

Exodus 2:23-25 NLT

<sup>23</sup>Years passed, and the king of Egypt died. But the Israelites continued to groan under their burden of slavery. They cried out for help, and their cry rose up to God. <sup>24</sup>God heard their groaning, and he remembered his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. <sup>25</sup>He looked down on the people of Israel and knew it was time to act.

Romans 8:18-28 NLT

<sup>18</sup>Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. <sup>19</sup>For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. <sup>20</sup>Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, <sup>21</sup>the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. <sup>22</sup>For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. <sup>23</sup>And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. <sup>24</sup>We were given this hope when we were saved. (If we already have something, we don't need to hope for it. <sup>25</sup>But if we look forward to something we don't yet have, we must wait patiently and confidently.) <sup>26</sup>And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. <sup>27</sup>And the Father who knows all hearts, knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will. <sup>28</sup>And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

PRAY

Communication.

The ability to communicate is crucial in life. Nothing is more frustrating than a failure to communicate.

I saw a cartoon that pictured an adult man kneeling at his bedside praying. In a balloon that appears to be descending from heaven above, are the words: "I am sorry, you have reached me when I am out of the office, away from my desk, or helping another customer. Please leave a message after the beep, and I'll get back to you as soon as possible." I would call that a failure to communicate! Thankfully, prayer does not work like that.

Consider this: Newborn babies are unable to speak but trust me - they do communicate! The challenge is to figure out *what* is being communicated. New parents are reduced to "trial and error":

What cry represents hunger that can be satisfied with nourishment?

What cry represents discomfort that can be addressed by changing a soiled diaper?

What cry represents the need for comfort or rest?

That cry comes as frequently from the exhausted parent as it does from the newborn!

Nonverbal communication is as significant as what is spoken. Sometimes more so.

Here in Exodus, the Hebrew people are suffering enslavement in Egypt. It is a desperate life. There are no words. Groaning will have to suffice. God hears the groans of his covenant people and resolves to take action on their behalf.

Fast forward to the NT where Paul is teaching about suffering. Paul reframes suffering by placing "our momentary suffering" in the context of eternity, and by comparing it to future glory. What?? I don't know about you, but when I'm suffering, it is hard to see beyond the present miserable moment. Pain has a way of focusing our attention on the immediate situation. When in pain ourselves, it is hard to see beyond our own suffering. Paul does not minimize personal suffering, or the suffering of creation, but zooms out in an attempt to place it in the larger context of eternity.

Seen from the much broader perspective of eternity, Paul reminds the Romans and us, that what we are currently experiencing is brief and transitory, even when it does not feel that way! Covid 19 *will* go away, we *will* have better ways to live with it, when vaccines and better treatments are widely available. The future will look different.

Groaning emanates from real people who are really suffering: those who have lost loved ones to CoVid19, those who are ill, isolated and lonely, those who have lost income; sources of livelihood, jobs, and those who have or soon will lose the roof over their heads, all victims of a failing economy in the midst of pandemic, etc.

Furthermore, Paul says that all creation groans as a woman groans in childbirth. I can tell you from personal experience, it's not called "labor" for nothin'! Our second son was born on Labor Day and I got teased for laboring on Labor Day but I can assure you, labor is no joke. The good news about laboring in childbirth is that there is a purposeful and positive outcome - new life results! Labor ends, a child is born. In this context, groaning represents suffering as well as effort [labor].

The impact of sin is both individual and global. In other words, because of sin we live in a fallen world. All our relationships, including our relationship with creation itself, are damaged and broken. Thus, even creation groans!

But there is Good News!!

**First, as God's adopted sons and daughters, we are joint heirs with Christ of his glory.** But until Christ returns in all his fullness, we too shall share in his sufferings. We have our salvation because of Christ's suffering on the cross. On the face of it, this does not seem like good news, but there is more.

**Second - Even when we do not know how to pray, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us** with groans/sighs too deep for words! I am still trying to wrap my mind around this fact.

Sometimes I know exactly what to pray. If someone is ill, healing. If someone is in danger, protection. If someone does not know Christ, I pray that they will come to a saving knowledge of God and relationship with Christ. If all else fails, we can default to the Lord's Prayer as it covers just about everything.

Overshadowed by other news this week, Iowa, Illinois and several midwestern states were hit by a "derecho" – a storm bearing down with winds more than 100 miles an hour. Iowa appears to have lost over 40% of its corn and soybean crops. The storm spawned over 15 tornadoes in Illinois, that left 800,000 people without power, many roads blocked by downed trees and powerlines, countless homes destroyed, and this amid the worst pandemic in a century. One hardly knows

where to start. What words shall we use when the needs are so immense and complicated. How then shall we pray?

When there are no words, when you and I are at the end of our human resources, the Holy Spirit of the Triune God becomes our prayer partner/intercessor, and “gives voice” to what we cannot! This is astonishing! One of the three persons of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit who was active in calling the universe into being, now calls upon God the Father for us in our time of greatest need! The Holy Spirit somehow can help us in our weakness, translating the inarticulate desires of our hearts, into “groans too deep for words”! (This is exceptionally great news.)

**Thirdly - God hears all this groaning** - creation’s (v.22), ours (stenazo v.23), the Spirit’s (stenagmos v.26)! The very fact of being heard is immensely important. Never underestimate the power of the simple but profound act of listening to and really hearing what another is saying. That act, in and of itself, conveys value and significance. Friends, God is a good listener. God pays attention.

**Fourthly - Having heard these groans—these “sighs too deep for words” - God responds.** In the case of the Israelites groaning under the oppression of Pharaoh, God raises up Moses to lead them to liberation. Even that process was far from painless (remember there were all those plagues?) but God’s purpose was accomplished.

*<sup>16</sup>For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God’s children. <sup>17</sup>And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God’s glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering.*  
Romans 8:16-17

Paul places this promise of God in the tension of what God has already accomplished on our behalf, and the coming consummation of God’s Kingdom with the return of Christ. So, we live in the “in between” time, of the “already”, and the “not yet”. And this, my siblings in Christ, is why we have hope!

Hope in the midst of suffering is often illusive. *“We wait with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God”* (Romans 8:19). We do not give into despair, even when redemption and new life are not immediately evident (8:24-25). *“Our grasp of God’s will and the future God has in store for creation - and for us - is limited at*

best. How can we pray for what we have not seen and have difficulty imagining? The Spirit gives voice to what we cannot articulate but hope and long for in our inmost selves.” \*(Elizabeth Johnson, RCL Narrative Lectionary online)

And so dear friends, as God’s adoptive sons and daughters, we live in the tension between “the already and the not yet”, between lament and hope, between sharing Christ’s suffering in the present, and future glory which we shall also share with Christ. The companionship and intercession of the Holy Spirit on our behalf, allows us to persevere even when the going gets tough.

Dr. George G. Brown had a long and fruitful ministry. A few years into his retirement he began to sink into the abyss of Alzheimer’s. At the conclusion of a celebration held in his honor, he was to conclude the program by singing “Precious Lord”. His wife of 50 years stood by his side, and whispered in his ear each phrase, which he then sang out:

(Precious Lord), Precious Lord, Take my hand (Take my hand)

Lead me on (lead me on), Let me stand (Let me stand).

I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. Through the storm, through the night, Lead me on through the light. Take my hand, precious Lord, and lead me home!

When he did not have the words, she gave him the words. When he couldn’t continue, she finished the song for him.

I think this is similar to what happens when we pray but we lack the words. The Holy Spirit of God, who comes alongside us, will take our hearts desires and intentions, our mumbling inadequate expressions, and clarify and tell it before God according to the will of God, exactly what we mean.

I am not exactly sure how it works, but I think it is rather like having a translator. When I went to Rwanda with a group of Presbyterian Women, I was asked to preach at a Presbyterian Church there. The official language of the worship service was French, so I preached in English and the pastor translated the message into French. I trusted her to speak on my behalf and communicate - as best she could - what I intended. The Holy Spirit does the same for us.

When words fail, the Holy Spirit will not.

We can pray with confidence and with boldness - even in the face of baffling circumstances and suffering - knowing that the Spirit will translate for us according to God's will.

*"All things work together for good, for those who love God and are called according to His purpose."* (Romans 8:28). This can bring us hope and comfort in our present circumstances because it reminds us that God is sovereign. God has a purpose - a good one - for those who love Him.

This does NOT mean that everything will always go our way, that all our prayers will be answered the way WE think they should, or that believers are exempt from suffering.

This does mean, that ALL things are under God's control. That ALL things will ultimately be orchestrated to accomplish God's good and loving purposes.

ALL THINGS...including present suffering.

----including Covid19

----including the upcoming presidential election

----including whatever situation, you are in right now,

ALL things work together for good, for those who love God and are called according to God's purposes.

Therefore, we have hope - even when words fail.

We can pray boldly, with confidence, knowing that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groans and sighs too deep for words!

Friends, that is Good News! That brings us HOPE!

Pray

Benediction: Romans 15:13

May the God of HOPE fill you with all JOY and PEACE in believing, so that you may abound in HOPE by the POWER of the Holy Spirit.