

Week Eight
Reading

A NEW KIND OF GROAN

THE GROAN

Let's come full circle. Where did we begin?

We began with the groan.

We began with the groan that we hear but do not hear. We listened not to the noise but through the noise. We listened for the groan that we hear every day and yet may never have heard at all. It's the constant behind the noise. We listened closely to the world around us, to the clashing and clanging of our days. We noted the groan's pervasiveness. We noted our expectation of the groan in back alleys and war-torn countries, and yet the groan is not limited to these places of physical strife. The groan reverberates from both Main Street and Wall Street. It is heard in the halls of academia and on the athletic field. The groan comes from the young and the old. It's everywhere. It's the constant hum behind the clatter and clanging of the day.

In that, we noted life's frenetic pace.

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.

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Get back home and do it again the next day.

Don't rest.

Don't evaluate.

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.

And then we asked a question.

A dangerous but profound little question.

Why?

Why do we groan?

THE PERFECT HOUSE

Remember the house?

We took a tour of a beautiful, but dangerously flawed house.

There was the appearance of character but lack of true character. The house had all the trappings: the brick, the wood, and the stone. And yet, the dramatic appearance was dangerously misleading. The house groaned. It was flawed. All indicators pointed to expansive soil, shifting sands, a foundation not worthy of being a foundation.

Such observations led us to the teachings of Christ:

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, TNIV).

What if we were different, we asked? 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 of being 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 displays of character but internal depth of character? What would come out of our lives? Who would benefit from the security of our "homes"?

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Which launched us on this multiweek experience unearthing soft spots, establishing new patterns, taking thoughts captive, embracing Christ's truth, trusting Christ's power, listening to Christ's Spirit, and more, much more.

And so now the groan is silenced.

Gone.

Finished.

Never to be heard from again.

We silenced that groan.

Right?

Not exactly.

TWO ERRORS

So what's the deal? Is this where we pour cold water on all we've discovered? Is this where we modify our expectations for genuine change, genuine character, and genuine transformation? A little change is possible, we'll say, but we are human after all. Let's not get carried away. Let's not set expectations too high. High expectations only lead to disappointment. Let's dumb this down a bit and get on with our lives.

Is that what we do now?

Again, not exactly.

Let's acknowledge potential errors.

First, there's the error of confusing the battle with the war. This is the declaration of *Mission Accomplished* when the mission is yet to be fully accomplished. A battle has been won. Maybe the battle was a significant battle. Maybe life feels very different. Maybe tremendous ground has been gained. Transformation happens. Character emerges. Anxiety turns to peace. Addiction is replaced by self-control. We celebrate. We worship. We tell our friends, our family, and anyone who will listen. This is good, all good, right up to the point where we do the unthinkable. We thought we were done. We thought it was over. We had gained such tremendous ground, and then we do it. We let our guard down. No, it's not yet a blatant pursuit of old habits and old patterns. It begins with innocence. We simply set down our shields and sheath our swords. Maybe we're tired. Maybe we crave a little passivity. Maybe, if we're honest, we crave old times and old patterns. We know the war hasn't really been won; we know that, but we act as if it has. We confuse the battle we have won with the war we still wage. Such actions, or more precisely inactions, inevitably lead to setbacks, frustrations and, dare we say, failures.

That's one potential error. There's another.

A second is the error of virtual surrender. It's not that we think progress isn't possible. Sure, progress is possible, but this is not our default expectation. The default expectation is struggle. Even more, those who don't struggle are labeled inauthentic. To struggle is to be real. We loathe plastic religiosity pretending to be perfect. Far more attractive is the person wrestling with sin. Such perspective, genuine as it is, is truth ripe for misapplication. Yes, plastic perfectionism is heinous, but if this disdain leads to the wearing of sin as a badge of honor, then something has gone dreadfully wrong. There's nothing honorable about sin. It's destructive. It robs us of life. It takes down both individuals and

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families and leaves people separated from their Creator. Plastic perfectionism is sin as well. It, too, is deeply destructive. But if our response to religiosity is a reveling in sin rather than a reviling of sin, then we've missed something terribly important. Our junk must go. Nothing is gained by a virtual surrender.

So what is our perspective? How do we engage real struggle where real victory is normal?

Let's consider a new kind of groan.

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Consider the following passage thoughtfully. Maybe read it twice.

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Corinthians 5:1-5).

There is a groan that must diminish. It's the groan emanating from a faulty foundation. In this, we do not relent. We dig for soft spots, unearth the sand, and build our lives upon a rock-solid foundation. In so doing, though, we come into a reality. It's a reality that, if unexpected, can leave us disillusioned. It's not that we thought this life would last forever, but we hoped we wouldn't still feel vulnerable. In truth, though, we do. We discover new life, new joy, new peace, new patterns, but we do not shed life's frailty. The passage just read likens our current reality to a tent. We, of course, run a risk by putting this tent metaphor in the same context as Christ's metaphor of a house, but the risk is worth it. It's worth it because even the grandest "house," the life resting fully in God's strength, when compared to the "house" it will one day be, makes this current grand house look like a tent.

And so a new kind of groan emerges.

It is a healthy groan.

It is the groaning for that which we were created.

What was just read? Hear it again in part, taking note of the added emphasis.

For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Corinthians 5:4-5).

Did you catch that?

God made us for a purpose.

This purpose is fulfilled not in this tent but in our heavenly dwelling for which we groan.

There is a new kind of groaning. The groan we silence is the groan of destructive living. The groan that emerges is the healthy longing for that which we were created. It is the longing for our very purpose. Scripture tells us that our "momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:17-18). In another place we read that "our present sufferings are not

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worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). We were not created for this earthly tent. We were created for our heavenly dwelling. We must not miss this. The here and now serves a purpose. It prepares us for our ultimate purpose.

We were not created for *this*.

We were created for *that*.

But *this* prepares us for *that*.

Existing for this life is no more our purpose than existing in the womb is the purpose of an embryo. In time, the embryo develops, matures, and ultimately leaves the womb in a different form. We, too, develop, mature, and ultimately leave this womb, this life, in a different form. We were not created and placed here as an end. We were created and placed here to prepare us for that which we are ultimately created.

This is preface.

This is preview.

This is pregame.

Which leads us to our seventh imperative.

I must recognize the real me.

I must fight for my life.

I must trust.

I must walk by God’s Spirit.

I must worship.

I must train.

And our seventh:

I must persevere.

Much could be said of perseverance. Let’s make three observations here.

CONTENTED DISCONTENTMENT

We long to *arrive*. We long to be at that place where all battles have been fought and won, all confusion has been cleared and resolved, and all wounds have been helped and healed. Scripture does not push against this longing. Rather, vision is cast for a future day when the longing will be fulfilled by describing a day when there will be “*no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away*” (Revelation 21:4). Yes, this old order will pass away, and the grand adventure of the new order will be ushered in. This new order will bring fulfillment to the unfulfilled longings we live with today. We were created with eternity in our hearts, and this longing for the eternal will finally find its home.

Assistance for the present is found in a distinction. Yes, to follow Christ is to live with a degree of discontentment, but it is a *contented discontentment*. Odd, you say? Not really. The lovers experience contented discontentment when they are engaged but not married. They have found true love, but they are not yet fully together. Homebuyers experience contented discontentment when they have contracted to purchase a house but have not yet closed. They have found a place to call home, but

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they are not yet in the house. Travelers experience contented discontentment when they have left their place of origin and are *en route* to their destination. They are relieved to be off and going, but they are not yet there, and contented discontentment propels them forward.

Identifying contented discontentment strengthens our resolve to persevere. Without this clarity, we're easily distracted by false promises of immediate fulfillment in other things. "I'm following Christ," we say. "It should be better than this." Maybe yes, but maybe no. Maybe the struggle of the moment is accomplishing one of the very things struggle is intended to accomplish. Describing a time of intense struggle, Paul writes that this hardship "*happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead*" (2 Corinthians 1:9). Hardship can send our hearts wandering, or it can focus our resolve upon that which we know will ultimately bring our hearts true rest. As followers of Christ we are not yet in a place of ultimate contentment, but we are unique in that by grace we have discovered where ultimate contentment will be fully realized. We need not keep searching. We are content in our discontentment.

Which leads to a second observation about perseverance.

ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE

It would be easy to argue that following Christ does not work. This may sound like a denial of everything we've discovered so far. Such is not the case. Rather, it's a reinforcement of everything we've discovered so far. Following Christ does not "work" if we maintain a limited, cradle to grave, perspective. Scripture states this bluntly: "*If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men*" (1 Corinthians 15:19). Why would Paul say such? Consider how he describes his life...

Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:25-28).

If following Christ is meant to generate the good life, then it failed Paul. Even more, Paul himself advocated a very different philosophy of living if the limited perspective is true. Consider this thought-provoking statement:

If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Corinthians 15:32).

Yes, if the limited perspective is true, if there is no eternity, then Scripture exhorts us to party like there is no tomorrow. But Scripture does not give us a limited perspective. We are given an eternal perspective, and with this eternal perspective, living for the moment looks foolish. Why live for immediate gratification when there is a grand view going far beyond the most distant horizon? Christ himself exhorts us to "*not store up earthly treasures where moth and rust destroy, but to store up treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy*" (Matthew 6:19-20). Yes, there is a frailty to this life that continues even for those who follow Christ, but we were never intended to live for this frail life. We were created for an eternal perspective. This eternal perspective empowers perseverance for the inevitable ups and downs of following Christ in a world often hostile to our faith. We cannot and must not be a people engrossed with the here and now. Thoughts of eternity must not be limited to quiet comforts when a grandparent passes away, as real and important as that may be. Rather, an eternal

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perspective must inspire our daily living. We are told to follow Christ, “*who for the joy set before him endured the cross*” (Hebrews 12:2). If we are to endure the crosses of our daily lives, we too must live for the joy set before us, for the grand view of God’s grand plan.

Which leads to a question and a third observation.

PERPLEXED

The question is this...

What is God’s grand plan?

It’s not only a fair question; it’s an essential question. If an eternal perspective is intended to inspire perseverance in the moment, then what do we know about this eternal perspective? What is the hope that stands before us? Will we like what comes next? This, of course, is a very significant question we will not fully exhaust here, but we will make an essential observation.

Scripture states, “*Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known*” (1 Corinthians 13:12). This passage, and others like it, simultaneously speaks to both mystery and revelation. Yes, much has been revealed. We know that we shall see face to face. We know that we shall know fully, even as we are fully known. We know of a new earth where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain (Revelation 21:4). We know of the great multitude, standing before God, so numerous that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language (Revelation 7:9). We know these things and more. Much has been revealed, and this inspires perseverance.

And yet, there is mystery.

Knowing what we know about eternity will not answer our every question. Difficulties will enter our lives, and although an eternal perspective will bring comfort, it will not answer everything. Hardship and tragedy, especially when it is severe, will be soothed but not fully resolved by our hope of eternity. We will still ask, “Why?” and at times be met with silence. This will test our faith like nothing else will test our faith. There will be intense seasons where we wonder why this event, this tragedy, this hardship has come upon us. Nothing here is meant to minimize these seasons. Flippant comments of eternity are not just unhelpful but are often destructive.

Those attempting to resolve all mystery in hardship miss an essential observation of Scripture. This observation is felt throughout but is described with wisdom by Paul. When writing of a time where “*We were hard pressed on every side*” (2 Corinthians 4:8), Paul describes their perspective. They were...

... *perplexed, but not in despair* (2 Corinthians 4:9).

A daring faith, a rich faith, a tried-but-true faith allows itself to be perplexed, sometimes deeply so. Quick answers do nothing when we are hard pressed on every side. In such seasons, far wiser is the faith that simultaneously takes comfort from that which is revealed, while allowing perplexity in the midst of mystery. This perplexity, when embraced, brings a comfort of its own and protects us from despair. Yes, there may be despairing times, but pulling out of these times will not be done with simple answers, but more commonly by allowing the perplexities to stand. To truly persevere, we must be a people who take comfort from what we know of the grand and eternal perspective, while allowing perplexities from the mystery to remain unresolved.

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PRESS ON

Much has been learned.

Much has been gained.

Much more will be experienced as we put it all into practice.

The unhealthy groan will diminish.

The new longing, the groaning for our eternal dwelling, will increase.

With the multitudes of travelers on the way of Christ, we too must “*press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of us*” (Philippians 3:12). As we persevere, we will ever-increasingly resemble and reflect the goodness of our God. We will build a lasting character that outlives this temporal tent and ushers us into our eternal dwellings.