The Trap God Set

On Romans 7–8, the Law That Heaped up Sin, and the Faithful One Who Caught It

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The Groanings Underneath Everything

Earlier today another preacher walked us through Isaiah 40 and the sudden weight under which a human being can pass from health to disease. He called us to the vocation of ministering to those who suffer in lower places. And along the way he reached for the same image Paul reaches for in Romans 8: labor pains, groanings, something being brought forth through what we suffer.

I want to pick up where that left off, because the framework Paul builds in Romans 8 stretches under everything we are going to look at this morning:

> For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pains together until now. And not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. (Romans 8:22–23)

So the earth is groaning. All of creation is groaning. Humanity is groaning. And, a mystery beyond mystery, three verses later, Paul says the Spirit of God is groaning too:

“Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26).

The Vocation of Hearing Groans

We focus mainly on the groanings of our own body, because they are so close to us. But if we will open our ears to the sounds of the groanings of other people (communities, nations, neighbors carrying weight that nobody knows about) there is a sound of groaning all around us. The Spirit gives us ears to hear what God wants us to hear, and what God wants us to hear is the groaning of the world.

Paul is drawing this directly from Exodus 2. Watch:

> Now it happened in the process of time that the king of Egypt died. Then the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage. So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God acknowledged them. (Exodus 2:23–25)

A suffering, groaning humanity cries out to God in prayer, and God hears their groanings. As Spirit-filled people, our vocation is to send up prayers to God on behalf of others, not only for our own groaning but for the groaning of others.

When Moses turns aside to the burning bush, the unburning bush, as someone in the assembly called it the other day, because the bush is on fire and yet it is not consumed, and the phrase has stuck with me, Moses is not the one hearing the suffering of the people. God is hearing it. And then God conveys what He has heard to Moses, who goes into Egypt and, with the mighty hand of God, delivers the people from bondage.

The Word “Salvation” Did Not Start at the Cross

Paul looks back at that Exodus deliverance in 1 Corinthians 10 with what I would call a very fluid imagination about what was actually happening:

> Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:1–4)

Paul is writing to Gentiles, and yet he calls the Exodus generation "all our fathers." Their deliverance was, somehow, the groundwork of ours. In Protestant theology we sometimes talk about salvation as if it is a brand-new thing, this great miraculous moment God did through Jesus. But the groundwork was laid when God delivered the children of Israel through Moses, through the Red Sea, through the wilderness, separating them from their bondage. The word "salvation" did not start at the cross. The word "salvation" started long before that. The cross is the climax of a long story that was already running.

And notice the imagery getting layered in: a cloud overhead, a sea passed through, food from heaven, water from a rock, and that rock, Paul says, was following them. The Rolling Stone. The rock that followed them was Christ. There is something here in the Exodus story that comes back, much later, as the very architecture of how God works.

Creation Suffers Without Having Caused It

Notice what Paul says about the suffering of creation in Romans 8:20, that it was subjected to futility "not willingly." Creation did not do anything to cause the problems of its own suffering. And yet sometimes we think to ourselves, "You know what, my sin doesn't bother anybody else. It's just personal. What I do on my own time does not affect anybody else." This is almost a mantra of our age: that sin is private, personal, contained.

But when Adam and Eve heard the command of God, a command meant for life, and the serpent twisted it into something else, and they acted on that twisting, the consequences were not

limited to themselves. The woman would now labor in pain in childbirth. The ground would labor in pain to deliver its fruit. The man would, by the sweat of his brow, bring forth from a ground that no longer simply gave its increase. All of the labor that was not there before sin: was there now.

Do you see all the laboring that gets introduced? Prior to that personal sin between Adam and Eve, the ground was yielding its increase freely. Now it is laboring to bring forth. Man is laboring. Woman is laboring. The whole rest of the book of the Bible is the book of how God is trying to deliver His creation from the burden and the groaning of that labor.

That is not the calling we were called to. Our vocation is not a vocation of enslavement and laboring. The calling we were called to was abundance, ministry, tending, dominion, not bondage. Not the tears of labor. This is why Revelation 21 says God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, because the labors are over, the suffering is over. All of it has progressed to the point where the groaning of humanity has been resolved.

Nobody Is Made of Better Stuff Than Anybody Else

Now in case anyone is tempted to think that the Jews were given an advantage and the Gentiles never had a chance (or, in our age, that being born in Protestant Europe or Protestant America gives you an advantage in front of God) that is a fallacy. If you think there is one group of people made of better material than another group of people, think again. All of us are groaning under sin. None of us is made of better stuff.

Paul says in Romans 1:18 that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. There were people who knew God from the beginning, Paul says (God made things; He manifested Himself in what He made) but because they did not want to retain God in their knowledge, God gave

them over. “I gave them up,” Paul says, three times in Romans 1. You resist, you resist, you resist, and finally God says, “Go for it.” And they gave themselves over to the things they had been chasing. This is Paul’s description of the Gentile nations.

Then in Romans 2 Paul turns and addresses any Jews who were nodding along to the indictment of the Gentiles:

“Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things” (Romans 2:1).

Paul says later in that chapter, “Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will . . . You yourself are confident that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes.” In other words: you have been congratulating yourselves that you have the law, and that you are not like those dirty Gentiles. But then Paul lands the indictment: “You who teach others, do you not teach yourself?” The Jews fell into the same trap the Gentiles had fallen into. Israel turned out to be no different from Adam, no different from the Gentile nations.

The Tents of Israel Were Beautiful, But

There is a moment in the book of Numbers where Balaam, who has been hired to curse Israel, stands on a hilltop and looks down at their encampment. The law of God has given Israel such order that the surrounding nations are stunned. The tabernacle in the center. Tents arranged with precision. The smells of human existence taken outside the camp, so the camp itself is not bound up with the disorder of the body. Balaam stands there, and instead of cursing them, he says:

“How lovely are your tents, O Jacob! Your dwellings, O Israel!” (Numbers 24:5).

He cannot curse them because of the orderliness the law has produced among them. The law was good. The law produced something beautiful. But Israel still had a weakness, and the weakness was not found in the law God gave them. The weakness was that they were descendants of Adam. They were themselves flesh and blood. The nature of sin was inside them. The law could create an atmosphere that prevented a free fall into debauchery to a degree. But the people themselves were still bound up with the same sin that all of humanity carries.

Paul finishes the indictment in Romans 3 by jumping through Old Testament verses, verses that were written to the Jews, and saying, in effect, "You too." Watch this catena:

> What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one. Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Romans 3:9–18)

Paul is reaching back into Israel's own Scriptures and using Israel's words to indict Israel. You too. You are made of the same stuff the Gentiles were made of. Despite the law, you continued to fail in the same ways.

Breaking Out of the Protestant Ditch

Before we get to Romans 7, I want to try to break us out of a particular Protestant mindset that started about five hundred years ago. This is not an indictment of our Protestant forefathers, and it is not an indictment of our Catholic forefathers either. This is a comment on

human nature. When the Catholic tradition found itself in one ditch, what felt like a works-righteousness system where ordinary people could not be confident of their standing before God, the Protestants moved them out of that ditch and into the opposite ditch.

The opposite ditch is the position that anything that smells of works-righteousness is bad. That "by grace you are saved through faith" is a full stop. That nothing on the human side needs to follow. But the same Paul who wrote, "By grace you are saved through faith," also wrote in the very next verse, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8–10). There is no full stop. The Protestant tradition tended to put one there.

Yes, God delivers you from Egypt, from the powers of Pharaoh. Yes, He gets you through the Red Sea and into the wilderness, where He begins to provide the spiritual things you need to be the person He is calling you to be. To that point, yes. But then the expectation is that when the law is given to you, you would actually be obedient to it. Look at the very last verse of Psalm 105:

"He gave them the lands of the Gentiles, and they inherited the labor of the nations, that they might observe His statutes and keep His laws" (Psalm 105:44–45).

The expectation built into Israel's whole story is that the people delivered would actually live the law that followed the deliverance. The land was given so that the law could be lived. And the law was given for life. Leviticus 18:5 says it directly:

"You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 18:5).

Keep them, and live by them. The law had the promise of life baked into it.

They Soon Forgot

Then turn the page to Psalm 106, written by someone looking back at the same story Psalm 105 was telling. Psalm 106:6 says:

> We have sinned with our fathers, we have committed iniquity, we have done wickedly.
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> Our fathers in Egypt did not understand Your wonders; they did not remember the multitude of Your mercies, but rebelled by the sea: the Red Sea. (Psalm 106:6–7)

A few verses later: “And He saved them . . . that He might make His mighty power known. . . . They soon forgot His works; they did not wait for His counsel, but lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tested God in the desert. And He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul” (Psalm 106:8–15).

They lusted, and God gave them what they asked for, but their souls grew lean. That is exactly the same dynamic Paul described in Romans 1 for the Gentiles. God gave them what they wanted, and their souls grew lean. The psalm continues: “They made a calf in Horeb . . . thus they changed their glory into the image of an ox that eats grass” (Psalm 106:19–20). This is the verse Paul is quoting in Romans 1:23 when he describes the Gentile fall. Paul is reading Israel’s own history as the template for Gentile failure.

Israel, given every advantage of the law, fell anyway. And the closing chapters of the law itself, Deuteronomy 28 through 32, anticipated this. God set life and death before Israel and said: “Choose life. Choose to keep My law. If you do not, you will be scattered throughout the nations.”

Romans 7: Speaking to Those Who Know the Law

Now we arrive at Romans 7, and here is where the argument becomes the most dense and the most worth our patience.

Paul opens by addressing those who know the law. He says the law has dominion over a person as long as they live, and through baptism into Christ we have died to that dominion (Romans 7:1–4). Then comes a sentence that has to be read slowly:

"For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death" (Romans 7:5).

Aroused by the law. That is the strange claim. Every place Israel went, the sinful passions inside them got stirred up not by the absence of the law but by the presence of it. Why?

Paul anticipates two questions about this. The first one is in verse 7: "What shall we say then? Is the law sin?" And the second is in verse 13: "Has then what is good become death to me?" These are the two questions, and they organize the rest of the chapter.

The answer to the first: certainly not. The law is not sin. But Paul goes on:

> I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. (Romans 7:7–8)

The Cookies in the Cookie Jar

A previous pastor in our assembly used to tell a story to illustrate this. Mama is going down to the store, and on her way out she tells Little Johnny, "I am going to run to the store. Don't get any of those cookies in the cookie jar." Now before that warning, Little Johnny was not thinking about the cookies. He was playing with his toys in the living room. Mama was just going to run down to the store. But as soon as the law came, "Don't eat the cookies," what is the only thing Johnny is now thinking about? The cookies.

You did not even know about them. And then the law arrived, and a new desire has been provoked.

This is exactly what Paul says: “Sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire” (Romans 7:8). The “Just Say No” campaigns of recent decades were never going to work for this reason. The weakness of the flesh is provoked by the prohibition. Should we say no to drugs? Yes. But can we just say no, and trust that saying no is enough? No, because of sin. Sin will take occasion by the commandment and work every manner of desire within us.

And so Paul says: “I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died” (Romans 7:9). Just like Adam and Eve in the garden. The garden had every tree they could possibly want, every one free to eat from. Just don’t eat from that one. And as soon as God said, “Just don’t eat that one,” all of the trees of the garden were suddenly outweighed by the one tree they could not have.

The Lure

This is where Paul reveals the strangest claim in the whole letter. Watch what he does in Romans 5:20:

“Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more” (Romans 5:20).

The law entered that the offense might abound. That is a remarkable thing to say. It is almost like God was setting a trap. The law as a lure. Sin draws near because of the prohibition. The offense is gathered up, heaped up, in one people: Israel.

I think sometimes of those traps where someone cuts a small hole in a coconut and puts a piece of fruit inside. A monkey reaches in, grabs the fruit, makes a fist around it, and now its fist cannot get back out of the small hole. The monkey could escape at any time by simply letting go

of the fruit. But the monkey will not let go. And so the monkey just sits there, holding the fruit, until the trapper comes back.

That is what the law did to sin. The law reached in. Sin took the bait. And then it just sat there, gathered up, waiting.

Heaped up in One Faithful Israelite

But here is where the trap fully closes. The whole history of Israel, with all the failures heaping up, was God's way of drawing sin out of hiding into one place. And then, when the time was right, one faithful Israelite stepped onto the scene. One Jew who actually kept the covenant. One who, in every temptation, was faithful. One who fulfilled the law of God in His own body.

And what happened? The Roman authorities and the religious hierarchy of that one people came together and conspired to do what fallen humanity always does to faithful people. They killed Him. Psalm 2 had described this very thing centuries earlier:

> Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, "Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision. (Psalm 2:1–4)

The kings of the earth gathered around the Anointed One. They said, "Let us break His bonds from us." And the God of heaven sat in the heavens and laughed. He had set His King on His holy hill. The whole trap was sprung at that moment. All the sin that had been heaped up by the law across fifteen hundred years was gathered onto one body, the one faithful body, and there sin met its end.

God in the Hands of Angry Sinners

I want to say something carefully here. Jonathan Edwards preached a famous sermon called “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” It has shaped a particular American Protestant imagination about what happened on the cross. But the cross is not actually “sinners in the hands of an angry God.” The cross is God in the hands of angry sinners.

It was angry sinners who put Him there. It was the religious leadership and the Roman state who killed Him. God did not condemn Jesus. Men condemned Jesus. What God condemned, Paul will say a few verses later, was sin in the flesh of the Son. The sin was put to death there. The Son was raised. The grave could not hold Him because the temple of God cannot ultimately be destroyed.

This is the trap God set. He drew sin out into the open by the law. He gathered it in one people, Israel. Israel could not handle it. The law heaped it up. And then, when the trap was fully laid, He sent His Son into the likeness of sinful flesh, took on Himself everything that had been heaped up, and condemned sin in the body of the Son.

The Temple That Cannot Be Destroyed

I want to circle back to something that connects to the resurrection. When Babylon came in and destroyed the first temple, what happened to the Shekinah glory of God? According to Ezekiel, the glory did not simply disappear. It moved. It moved out from the holy of holies to the gate of the temple. Then to the threshold. Then to the gate of the city. And then to the Mount of Olives, and from there away (Ezekiel 10–11). The farther the presence got from the temple, the more open season it was on the destruction of that building.

The ultimate death is the moment the presence leaves.

Now hold that in mind as you hear what Jesus said when they asked Him about the temple. He said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). They said, “Forty-six years this temple was in building, and You will raise it up in three days?” But John tells us, “He was speaking of the temple of His body” (John 2:21). Because the Shekinah of God was no longer dwelling in the stone building on the temple mount. The Shekinah of God was dwelling on one man, Jesus Christ. He was the temple of God on the earth.

And so evil men came in and destroyed that temple too. But here is the difference. The presence of God cannot ultimately be destroyed by death. That is why the grave could not keep Him. And that is why resurrection is the vocation of every body in which the Spirit of God now dwells. You are the dwelling place of God. Your body may be destroyed, but it is coming out of the grave, because the temple of God cannot be permanently destroyed. Evil people will do evil things. There will be groanings and suffering and all of the things we face as people. But if you are indwelt by the Spirit of God, He will raise you up. As Paul says a few verses later: “The body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Romans 8:10).

No Condemnation

That brings us to where Paul has been pointing us all along: Romans 8:1:

> There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:1–4)

The law of the Spirit of life is not a different law from the law of Moses. It is the same law, now enlivened by a life that is no longer bound by the flesh but empowered by the Spirit. The law's righteous requirement, which the flesh could not deliver, is now fulfilled in us through the Spirit who has been given to us.

This is what the Protestant reading sometimes misses. Paul is not saying the law is bad and needs to be done away with. Paul is saying the law was always good, was always for life, but could not be lived in the strength of the flesh. The flesh was too weak. The flesh was bound by sin. What was needed was not the removal of the law but the empowering of a new life that could actually live it. And that new life is the Spirit who indwells you.

This is what I forget when I drift back into thinking about my own flesh, and my wife has had to remind me, more times than I can count, of what I say every Sunday from this pulpit. The Spirit who indwells you is the same Spirit who empowers what the law required. You are not under condemnation. Walk after the cloud.

What That Means for the Groanings

Look back at where we started. Paul opens Romans 8 with the no-condemnation, then immediately picks up the groanings of the creation, "We know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pains together until now" (Romans 8:22). The groanings are not done. The labor pains are not done. But now we are not groaning under condemnation. We are groaning toward something: the redemption of our bodies, the manifestation of the sons of God, the wiping away of every tear.

And the Spirit groans with us in the meantime. When we cannot find words, the Spirit makes intercession with groanings that cannot be uttered. When the world is groaning and we hear it, our vocation as Spirit-filled people is to send up prayers on behalf of those who are

suffering. The same God who heard Israel groaning in Egypt is hearing the groans of the world now. And the same God who delivered Israel through Moses is at work delivering the surrounding world through us, through our intercession, through our presence, through our willingness to hear what God wants us to hear.

Where Sin Abounds, Grace Abounds More

I want to close with the line from Romans 5:20 that hangs over this entire chapter. After Paul says, "The law entered that the offense might abound," he immediately says:

"But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Romans 5:20).

The trap God set was not a trap to catch sinners and condemn them. It was a trap to catch sin and condemn it. The sinners were the ones the Father wanted to bring home. And the way He brought them home was by sending the Son into the very middle of the trap, taking onto Himself everything that had been heaped up, and condemning the sin in His body so that the sinners could go free.

This is the gospel. Where sin abounds, grace abounds much more. Let the ever-abounding grace of God live in your life. Believe it. Move out in trust. And see what God will do this week.