

# Groaning to Be Set Free

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Michelangelo (1475-1564) was a sculptor, painter, architect, and poet. Although he lived to the fine old age of 88, he accepted more commissions than he could ever complete – even if he lived to be a hundred. He has, therefore, left behind some unfinished works, particularly his incomplete bound “slave” statues that were to adorn the tomb of Pope Julius II, also left unfinished.

I am sure that, at the onset, Michelangelo intended to complete them. When he realized that he would never accomplish what he set out to do, however, I believe that he purposely left them unfinished. Why would he intentionally do so? Michelangelo, I would argue, realized that these unfinished statues of the bound slaves simultaneously exemplified both a sculptural principle to which he adhered and to a theological truth that he believed.

First, Michelangelo famously said that the statues he carved were already present within the marble. All he needed to do was to chisel away the marble that encased them and so bring them forth. Thus, David was present in the marble block that Michelangelo first beheld, and what we behold (now displayed in Florence) is the David that was always there, now set free.

Second, with regard to his unfinished statues of the bound slaves, I believe that this principle is exemplified in a twofold manner. Michelangelo is first of all depicting slaves who are struggling to free themselves from the cords that hold them in bondage. Yet, also and simultaneously, and most importantly, they are groaning to free themselves from the marble that still encases them.

Michelangelo purposely left them unfinished in order to portray humankind’s slavery as well as its desire for liberation. What is being depicted is humankind’s groaning to free itself from all that holds it in bondage so that it can become truly human.



We, therefore, see, in the Awakening Slave, a figure whose muscular torso is twisting to extricate itself from the marble that clings to it. He is arduously pulling his legs and thighs from the marble, and he is wrenching his arms out so that his hands would be free to lift himself out of the marble that holds him tight. And as he awakes from sleep, he labors to lift his head, which is pillowed in stone.

For Michelangelo, then, such an understanding was not simply the depiction of a philosophical principle or a portrayal of humankind's ever-present existential plight. Rather, the unfinished statues of the bound slaves are sculptured theological depictions of the Gospel.

Humankind is enslaved to Adam's sin and bound by Adam's death. Jesus, on the Cross, struggled, groaned in agony, to set himself free from Adam's sin-deformed nature. And in his Resurrection, he

awakened from the tomb as the new man – a man no longer enslaved by sin and wrapped in death. He is the fully alive new Adam; the father of the born-again human race.

We who come to faith and are baptized, become a new creation in Christ, and so come to share in his resurrection. However, we are yet to assume his full likeness. Thus, St. Paul makes the astounding statement that “we know that the whole of creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.” (Romans 8:22-24)

Those who do not believe in Jesus groan in despair, for they have no hope of ever being freed from the bondage of evil and death. We who believe groan as well, but ours is a good groaning, for we groan in hope. We know, in faith, that when Jesus returns in glory, we will assume fully his risen likeness – our full adoption as sons and daughters of our heavenly Father.

At Jesus’ command, Lazarus emerges from the tomb. Anticipating the resurrection, he is to be unbound and set free. Thus, here on earth, we ever groan in the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit wells up within us as we liberate ourselves from the bondage of sin, a bondage from which we yearn to be set free. Moreover, in the Spirit, we even now take on the form of our true selves, the real image of who we truly are in Christ Jesus.

This is why, in the midst of our groaning, the sacraments are so important, particularly the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. In repentance, we continually liberate ourselves from the bondage of sin. In the Eucharist, we partake of the risen body and the risen blood of Jesus and so, in communion with him, assume evermore fully his risen image – a likeness that will find its completeness when we fully abide in him at the end of time.

Thus, Michelangelo perceived that his unfinished bound slaves were sculpted parables of the Gospel. As his images were groaning to be set free from the marble that held them bound, so Christians, here on earth, are groaning to be liberated in Christ Jesus. In that final liberation, when Jesus comes in glory, not only will the faithful obtain “the glorious liberty of the children of God. . .the redemption of our

bodies,” but the whole of creation will “be set free from its bondage to decay” and share in humankind’s risen glory.

Nothing of God’s good creation will be lost, neither man nor beast, neither valley nor mountain, for all will be transformed into a new heaven and a new earth – sharing in the new creation that is the risen and glorious Jesus himself. As the whole of creation now groans in agony, so the whole of creation now cries out in expectant hope – Come Lord Jesus!

**\*Image:** *The Awakening Slave* by Michelangelo, [Galleria dell’Accademia, Florence, Italy]

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