
The Groans of Believers

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do groan, being burdened”
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— *under their burdens* —

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— 2 Corinthians 5:4

IN the first verse of this chapter, the apostle gives a reason why he, and others of the saints in his day, did endure persecution for the cause of Christ, with such an unshaken constancy and holy magnanimity; he tells us that they had the prospect of better things, the solid and well-grounded hope of a happy immortality to follow upon the dissolution of this clay-tabernacle of the body. Ye need not wonder, would he say, though we cheerfully and willingly undergo the sharpest trials for religion: “For we know, that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

When the poor believer can say with David, “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever,” he will be ready to join issue with the same holy man, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” Yea, so far is the apostle from being damped or discouraged at the thoughts of death, that he rather invites it to do its office, by striking down the clay-tabernacle, that his soul may be at liberty to ascend to these mansions of glory, that his blessed friend and elder

brother hath prepared for him above: verse 2: "In this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven." He knew very well, that when he should be stripped of his mortal body, he should not be found naked, as it is verse 3, but clothed with a robe of glory and immortality. And in the verse read, he gives a reason why he was so desirous to change his quarters; and it is drawn from the uneasiness and inconvenience of his present lodging, while cooped up in this clay-tabernacle: "We that are in this tabernacle [says he] do groan, being burdened."

In which words we may briefly notice, (1) The believer's present lodging or habitation; he is in a tabernacle. (2) His melancholy disposition; he is groaning. (3) The cause or reasons of his groans; being burdened.

(1) I say, we have an account of the believer's present lodging or habitation; he is in this tabernacle. By the tabernacle here we are to understand the body; so called, because it is a weak, moveable sort of habitation; (as we may hear more fully afterwards). The indweller of this lodging is the noble soul, which is said to be in this tabernacle, while it is in an embodied state. So that the meaning is, "We that are in this tabernacle," that is, we that are living in the body.

(2) We have the melancholy disposition of the poor believer while in this lodging; he groans. The word in the original, rendered, to groan, we find it taken in a threefold sense in Scripture. First, it is an expression of grief. "Obey them that have the rule over you, that they may give their account of you, not with grief" (Heb 13:17); or, as it may be ren-

dered, not with groans. It is the same word that is here used. There is nothing more ordinary, when a person is weighted and pressed in spirit, than to give vent to the heart in sobs and groans. And thus stands the case with the Lord's people many times, while in the tabernacle of the body. Secondly, it is sometimes an expression of displeasure, "Grudge not one against another" (Jam 5:9). It is the same word that is here rendered to groan. And so it imports, that the believer is dissatisfied with, or disaffected to his present quarters; he does not like it, in comparison of the better habitation that he has in view. Thirdly, it is sometimes taken as an expression of ardent, passionate, and earnest desire. Thus the word is taken in the second verse of this chapter, "In this we groan earnestly, desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven." I shall not exclude any of these senses from the apostle's scope in these words.

(3) In the words we have the cause or reason of the believer's groans; being burdened. Many a weary weight and heavy load has the believer hanging about him, while passing through this valley of Baca, which make him to go many times with a bowed down back. What these weights and burdens are, ye may hear more fully afterwards.

The observation I offer from the words is this.

Doctrine: That believers are many times burdened, even unto groaning, while in the clay-tabernacle of the body, "We that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened."

The method I shall observe, in handling this doctrine, is, to give you some account.

- I. Of the believer's present lodging; he is in a tabernacle.
- II. Of the believer's burdens in this tabernacle.
- III. Of his groans under these burdens.
- IV. Conclude with some improvements of the whole.

I. The believer's present lodging: a tabernacle.

The first thing is to give you some account of the believer's present lodging while in the body. And there are these two or three things that I remark about it, which I find in the text and context.

(1) A house

Then, I find it is called a house in the first verse of this chapter. And it is fitly so called, because of its rare and curious structure and workmanship. "I will praise Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Thy works, and that my soul knoweth right well. My substance was not hid from Thee, when I was made in secret; and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth" (Psa 139:14,15). The body of man is a wonderful piece of architecture, and the skill and wisdom of the great Creator is wonderfully discovered therein. It is set up, as it were, by line and rule, in such exact orders, that the most curious piles and edifices in the world are but a chaos or mass of confusion, when compared therewith. Take a clod of dust, and compare it with the flesh of man, unless we were instructed of it beforehand, we would not imagine it to be one and the same matter, considering the beauty and excellency of the

one above the other; which evidently proclaims the being, power, and wisdom of the great Creator, who made us, and not we ourselves, and who can sublimate matter above its first original.

(2) *An earthly house*

I remark concerning the believer's present lodging, that however curious its structure be, yet it is but a house of earth; therefore called in the first verse, "an earthly house," and it is so, especially in a threefold respect.

First, in respect of its original; it is made of earth. It is true, all the elements meet in the body of man, fire, earth, water, and air; but earth is the predominant. And therefore, from thence he is said to have his rise: "He dwells in houses of clay, and his foundation is in the dust" (Job 4:19). Whatever be the beauty, strength, structure, or high pedigree of men; yet as to their bodies, they claim no higher extract than the dust of the earth.

Secondly, it is a house of clay, in respect of the means that support it; it stands upon pillars of dust; for the corn, wine, and oil, wherewith the body of man is maintained, do all spring out of the earth. God is said to hear the heavens, the heavens to hear the earth, the earth to hear the corn, wine, and oil, and these to hear Jezreel (Hosea 2:21-22). And if these props be withdrawn, how soon will the clay-tabernacle fall to the ground, and return to its original?

Thirdly, it is a house of earth in respect of its end; it returns thither at its dissolution. Accordingly see that which God said to Adam, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen 3:19).

Perhaps there may be some allusion unto these three in that passionate exclamation of the Prophet Jeremiah to the rebellious Jews, "O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord!" (Jer 22:29). They were earth in their original, they were earth as to their support, and they would return unto earth in the end.

(3) *A tabernacle*

I remark concerning the believer's present lodging, that it is but at best a tabernacle. So it is called in verse 1, "If our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved;" and again here, "We that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened." Now a tabernacle or tent is a movable or portable kind of habitation, and is peculiar especially to two sorts of men. (1st) Unto travelers or wayfaring men. (2nd) To soldiers or war-faring men.

First, I say, Tabernacles or tents, they are peculiar to strangers or wayfaring men. Strangers, especially in the eastern countries, used to carry these portable houses about with them, because of the inconveniences which they were exposed to. Hence, it is said of Abraham, that "by faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise" (Heb 11:9). They dwelt in tabernacles, because they had no present inheritance; they were but strangers and passengers in the country. To this the apostle probably alludes here. And so this intimates to us, that the saints of God, while in the body, they are pilgrims and strangers, not as yet arrived at their own country: "I am a stranger in the

earth,” says the psalmist in Psalm 119:19; and it is said of the Scripture-worthies that they “confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth; they desired a better country, that is, an heavenly” (Heb 11:13, 16). O believer, thou art not a resident, but only a passenger through this valley of Baca; and therefore study a disposition of soul suitable to thy present condition.

Secondly, tabernacles as they were used by strangers and wayfaring men, so by soldiers and war-faring men, who are obliged frequently to flit their camps from one place to another. Believers, while they are in the tabernacle of the body, must act the part of soldiers, fight their way to the promised land, through the very armies of hell. “We wrestle not [says the apostle] against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph 6:12). And therefore, as the apostle exhorts, it concerns us to put on “the whole armor of God,” the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, the girdle of truth; and to be frequently accustoming ourselves to a holy dexterity in wielding and managing “the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God,” that so we may be able to make a courageous stand in the day of battle, and at last come off the field in a victorious manner, when Christ, the Captain of salvation, shall sound the retreat of death. Thus the believer's lodging in a tabernacle shows him to be both a traveler and a soldier.

(4) Another thing that I remark concerning the believer's lodging is, that it is but a tottering and

crazy house, that is shortly to be taken down; for, says the apostle in verse 1, "The earthly house of this tabernacle is to be dissolved." "What man is he [says the psalmist] that liveth, and shall not see death? shall he deliver his soul from the hand of the grave?" (Psa 89:48). This king of terrors has erected his trophies of victory over all that ever sprung of Adam. The greatest Caesars and Alexanders who made the world to tremble with their sword, were all forced at last to yield themselves captives unto this grim messenger of the Lord of hosts. There is no discharge of this warfare; the tabernacle of the body must dissolve. However, it may be ground of encouragement to the believer, that death is not a destruction or annihilation: no, as the apostle tells, it is only a dissolving, or taking down of the tent or tabernacle; for God designs to set up this tabernacle again at the resurrection, more glorious than ever. It was the faith of this that comforted and encouraged Job under his affliction, "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon earth. And though after my skin worms destroy this body, and though my reins be consumed within me [says he], yet in my flesh shall I see God" (Job 19:25,26). So much for the first thing in the method.

II. Of the believer's burdens in this tabernacle

The second thing proposed was, to speak a little of the believer's burdens while in this tabernacle. This earthly house, it lies under many

servitudes, and the believer (as one says) pays a dear mail or rent for his quarters. For,

(1) The clay-tabernacle itself is many times a very heavy burden to him. The crazy cottage of the body is liable to innumerable pains and distempers, which makes it lie like a dead weight upon the soul, whereby its vivacity and activity is exceedingly marred. When the poor soul would mount up, as upon eagle's wings, the body will not bear part with it. So that the believer feels the truth of Christ's apology verified in his sad experience, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

(2) Not only is he burdened with a burden of clay, but also with a burden of sin; I mean indwelling corruption, the secret atheism, enmity, unbelief, ignorance, pride, hypocrisy, and other abominations of his heart. O but this be a heavy burden, which many times is like to dispirit the poor believer, and press him through the very ground. David, though a man according to God's own heart, yet cries out under this burden, "Who can understand his errors? cleanse Thou me from secret faults" (Psa 19:12). And the apostle Paul never complained so much of any burden as of this, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom 7:24). To be rid of this burden, the poor believer many times would be content that this clay-tabernacle were broken into shivers.

(3) He is burdened many times with a sense of much actual guilt, which he has contracted through the untenderness of his way and walk. Conscience, that deputy of the Lord of Hosts (being supported by the authority of the law,) frequently brings in a

heavy indictment against the poor soul, and tells it, Thus and thus thou hast sinned, and trampled upon the authority of God and the great Lawgiver. In this case, the believer cannot but take with the charge, and own, with David, "Mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me" (Psa 38:4); "Innumerable evils have compassed me about, mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of mine head, therefore my heart faileth me" (Psa 40:12).

(4) He is sometimes sadly burdened with the temptations of Satan. The devil, that cunning archer, he shoots at him, and sore wounds and grieves him. Sometimes whole showers of fiery darts dipped in hell are made to fly about his ears. God, for holy and wise ends, suffers the believer to be winnowed, sifted, and buffeted by this enemy. And O but the believer be sore burdened in this case! Sometimes he is ready to conclude, with David, One day or other I shall fall by this roaring lion, that goes about seeking to devour me; sometimes he is brought to his wits end, saying, with Jehoshaphat in great extremity, when surrounded by enemies, "I know not what to do, but mine eyes are towards Thee" (2Ch 20:12). But let not the believer think strange of this, seeing Christ Himself was not exempted from the molestations of this enemy.

(5) Sometimes the believer is burdened with the burden of ill company. The society of the wicked, which perhaps is unavoidable, is a great incumbrance to him, and tends mightily to mar and hinder him in his work and warfare. Hence David

uttered that mournful and melancholy complaint, "Woe is me, that I sojourn in Mesech, that I dwell in the tents of Kedar" (Psa 120:5). The believer is of Jacob's disposition, with reference to the wicked, "O my soul, come not thou unto their secret; unto their assembly, mine honor, be not thou united" (Gen 49:6). And truly, sirs, if the company and society of the wicked be not your burden, it is a sign ye are of their society.

(6) Sometimes the believer is sadly burdened, not only with his own sins, but with the abounding sins and abominations of the day and place wherein he lives. "I beheld the transgressors [says David] and was grieved. Rivers of waters run down mine eyes: because they keep not Thy law" (Psa 119:136,158). O what a heart-breaking thing it is to the poor soul, to see sinners dashing themselves to pieces upon the thick bosses of God's buckler, and, as it were, upon the Rock of salvation, running headlong to their own everlasting ruin, without ever reflecting upon their ways! His very bowels yearn with pity towards them, who will not pity themselves. Upon this account believers are frequently designed the "mourners in Zion: they sigh and cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst of Jerusalem" (Eze 9:4).

(7) The believer is many times, while in this tabernacle, burdened with the public concerns of Christ. He is a person of a very grateful and public spirit. Christ took a list of him while he was in a low state; and therefore He cannot but be concerned for the concerns of His kingdom and glory, especially when He sees them suffering in the world. When he beholds the boar out of the wood,

or the wild beast of the forest, open and avowed enemies, wasting and devouring the church of God; when he sees the foxes spoiling the tender vines, and the watchmen wounding, smiting, or taking away the vail of the spouse of Christ (Song 5:7); when he sees the privileges of the church of Christ invaded, her doctrine and worship corrupted, her ordinary meals retrenched by the stewards of the house: these things, I say, are sinking and oppressing to his spirit: he then hangs his harp upon the willows, when he remembers Zion. In this case he is “sorrowful for the solemn assembly, and the reproach of it is his burden” (Zep 3:18).

(8) The poor believer has many times the burden of great crosses and afflictions lying upon him, and these both of a bodily and spiritual nature, and deep many times calleth unto deep; the deep of external trouble calls to the deep of inward distress; and these, like two seas meeting together, do break upon him with such violence, that the waters are like to come in unto his very soul. Sometimes, I say, he has a burden of outward troubles upon him; perhaps a burden of sickness and pain upon his body, whereby the crazy tabernacle of clay is sore shattered, “There is no soundness in my flesh [says David]...because of my sin” (Psa 38:3).

Sometimes he is burdened with poverty, and want of the external necessities of life; which needs be no strange thing, considering that the Son of God, the heir of all things, became poor; and so poor, that, as He Himself declares, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head.” Sometimes he is burdened with infamy and re-

proach, malice and envy striking at his reputation, and wounding his name. "False witnesses [says David] rose up against me; they laid to my charge things that I knew not" (Psa 35:11). Sometimes he is burdened in his relations, as by their miscarriages. It was a grief of heart to Rebekah when Esau married the daughter of Beerli the Hittite (Gen 26:34, 35). And no doubt David had many a sad heart for the miscarriages of his children, particularly of Amnon and Absalom. Sometimes he is burdened with the death of near relations. It is breaking to him when the Lord takes away the desire of his eyes with a stroke. I might here tell you also of many trials and distresses of a more spiritual nature that the believer is exercised with, besides those already named.

Sometimes he has the burden of much weighty work lying on his hand, and his heart is like to faint at the prospect of it, through the sense of his own utter inability to manage it, either to God's glory, or his own comfort, or the edification of others; such as, the work of his station, relation, and generation, and the great work of his salvation. This lies heavy upon him, till the Lord say to him, as he said to Paul in another case, "My grace is sufficient for thee" (2Co 12:9).

Sometimes the believer in this tabernacle is under the burden of much darkness. Sometimes he is in darkness as to his state; he walks in darkness, and has no light, insomuch that he is ready to raze the foundation, and to cry, "I am cast out of Thy sight: the Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me" (Isa 49:14).

Sometimes he is in darkness as to his duty, whether he should do or forbear; many a perplexing thought rolls in his breast, till the Lord, by His Word and Spirit, say to him, "This is the way, walk ye in it" (Isa 30:21). Sometimes he is burdened with distance from his God, who seems to have withdrawn from him behind the mountains; and in this case he cries, with the church, "For these things I weep, mine eye, mine eye, runneth down with water, because the Comforter that should relieve my soul, is far from me" (Lam 1:16). And sometimes it is a burden to him to think, that he is at such a distance from his own country and inheritance; and in this case he longs to be over Jordan, at the promised land, saying, "I desire to be dissolved, and to be with Christ; which is best of all" (Phi 1:23). Sometimes again he is under the burden of fear, particularly the fear of death. In Hebrews 2:15 we read of some who are held in bondage all their life through fear of death; and yet, glory to God, such have had a safe landing at last.

Thus I have told you of some things wherewith the believer is burdened, while in the tabernacle of this body.

III. Of his groans under these burdens.

The third thing in the method was, to speak of the believer's groaning under his burden: for (says the apostle) "We that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened." Upon this head I shall only suggest two or three considerations.

(1) Consider, that the working of the believer's heart, under the pressures of these burdens, vents

itself variously. Sometimes he is said to be in heaviness, “If need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations” (1Pe 1:6). Sometimes he is said to sigh under his burdens, and to sigh to the breaking of his loins: he is said to fetch his sighs from the bottom of his heart: “My sighing cometh before I eat,” says Job. Sometimes his burdens make him to cry. Sometimes he cries to his God, “Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord” (Psa 130:1). Sometimes he cries to bystanders and onlookers, as Job did to his friends, “Have pity upon me, O ye, my friends, for the hand of God hath touched me” (Job 19:21); or with the church, “Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold and see, if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me, in the day of his fierce anger” (Lam 1:12). Sometimes he is said to roar under his burden: “My roarings [says Job], are poured out like the water” (Job 3:24). “I have roared [says David], by reason of the disquietness of my heart” (Psa 38:8).

Sometimes he is at the very point of fainting under his burden: “I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” Sometimes his spirits are quite over-set and overwhelmed, “From the end of the earth will I cry unto Thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I” (Psa 61:2). Sometimes, again, he is as it were distracted, distracted and put out of his wits, through the weight of his burdens, especially when under the weight of divine terrors. Thus it was with holy Heman, “While I suffer thy terrors, I am distracted” (Psa 88:15). Yea, sometimes the matter is

carried so far, that it goes to the drinking up of the very spirit, and a drying and withering of the bones; as ye see in the case of Job, “The arrows of the Almighty are within me, the poison whereof drinketh up my spirit.” O the heavy tossings of the believer's heart under his burdens! The apostle here expresses it by a groaning: “We that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened.”

(2) For clearing this, ye would know, that there are three sorts of groans that we read of in Scripture. First, Of groans of nature; secondly, Of groans of reason; and thirdly, Of groans of grace.

First, I say, we read of groans of nature, “We know [says the apostle], that the whole creation groaneth, and travaileth in pain together until now” (Rom 8:22). Man, by his sin, brought a curse upon the good creatures of God, “Cursed is the ground for thy sake” (Gen 3:17). And the very earth upon which we tread groans, like a woman in travail, under the weight of that curse and vanity, that it is subjected unto through the sin of man; and it longs, as it were, to be delivered from the bondage of corruption, and to share of the glorious liberty of the sons of God, at the day of their manifestation.

Secondly, we read of groans of reason, or of the reasonable creature under their affliction. Thus we are told, that the children of Israel groaned under the weight of their affliction in Egypt, by reason of the heavy tasks that were imposed upon them, “I have heard [says the Lord], the groaning of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage” (Exo 6:5).

Thirdly, we read of groans of grace, or of spiritual groans, “The Spirit helpeth our infirmities: and

maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Rom 8:26). And of this kind, we conceive, are these groans which the apostle speaks of in our text; they are not natural, neither are they merely rational groans, though even these are not to be excluded, but they are gracious and supernatural, being the fruit of some saving work of the Spirit of God upon the soul, and therefore,

(3) A third remark I offer is this, that these groans of the gracious soul here spoken of, seem to imply, as was hinted at in the explication of the words, *first*, A great deal of grief and sorrow of spirit on the account of sin, and the sad and melancholy effects of it on the believer, while in this embodied state. *Second*, It implies a displeasure or dissatisfaction in the believer, with his present burdened estate; he cannot find rest for the sole of his foot hereaway; he finds that this is not his resting place. And *third*, It implies a breathing and panting of soul after a better state, even the immediate enjoyment of God in glory: he groans with an “earnest desire to be clothed upon with his house which is from heaven” (v.2).

IV. Conclusion: some improvements of the whole.

But I proceed to the fourth thing in the method, which was the application of the doctrine. And the first use shall be of information.

Of information

(1) Hence we may see the vast difference between heaven and earth. O what vast odds is there between the present and future state of the be-

liever, between his present earthly lodging and his heavenly mansion! This world is but at best a weary land: but there is no wearying in heaven: no, “they shall serve Him day and night in His holy temple.” This world is a land of darkness, where thou goest many a time “mourning without the sun,” but when once thou comest to thine own country, “the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and thy God thy glory.” This world is a land of distance, but in heaven thou shalt be at home: when absent from the body, thou shalt be present with the Lord. This world is a “den of lions,” and a “mountain of leopards;” but there is no lion or leopard there: “they shall not hurt nor destroy in all God’s holy mountain” above. This world is a land of thorn’s many pricking briars of affliction grow hereaway, but no pricking briar or grieving thorn is to be found in all that country above. This world is a polluted land, it is defiled with sin; but there can in no wise enter into the land of glory any thing that defileth, or worketh abomination, or maketh a lie. In a word, there is nothing but matter of groaning for the most part here; but all ground of groaning ceaseth for ever there.

(2) See hence a consideration that may contribute to stay or allay our griefs, sobs, and groans, for the death of godly relations; for while in this tabernacle they groan, being burdened; but now their groans are turned into songs, and their mourning into Hallelujahs; for the ransomed of the Lord, when they return, or come to Zion, at death or the resurrection, it is “with songs, and everlasting joy upon their heads: they obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing flee away” (Isa 35:10). And

therefore, let us “not sorrow as them that have no hope.” If our godly friends that are departed, could entertain converse with us, they would be ready to say to us, as Christ said to the daughters of Jerusalem, O “weep not for us, but weep for yourselves,” for we would not exchange conditions with you for ten thousand worlds: ye are yet groaning in your clay-tabernacle, oppressed with your many burdens; but as for us, the day of our complete redemption is come, our heads are lifted up above all our burdens, under which, once in a day, we groaned while we were with you.

(3) See hence, that they are not aye¹ the happiest folk that have the merriest life of it in the world. Indeed, if we look only to things present, the wicked would seem to have the best of it; for, instead of groaning, “they take the timbrel and harp, and rejoice at the sound of the organ: they spend their days in wealth” and ease (Job 21:12, 13). But O sirs, remember that it is the evening that crowns the day. “The triumphing of the wicked is short, and the joy of the hypocrite but for a moment:” whereas the groanings of the righteous are but short, and their jubilee and triumph shall be everlasting. “Mark the perfect man [says David], and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace. But the transgressors shall be destroyed together, the end of the wicked shall be cut off” (Psa 37:37, 38). I will read you a word that will show the vast difference between the godly and the wicked, and discover the strange alteration of the scene betwixt them in the life to come. “Thus saith

¹ *aye* – archaic word meaning “ever.”

the Lord God, Behold My servants shall eat, but ye shall be hungry; behold my servants shall drink, but ye shall be thirsty; behold My servants shall rejoice, but ye shall be ashamed: behold My servants shall sing for joy of heart, but ye shall cry for sorrow of heart, and shall howl for vexation of spirit” (Isa 65:13, 14).

(4) See hence, that death needs not be a terror to the believer, Why? Because, by taking down this tabernacle, it takes off all his burdens, and puts a final period to all his groans. Death, to a believer, is like the fiery chariot to Elijah: it makes him drop the mantle of his body, with all its filthiness, but it transports his soul, his better part, into the mansions of glory, “the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

Of reproof

The second use of the doctrine may be of reproof unto two sorts of persons.

(1) It reproves those who are at home while in this tabernacle. Their great concern is about this clay-tabernacle, how to gratify it, how to beautify and adorn it; their language is, “Who will shew us any good? What shall we eat? What shall we drink? wherewithal shall we be clothed?” But they have no thought or concern about the immortal soul which inhabits the tabernacle, which must be happy or miserable for ever. O sirs! remember, that whatever care ye take about this clay-tabernacle, it will drop down to dust ere long, and the noisome grave will be its habitation, where worms and corruption will prey upon the fairest face and purest complexion. Where will be your beauty, strength,

or fine attire, when the curtains of the grave are drawn about you?

(2) This doctrine serves to reprove those who add to the burdens and groans of the Lord's people, as if they were not burdened enough already. Remember that it is a dreadful thing to vex or occasion the grief of those whom the Lord wounded: they that do so counteract the commission of Christ from the Father, who was "sent to comfort them that mourn in Zion, to give them the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness." But, on the contrary, they study to give a heavy spirit, and to strip and rob them of their garments of praise. Remember that Christ is very tender of His burdened saints; and if any offer to lay a load above their burden, by grieving or offending them, the Lord Jesus will not pass it without a severe resentment; and "it were better for such that a millstone were hanged about their neck, and that they were drowned in the depth of the sea."

Of lamentation and humiliation

A third use shall be of lamentation and humiliation. Let us lament, that the Lord's saints and people should have so much matter of groaning at this day and time wherein we live. And here I will tell you of several things that are a burden unto the spirits of the Lord's people, and help on their groaning, and make them sad hearts.

(1) The abounding profanity and immorality of all sorts that are to be found among us. O how rampant is atheism and profanity; and impiety, like an impetuous torrent, carrying all before it! It is

become fashionable among some to be impious and profane. Religion, which is the ornament of a nation, is faced down by bold and petulant wits. It is reckoned, by some, a genteel accomplishment to break a jest upon the Bible, and to play upon things religious and sacred. O what cursing and swearing! O what lying and cheating! what abominable drunkenness, murders, and uncleanness! what perjury and blasphemy is the land defiled with! We may apply that word, "For these things the land mourns" (Hos 4:3). The land groans at this day under these and the like abominations. And therefore, no wonder that the hearts of those that regard the glory of God do groan under them also, and cry with the prophet, "O that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people. O, that I had in the wilderness a lodging-place of wayfaring men, that I might leave my people, and go from them: for they be all adulterers, an assembly of treacherous men" (Jer 9:1, 2).

(2) The universal barrenness that is to be found among us at this day, is matter of groaning unto the Lord's people. God has been at great pains with us both by ordinances and providences: He has planted us in a fruitful soil; He has given us a standing under the means of grace; He has given us "line upon line, precept upon precept:" and yet, alas! may not the Lord say of us, as He said of His vineyard, "I looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes" (Isa 5:2). And as for the fruit of providence, alas! where is it? Mercies are lost on us; for when God feeds us to the full, when He gives peace and plenty, then

Jeshurun like, we wax fat, and kick against Him (Deu 32:15). And as mercies, so rods and afflictions are lost upon us likewise: God has “stricken us, but we have not grieved;” He has “consumed us, but we have refused to receive correction” (Jer 5:3).

(3) The lamentable divisions that are in our Reuben occasion great thought of heart, and heaviness to the Lord's people at this day. Court and country, church and state, are divided: ministers divided from their people, and people from their ministers; and both ministers and people are divided among themselves; and every party and faction turning over the blame upon the other: than which there cannot be a greater evidence of God's anger, or of approaching ruin and desolation; for “a city or kingdom divided against itself cannot stand” (Mat 12:25).

(4) The innumerable defections and backslidings of our day are a great burden to the Lord's people, and make their hearts to groan within them. The charge which the Lord advanceth against the church of Ephesus, may too justly be laid to our door, that we are fallen from our first love. There is but little love to God or His people, little zeal for His way and work, to be found among us; the power of godliness, and life of religion, is dwindled away into an empty form with the most part.

I might here take occasion to tell you of many public defections and backslidings that we stand guilty of before the Lord; particularly, of the breach of our solemn national engagements. It was once the glory of our land to be married unto the Lord, by solemn covenant, in a national capacity;

but, to our eternal infamy and reproach, it has been both broken and burned by public authority in this very city. Perhaps indeed some may ridicule me for making mention of the breach of our solemn engagements; but I must blow the trumpet as God's herald, "whether ye will hear or forbear." And ye who ridicule these things now, will perhaps laugh at leisure, if God shall send a bloody sword or raging pestilence, to avenge the quarrel of His covenant. But some may say, Ye talk of breach of solemn national engagements; but wherein does the truth of such a charge appear?

For answer, I shall instance in a few particulars. It is fit that we not only know, wherein our fathers have broken this covenant; but wherein ourselves, this present generation, stands guilty.

(1) Then, in our national covenant we swear, that we will endeavor to be humbled for our own sins, and for the sins of the kingdom. But, alas! public days of fasting and humiliation for the sins of the land are but rare, and thin sown at this day. Where are the mourners of our Zion? How few are they whose hearts are bleeding for the abounding wickedness of the day? If God shall give a commission to the men with the slaughter weapons to go through Scotland, and slay utterly old and young, only come not near any that sigh and cry; O what a depopulate country would it be! how few inhabitants would be left in the land!

(2) In that covenant we are bound to go before one another in the example of a real reformation. But, alas! who makes conscience of this part of the oath of God? How little personal reformation is there? how little care to have the heart purified

from lusts and uncleanness? so that the Lord may well say unto us, as He said to Jerusalem, “O Jerusalem, wash thine heart from wickedness: how long shall vain thoughts lodge within thee?” How little reformation of life? what a scandalous latitude do many professors of religion take to themselves, cursing, swearing, lying, drinking, cheating, and over-reaching others in their dealings, whereby the way of religion comes to be evil spoken of?

(3) By the covenant we engage, not only to reform ourselves, but our families. But, alas! how little of this is to be found? How little care is taken by many parents and masters, to have their children and servants, after the example of Abraham, instructed in the good ways of the Lord? Every head of a family should be a priest in his family, for maintaining the worship of God in it: but, alas! how many are there who either scruff over the duty in a superficial manner, or else live in the total neglect of it? Go through many noblemen and gentlemen's families in the kingdom, and ye shall find as little of the worship of God in them, as if they were Turks and Pagans, and perhaps less. Yea, atheism is become so rife among people of higher rank, that, with some, he is not reckoned a man of any spirit, that will bow a knee to God in his family.

(4) In our national covenant we swear to endeavor to preserve the reformation of England and Ireland from the remains of the Roman hierarchy, and ceremonies of man's invention in the worship of God. But how is this article performed, when, by solemn treaty, the representatives of the nations, in a parliamentary capacity, have consented, that

Episcopacy should continue as the form of worship and government in our neighbor nation? Again, by the covenant we swear to endeavor the extirpation of Popery: and yet how many masses are kept openly in the land, particularly in the northern parts of the kingdom? how many trafficking priests and Jesuits are swarming among us? and how many professed Protestants are there, who have of late shown their good will to sacrifice a Protestant interest unto the will of a Popish Pretender?

Again, in our national covenant, we abjure Prelacy² and tyranny in our church-government: but though Prelatic tyranny be not established, yet there is too much of a Prelatic spirit venting itself among us at this day, while many are laying claim to a negative voice in radical judicatories, over those whose offices give them equal interest in the government of the church with themselves. And there is but too much tyranny exercised over the Lord's people by many judicatories of the church, while men are thrust in upon them, to take the charge of their souls, contrary to their own free choice and election, Christ's little ones are but too little regarded, if the world's great ones be gratified. On which account many of the Lord's people are crying at this day with the church, "The watchmen that went about the city, found me, they smote me...they took away my vail from me" (Song 5:7). Again, in our covenant, we abjure superstition in worship: and yet, to the scandal of our

² *Prelacy* – church government by prelates. A prelate is a bishop or office of rank within a church hierarchy. This is the form of church government practiced in the Roman Catholic Church.

holy religion, it is not only tolerated by public authority, but greedily gone after by many in our land. Heresy and error are abjured by the covenant, every doctrine inconsistent with the Word of God, and our Confession of Faith; and yet all sorts of errors are tolerated, except rank Popery, and blasphemy against the Trinity. It is true, the standard of our doctrine (blessed be God) remains pure; but it is to be lamented, there is not so much zeal discovered in curbing error, as our covenant-vows do engage us to. Again, in our covenant, we abjure malignants, that is to say, enemies to a covenanted work of reformation, as being no members of our church, and consequently as having no right to the privileges thereof; and yet malignant lords and lairds are the men who are generally gratified in the affair of planting churches, in opposition unto them that fear God, and who, on all occasion, discover their love and regard for a covenanted work of reformation.

Again, in the covenant, we swear against a detestable neutrality and indifference in the cause of God and religion; and yet how many Gallios are there among us, who are indifferent whether the interest of Christ sink or swim? And does it not discover too much of a lamentable lukewarmness and indifference of spirit about the way and work of God, when we are beginning to abridge the ordinary number of our sermons at our solemn gospel-festivals, and to diminish the solemnity thereof, which has been so remarkably owned of God? What else is this, but a snuffing at His ordinances, and saying practically, "What a weariness is it?" (Mal 1:13).

Sirs, whatever some may think of the matter, yet I know that the hearts of many of the Lord's people are sorrowful, even unto groaning, for the solemn assembly. I shall not say, that what is now transacted of late, with relation to this matter is a breach of our national covenant; but I say, it seems to be a sad evidence of the lukewarmness of our spirits about the way and work of God. And I find, that a "changing of the ordinances, and a breaking of the everlasting covenant," go together in Scripture (Isa 24:5).

I might have told you of many other things that break and burden the spirits of the Lord's people at this day; particularly, of the removing of the righteous by death; which, as it is a great and heavy judgment in itself, so it is an ordinary forerunner of some heavy calamity approaching: "Merciful men are taken away, none considering that the righteous is taken away from the evil to come" (Isa 57:1). And I suppose there may be many hearing me, whose hearts are inwardly groaning to this day, for the removal of that eminent light (Mr. James Webster), which shined with such a refreshing lustre from this pulpit among you so many years. It bodes ill to our Zion, when such watchmen are called off from her walls, as, on all occasions, were ready to blow the trumpet upon the approach of any danger from earth or hell. But I pass this use, and go on to

Of two sorts of persons

A fourth use of the doctrine, which shall be in a word to two sorts of persons.

First, a word to you who are not burdened in this tabernacle. Ye never knew what it was to

groan, either for your own sins, or for the sins of the land wherein you live, or the tokens of God's anger, which are to be found among us; these are things of no account with them, they can go very lightly and easily under them. All I shall say to you, shall be comprised in these two or three words.

(1) It seems the adamant and nethermillstone ye carry in your breast, was never to this day broken by the power of regenerating grace. And therefore, I may say to you, as Peter said to Simon Magus, "Ye are yet in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:23). Ye are under the slavery of Satan, and the curse of the law, and wrath of God; and these are heavy burdens, whether ye feel them or not.

(2) Know it for a certainty, that, except mercy and repentance interpose, your groaning time is coming. However ye make light of sin now, and of things serious and sacred; yet ye will find them to be sad and weighty things when death is sitting down upon your eyelids, when your eye-strings are breaking, and your souls taking their flight into another world. O "what will ye do in the day of visitation? to whom will ye flee for help? and where will ye leave your glory?" (Isa 10:3). When ye are standing trembling panels before the awful bar of the great Jehovah, will ye make light of sin then? Or will ye make light of it, when, with Dives, ye are weltering among the flames of hell? O "consider this, ye that forget God, lest He tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness."

Whether do ye think it is better to groan a while in this tabernacle under the burden of sin, or to groan for ever under the weight of God's vengeance, while an endless eternity endures?

Secondly, a second sort I would speak a word unto, are poor, broken, and burdened believers, who are groaning under the weight of these burdens I mentioned. I only offer two or three things for your encouragement, with which I shall close; for we are to comfort them that mourn in Zion.

(1) Know for thy comfort, poor believer, that thy tender-hearted Father is privy to all thy secret groans; though the world know nothing about them, He hears them. "Lord [says David], all my desire is before Thee: and my groaning is not hid from Thee" (Psa 38:9). As He puts thy tears in His bottle, so He marks down thy groans in the book of His remembrance.

(2) As the Lord hears thy groans, so He groans with thee under all thy burdens: for "He is touched with the feeling of our infirmities; and in all our afflictions He is afflicted." He has the bowels of a father unto his children: "As a father pitieth his children: so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him" (Psa 103:13). Yea, His heart is so tender toward thee, that it is compared to the tender affection of a mother to her sucking child. And therefore,

(3) Know for thy encouragement, that thou art not alone under thy burdens. No: "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." He bears thee and thy burdens both: and therefore though thou may "pass through the fire and water; yet the fire shall not burn thee, the waters of adversity shall not overwhelm thee."

(4) Know for thy comfort, that whatever be thy burden, and however heavy thy groanings are, there is abundant consolation provided for thee in God's covenant. And here I might go through the several burdens of the Lord's people, and offer a word of encouragement to you under each. I shall only touch them passingly.

First, art thou burdened with the body of clay? Perhaps thy clay-cottage is always like to drop down every day; and this fills thee with heaviness. Well, believer, know for thy comfort, that, "if the earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, thou hast a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." There are mansions of glory prepared for thee there, where thou "shalt be for ever with the Lord."

Secondly, art thou burdened with a burden of sin, crying, "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Well, here is comfort, believer, thy "old man is crucified with Christ, that the body of sin might be destroyed." Ere long He will present thee to His Father, "without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing."

Thirdly, art thou burdened with the sense of much actual guilt? Art thou crying, with David, "Mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me?" Well, but consider, believer, "God is faithful to forgive thee," for He has said, "I will be merciful to their unrighteousnesses, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more."

Fourthly, art thou burdened with the temptations and fiery darts of Satan? Well, but consider, believer, Christ thy glorious head, the true seed of

the woman, He has bruised the head of the old serpent; “through death He has destroyed him that had the power of death, that is the devil.” And as He overcame him in His own person, so He will make thee to overcome him in thy person ere long: “The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly.”

Fifthly, is the society of the wicked thy burden? Art thou crying, “Woe is me, that I sojourn in Mesech?” Why, consider that thou shall get other company ere long when thou putttest off this clay-tabernacle, thou shalt enter in among “the spirits of just men made perfect.” Only stand thy ground, and be not conformed to the world.

Sixthly, art thou burdened with the abounding sins and backslidings of the day and generation wherein thou livest? Well, be comforted. God's mark is upon thee as one of the mourners in Zion; and in the day when the man with the slaughter-weapon shall go through, God will give a charge not to come near any upon whom His mark is found: “Thou shalt be hid in the day of the Lord's anger.”

Seventhly, art thou burdened with the concerns of Christ, with the interests of His kingdom and glory? Is thy heart, with Eli's, “trembling for fear of the ark of the Lord,” lest it get a wrong touch? Know, for thy encouragement, that “the Lord shall reign for ever, even thy God, O Zion, unto all generations; and that, though clouds and darkness be round about Him, yet righteousness and judgment are the habitation of His throne, and mercy and truth shall go before His face.” Though His way be in the whirlwind, and His footsteps in the great

water, yet He carries on the designs of His glory, and His church's good. And as for thee that art "sorrowful for the solemn assembly, to whom the reproach of it is a burden," God will gather thee unto Himself; He will gather thee unto the "general assembly, and church of the firstborn."

Eighthly, art thou burdened with manifold afflictions in thy body, in thy estate, in thy name, in thy relations? Know for thy comfort, God is carrying on a design of love to thee in all these things: "Thy light afflictions, which are but for a moment, will work for thee a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." See a sweet prophecy for thy comfort (Isa 54:11,12).

Ninthly, art thou burdened with much weighty work? Perhaps thou knowest not how to manage this and the other duty; how to adventure to a communion table, or the like. Well, for thy encouragement, poor soul, the Lord "sends none a warfare upon their own charges." and therefore look to Him, that He may bear thy charges out of the stock that is in thy elder brother's hand; and "go in His strength, making mention of His righteousness."

Tenthly, art thou under the burden of much darkness, crying, with Job, "Behold, I go forward, but He is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive Him?" (Job 23:8). Well, be comforted; for "Unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness. Unto you that fear My name, shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings." And therefore say thou with the church, "He will bring me forth to the light, and I shall behold His righteousness" (Mic 7:9). Again,

Eleventhly, art thou burdened with the Lord's distance from thy soul, "because the Comforter that should relieve thy soul, is far from thee"? (Lam 1:16). Well, be comforted, "He will not contend for ever," He has promised to return (Isa 54:7,8). The Lord cannot keep up Himself long from the poor soul that is weeping and groaning after Him; as we see in Ephraim (Jer 31:18). Again,

Twelfthly, art thou burdened with the fear of death? Know for thy comfort, the sting of death is gone, and it cannot hurt thee: "I will ransom them from the power of the grave: I will redeem thee from death: O death, I will be thy plagues: O grave, I will be thy destruction" (Hos 13:14).

Lastly, art thou burdened with the death of the righteous, particularly with the loss of faithful ministers? Well, be encouraged, that though the Lord take away an Elijah, yet the Lord God of Elijah lives, and the residue of the spirit is still with him. And therefore take up David's song, and sing. "The Lord liveth, and blessed be my rock: and let the God of my salvation be exalted" (Psa 18:46).



Invitation to Sinners

by John Mason (1646-1694)

HAVE you sins, or have you none? If you have, whither should you go, but to the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world? Have you souls, or have you none? If you have, where should you go, but to the Saviour of souls? Is there a life to come, or is there not? If there is, where should you go but to Him, who only hath the words of eternal life? Is there a wrath to come, or is there not? If there is, where should you go but to Him, who only can deliver from the wrath to come?

And will the Saviour not receive you? If He yielded Himself into the hands of them that sought His life, will He hide Himself from the hearts of them that seek His mercy? If He was willing to be taken by the hand of violence, is He not more willing to be taken by the hands of faith? He that died for your sins, will He cast you off for your infirmities? O come, come, come! I charge you come. I beseech you come. Come, and He will give you life. Come, and He will give you rest. Come, and He will receive you. Knock, and He will open to you. Look to Him, and He will save you.

Did ever any come to Jesus for a cure, and go away without it? You would find something in yourself, but you find nothing but what you have reason to be ashamed of; but let not that hinder, but further your coming. Come as you are; come poor, come needy, come naked, come empty, come wretched, only come, only believe. His heart is free, His arms are open; 'tis His joy and His crown to receive you. If you are willing, He never was otherwise. ❧

Ebenezer Erskine was born June 22, 1680. His father was Rev. Henry Erskine of Chirnside, Scotland. He had many brothers and sisters, among them the well-known Rev. Ralph Erskine.

The Rev. Ebenezer was a faithful preacher and a valiant defender of the truth. His first pastorate was in Portmoak, Scotland in the year 1703, where he served Christ for twenty-eight years. In 1731, he accepted a call to Stirling, where he remained for twenty-three years. After this, the Secession commenced and he became highly involved and was the spokesman for the Seceders (1Pe 3:14-18).

He married twice. His first wife, Alison Turpie, was the mother of ten of his children of whom three sons and a daughter died in childhood. Six children were born to him with his second wife, Mary Webster. He died on June 2, 1754.