

London Justice House of Prayer - Donna Taylor
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Romans 8:22-27

I. The Groanings of the Spirit

A. Our Vocation Is Intercession

We have discussed in the previous passage, verses 18-21, that we get to the glory through the sufferings we experience in this life. Now, Paul speaks about the suffering and not in the way we might expect. The suffering here is deeply personal, and we could say even intimate. This isn't here simply talking about outward persecution, beatings or imprisonment, or poverty, shipwreck, sickness or anything physical.

Paul writes in this passage about the deepest level of groaning within our innermost being. This isn't just about going through a rough time or something we occasionally have to put up with. Here he is again talking about our vocation, our calling, to stand in prayer where the world is in pain so that God's own spirit may be present and intercede right here. The Holy Spirit, God's spirit, comes to dwell in the midst of his world, in Jesus' faithful followers, but the world is in great pain.

The Holy Spirit inhabits (dwells in) that pain, and calls out to the Father from the deepest depths through God's people being in prayer, Spirit inspired prayer at that place. This vocation and calling is painful in that sense and is at the heart of God's rescuing plan for the whole creation. When Paul inserts here in this passage verses 26-27 that we don't know what to pray for and how to pray, we find ourselves in a dilemma. This is a very significant part of this whole passage in Romans 8 that we must understand how it is not a suggestion, but a mandate that we enter into intercession with the Father, through the Holy Spirit in prayer for the whole world.

As we have already discussed in Psalm 8:4-8, we are the key to bring His wise order into the world, and with this promise in verse 21, we have already discussed, that the glorification of Jesus' followers, sons of God, will be the key to God's rescue of the whole creation from its slavery of corruption. Keeping this in mind, when we come to verses 26-27, we will understand the means through which this comes about.

22 For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. 23 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

**4 What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him?
5 For You have made him a little lower than the angels, And You have crowned him with glory and honor. 6 You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, 7 All sheep and oxen—Even the beasts of the field, 8 The birds of the air, And the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas. Psalm 8:4-8**

17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. II Corinthians 4:17

B. Redemptive Work of the Holy Spirit

This description in verse 22 is referring to the natural occurrences that take place within creation. Even the ones labeled as the acts of God are simply groans and labors from the creation waiting to be liberated. We are all aware of earthquakes, epidemics and war. But only those who understand the Biblical tradition are able to understand these as the labor pains of a renewed creation. It may seem contrary to say, but this way of looking at the sufferings of the world is very much positive. God's new world is waiting to be born. The fact is labor pains are horrible, but full of hope as referenced in verse 18, with present sufferings being unable to compete with the coming glory.

The new world has begun with Jesus and the spirit, but this doesn't diminish the ongoing pain and sorrow of the old world. It actually produces a very uncomfortable tension. This can be especially distressing for those who have been taught that becoming a Christian would be the gateway to a smooth untroubled life. What is happening in creation as a whole is mirrored in the experience of Jesus' followers. We ourselves are going through the labor pains, because in one way we are still in Egypt waiting God's fresh word of sonship.

So many Christians think, well, the world is in a mess, people are sinful and deserve God's wrath; but we Christians are just fine and anyway we'll be leaving this place before too long. No! The church is groaning at the heart of the groaning of creation. This isn't an accident. It is where we are called to be. Standing in this place is our vocation, where we are to be wise stewards, as redeemed people, over all creation.

This is why Paul goes on to say in verse 23 emphasizing the fact that we have 'the first fruits of the spirit's life within us.' He is indicating here that the spirit is the 'down payment' in advance on the full promised inheritance.' In the spirit, we are already tasting God's new world, and in some ways that makes our ongoing life in the old world more painful. We find ourselves in the in-between state waiting for the resurrection and more particularly the redemption of our body, here meaning 'more to come.' (Eph. 1:14) At the moment, we have redemption already in our spirit, but we are still dealing with the flesh and all its weaknesses, hence the statement we groan within ourselves. (2 Corinthians 5:1-4)

14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory. Ephesians 1:14

5 For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. 2 For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, 3 if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. 4 For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. 2 Corinthians 5:1-4

There is a three fold effect of our redemption. Our spirit is redeemed, which is a current reality, our soul (mind, will, emotions) are being redeemed, which is an ongoing process, and our body will be redeemed, which is the future expectation when we receive our new spiritual body. (1 Cor. 15:42-44)

42 So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. 43 It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. 44 It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. 1 Corinthians 15:42-44

We groan because although we are a new creature in Christ, our souls are being saved, but our bodies are still subject to pain and sin. The word for redemption here is *apolytroxis*, carries the same meaning as God 'redeemed' His people from Egypt. Verse 23 places us, the church, at the heart of the groaning of all creation, as the new exodus people and because of it. Just as they groaned crying out for freedom from slavery, we too groan and cry out as the people of Jesus, our Messiah, to share in the pain of the world. This is where Paul is taking us in that place of prayer in verses 26-27.

And just as the firstfruits of a harvest are a promise of the full crop to come, the Holy Spirit is the promise of our full adoption as God's children, when our bodies are redeemed. Thus, the metaphor here suggests the Holy Spirit is the foretaste of the life to come. We can taste and experience the promise of that life here and now. We have the assurance of the fulness of that life in the age to come. We have not been left without hope! We know there is a great harvest of souls coming into the Kingdom of God. Any revival or past Great Awakenings were birthed out of prayer and intercession crying out to God.

II. The Call To Persevere

A. Endurance Through Patience and Hope

We find in verses 24-25 what Paul has already stated in chapter 5:1-5. Living with 'hope that is not yet seen' requires a call to patience. Faith always triumphs in times of trouble. The first benefit we have from justification is peace. Paul has already laid a foundation he is now building on that we can fully trust in God to fulfill His promises toward His faithful followers.

24 For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. Romans 8:24-25

1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. Romans 5:1-5

Justification by grace based on faith in what Jesus did for us removing condemnation from our relationship with God replacing it with peace. Here we find two more benefits of justification - the ability to rejoice and express hope. Paul is rejoicing because of the grace given to him (us) and the hope of being glorified with Jesus.

Notice Paul is boasting 'in' his tribulations, but not 'for' them. When we boast in our tribulations, we are understanding that God is at work in us despite our tribulations. We experience tribulation because we live in a fallen world where there's a battle between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil. However, when we have faith in God, we are able to access His grace, which is sufficient in our weakness. Paul is not saying God causes tribulations in our life, but through them they will produce perseverance, character and hope when we remain faithful to the Lord through the battle. The Bible makes it clear that hope is what we need in our hearts to make it through tribulations in our life. Hope is the confident expectation of what God has promised. We should never accept what some in the world would say,

“Don’t get your hopes up!” Hope is a sign we have yielded to to the Holy Spirit within our hearts, because the Holy Spirit does not live in despair.

Paul has been speaking of the glory that is within us (vs. 17) and telling us that we will receive glorified bodies and renewed souls (mind, will and emotions) that will perfectly manifest that glory. This is the hope he is referencing here. Hope is the confident expectation of the promises of God. In verse 25 we see that hope and patience are connected.

Hope is the confident expectation of a coming promise and patience is having the endurance to wait for the manifestation of that promise. Therefore, we need both of these in operation to remain faithful to what God has said will happen.

III. Holy Spirit Led Intercession

A. Unutterable Groanings

So in verses 26-27 when Paul speaks of ‘unutterable groaning,’ it isn’t always praying in tongues, but that is certainly part of it. We know that all Christians haven’t been baptized in the Holy Spirit, and those who have asked to be, may not yet have a fluid prayer language. That doesn’t mean they won’t be able to be led by the Holy Spirit in how to pray. What Paul is pointing out here is that we need to focus on the way the spirit wants to enable us to pray and ask Him to pray through us.

26 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. 27 Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. Romans 8:26-27

Everything God does is birthed through prayer. Here in the middle of this entire chapter, Paul inserts the call we have to the kind of intercession that enters into the groaning of creation. What he has pointed out in the prior passages we have looked at is leading up to how this will be manifested. We have a part to play in seeing the birthing of the new creation being set free from the bondage of corruption. The ‘weakness’ here seems to be our failure to grasp the distress or anguish of the world around us.

The word we question here is ‘groaning.’ In verses 22-23, is *stenazo*, used as a verb, and in verse 26, it is *stenagmos* used as a noun. First, the world is groaning in labor pains, and second, the Messiah’s people, Jesus’ followers, us, are groaning as we await the resurrection. And then, God’s own spirit is groaning within us. He calls us to partner with Him in the work He is presently doing to bring about the redemption of creation. So, our prayers when they become anguished prayers; we feel overwhelmed and don’t know what to pray for. We are called to lament and cry out to the Father through the indwelling intercession of Holy Spirit. That’s what this passage is all about.

Notice that at the heart of this whole train of thought, we find God himself, the One who searches the hearts, God the Father who is hearing and knowing the groaning of all creation and the groanings too deep for words in our hearts, He, Father God knows the mind of the spirit which is groaning in those very places. It becomes very clear when we understand what Paul is saying here, that we have been called to the place of lament, crying out to God where the pain of this world through the person of the Holy Spirit is dwelling and groaning in the hearts of God’s people. This is not something we should run away from or think we are in doubt and unbelief when we recognize this is the sorrow and pain God feels for His

whole created world. Because of the work of Jesus coming as the Messiah, the anointed king of Israel, doing in person the work of judgment and mercy for which He alone would be equipped, so we are called to intercede yielding to the Holy Spirit. Teach me and show me how to pray, because I do not know how or what to even speak. Even the Holy Spirit at times, is at a loss for words, because of the depravity the world has fallen into.

B. Called to Lament

God's purposes will come about through, and even by means of a time of intense suffering like that of a woman giving birth. We find this throughout scripture in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and in second-Temple books, such as Enoch 1 and Ezra 4. Jesus says in John 16:20-22, when he speaks of a woman in labor sorrow her sorrow then turns into joy. Paul declares this is where we are. We are in the throes of labor pains.

20 Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. 21 A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. 22 Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you. John 16:20-22

The world is in labor pains, the church is in labor pains, and the spirit is also going into labor, the groaning labor pains of the new creation. Think of the *ruach Elohim*, the wind or spirit of God, brooding over the waters in Genesis 1:2. Paul clearly has Genesis 1 in mind in Romans 8. This is the ultimate seed of all hope; for the world in chaos, God's spirit is the source of new life.

At the very point where we find ourselves in pain and sorrow too deep for words, at the heart of creation's wordless pain - pandemics, climate crises, wars, violent crime and all the rest - in all this, God's own spirit is there, with powerful groans which, though wordless, form the ultimate language of intercession.

Since we never really thoroughly know how to pray as we ought, we must exercise humility and faith to wait on God and let the Holy Spirit direct us. Supposing we already know how to intercede for others will not only hinder maximum effectiveness, it will also cause us to miss the sense of adventure God wants to bless us with as we receive His insight and enablement for intercessory prayer.

How do we know without infinite minds whether God wants to move through us with weeping, travailing, wrestling, fasting, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, dreams, visions, mental pictures, impressions, verses of Scripture quickened to us, or silence? Only by waiting on God and giving Him time to move on and through us. Psalm 26:5 teaches this wisdom: "My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him."

C. Confident in Intercession

How do we know God's spirit will be there, doing this work? How do we know God hasn't given up on His creation in disgust, as some may believe? Because we will be there, indwelt by that same spirit. We are called to be people who stand at the place of pain - in the cancer ward, at the court hearing of the innocent, by the graveyard full of memorials to small children or to families whose homes have been bombed in war - so as to be those within whose own painful trial, the Holy Spirit will plead to the Father on behalf of the whole creation.

Indwelt by God's spirit, we are to be right there in the chaos, so that God's new creation may finally emerge, this time as its spirit-enabled humans. This vocation, to say the least, is challenging. It is hard work but fortunately, God has provided a prayer book to help us. It's called the book of Psalms. That is where Paul goes now. This inarticulate groaning of the world, the church, and the spirit is not in vain. We know because God himself, God the father, says Paul in verse 27, searches all hearts. In verse 36 he quotes Psalm 44:22. Verse 21 says that God knows the secrets of our hearts.

21 Would not God search this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart. 22 Yet for Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Psalm 44:21-22

In this Psalm, Paul provides an example of God-given lament. This is a picture of the spirit calling to the father from the depth of the world's pain and the church's pain. This is our Gethsemane moment, we may have our own 'why-did-you-abandon-me?' moment. It will come one way or another as we follow Jesus, and especially as we minister to his people. We pray out of our own pain, whether of sickness, or grief or injury or disappointment or opposition or apparent failure or depression.

IV. Conclusion

Romans 8 is most certainly about assurance, but it isn't just the assurance of salvation; it is the assurance that when we are in that dark place, sensing our own pain at the heart of the world's pain, this is not outside God's saving purposes, but is actually at their heart.

Thus the glory to be revealed, the image-bearing authority exercised by God's people within the new creation (verses 18-21); is anticipated in the present time in the strange; challenging work of intercessory prayer. We are called to be the Tabernacle people, the place where and the means by which the spirit undertakes this constant, and often painful, wordless work.

The sign that the divine glory has come to dwell within us, in our midst, is that we are in this way exercising the 'human' glory of delegated 'authority' over the world. That's what prayer is all about, and where the world is in a mess, prayer may look and feel like what Paul describes here. The mystery of praying to the Father, with the Son and through Holy Spirit, that God the spirit comes to that place of pain so that our griefs, sorrows and loves are taken up into the grief, sorrow and love of God. This is what it means in verse 17, to suffer with the Messiah, so that we may be glorified with Him.

This is the vital link to the next verse 28, which we will look at in the next session with verses 28-30.