Greek word it represents. The Greek word for *gospel* is made of two parts. The first part is *Eu* translated "good." We use this in words like *eulogy*, a good word said at a funeral. The second part is *angelos*. By itself we transliterate this as "angel." An angel is a being who acts as a messenger. *Angelos* is translated "message" or "news." So the word beneath *gospel* is pregnant with meaning. It's good news...very good news...a good message.

BAD NEWS IS GOOD NEWS?

Our friend in the doctor's office hopes for *gospel*, for good news. He doesn't get it. He gets bad news, really bad news, the worst news he could imagine. His heart is *beyond cure*. The doctor is forthright and direct. He appreciates this. In her final comments she says something that doesn't communicate at first. He revisits the comment later as he roles the conversation around his mind.

"I know I've given you bad news today," she says. "The only thing worse than bad news is living with a bad condition and not knowing it. There are countless people out there with your exact condition. They don't know it. Their first known clue will be when their heart stops."

It's an odd form of encouragement, but there's truth in it. The man's grateful to know the bad news. It takes him awhile to recognize the substance of this encouragement. In time, he identifies it clearly...

Knowing bad news enables him to recognize good news.

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It may be a long shot, but a solution could come along. Without awareness of the bad news, he's not even looking for good news. Self-awareness is powerful.

THE UNFOLDING MESSAGE OF SCRIPTURE

Not all, but a good portion of Scripture's earliest writings, the portion we refer to as the Old Testament, is intended to bring awareness of the problem, the bad news. It's a messy book. There's murder and rape and war and theft. There are people who pretend to be something but are truly something else. There's gossip and slander and adultery and bitterness. It's ugly. It's rough.

It's a lot like today.

Clearly something is wrong.

In the midst of Scripture bringing increased awareness of the bad news, periodically we hear a drumbeat. At first, it is heard in the distance. Over time, it increases in frequency and boldness. The drumbeat is the march of good news. Over time, this small drumbeat of good news increases in volume and ultimately reverberates from page to page.

With that in mind, consider a relatively early drumbeat, an announcement of the coming good news...

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

That's *euangelos*.

The heart of stone is replaced by a heart of flesh.

Awareness of the bad news helps us recognize the good news.

It's profoundly good news. God gets to the heart of the matter. This is no bandaid solution. This gets after the wellspring of life. This is hope in the midst of a story that appears hopeless. Where, after all, is hope when the wellspring of humanity is *beyond cure*? The only hope is for a power beyond us to perform a kind of surgery we could never perform on ourselves. No way, absolutely no way, could our friend look at his doctor and tell her, "You've been very helpful. I'll take it from here. I'll find a new heart, take out my old heart, and put the new one in myself. You've been great, but I don't need you anymore." That's sad and laughable. He's fully dependent upon another person's ability to give him a new heart.

And so are we.

Don't miss this...

Foundational to transformed living is a supernatural experience.

Engaging this supernatural experience is the purpose of this module.

DIGGING DEEP

Some would prefer an ivory tower experience. They'd wish for long hours of mind-bending thought. They'd study God but not worship God. They'd study Scripture but neglect the God of Scripture. They'd talk about life but ignore real living. Yes, God is God of the ivory tower, but God is God of the streets. He not only calls us to deep thinking, but he calls us to passionate living. Loving God does not just address below-the-ground realities. Loving God works its way into all aspects of life, all aspects of

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the house. Loving God addresses cracks in the walls, doors that don't shut, floors slightly off level, and maybe most of all...

Loving God addresses the groan.

There's much more to it than knowing what it means to love God. There's a working out of this reality that translates into transformed lives. We must not just point to the above-mentioned words of Christ and explain that loving God is having God as the foundation of our house, our lives. Rather, we must do the difficult. We must roll up our sleeves and renovate. We must not be content with external character. We must be a people who build true character.

BUILD CHARACTER

Building true character will at times mean addressing above-ground realities. We'll discover aspects of our lives out of line with the foundation we have established below the surface. At other times, building true character will involve below-ground realities. We'll discover soft spots in the foundation. We may have experienced the grace of Christ and committed to having God as our God, but over time we will discover aspects of our lives still resting on false gods. Unearthing these soft spots is challenging, but it is also something else.

It's liberating.

Christ said as much when he said, *"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"* (John 8:32). Living by false gods is enslavement to the groan and to the inevitable crash. But when we become a people who bring God's presence into all aspects of our lives, we become a people set free. We are ever-increasingly free from the groan, and we are freed to walk a new trajectory, a trajectory that does not involve the house of our lives ending with *"a great crash"* (Matthew 7:27).

So that is where we are. We are at a place of hope and healing. Our passion is to unearth soft spots and to experience the resonant character of a life entrusted to God. To do this, we must be willing to engage the Scriptures, engage each other, and engage our Creator. The days and weeks to follow are designed to help us do exactly that.

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