

## **The Three Groans**

By Pete Greig

*"He hurls the world into our hearts,  
where we and He together carry it in infinitely tender love."  
—Thomas Kelly*

It's a wild time to be exploring *How to Pray*! Here we are, seeking to grow in our practice of prayer against the backdrop of a global pandemic, a presidential election, racial injustice, riots on the streets, a financial crisis, environmental catastrophe, a litany of abuse scandals, spiralling addiction, and the church in decline. There are probably other, more personal areas of heartbreak in your own life too.

When we watch the news or talk to our neighbours, something within us occasionally rises up with a mixture of defiance and despair. We find ourselves aching for the sanity, healing and hope of Jesus to break in and surprise us all.

And so, as we approach week three of the Book Club, our attention turns towards the simplest and most universal aspect of prayer: asking God for help. In chapter five we explore petition and in chapter six intercession. (The difference is uncomplicated: petition is asking for our own needs while intercession is asking on behalf of others.)

But does asking God make any difference? Do we honestly believe that our whispered prayers – our 'wish-dreams' (to coin a phrase from Dietrich Bonhoeffer writing at the time of Hitler) - can shift the tectonic plates of medical science, global warming, and the race for the White House?

It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the world's problems, and it can therefore be tempting to shield ourselves from disappointment or ridicule by lowering our expectations. Prayer becomes a therapeutic tool, merely a formational practice that changes me 'in here', no longer a power that changes the world 'out there'.

One of the key texts for this week is Romans chapter 8. It's a great bit of the Bible. You may like to spend some time reading it devotionally over the coming days. You'll notice that it's a very noisy chapter indeed, filled with the disconcerting sound of groaning. In Romans 8 we hear the polyphonic sounds of creation groaning (v.22), ourselves groaning (v.23), and even the Holy Spirit groaning (v.26). That's an awful lot of groaning.

These three groans are worth exploring, especially at a time of global crisis when we are seeking to make sense of intercessory prayer. Intercession is often unhelpfully presented in transactional terms, as if God expects us to barter on behalf of others for clemency and favour. But Romans 8 is supremely relational, describing the Spirit within us crying 'Abba, Father', and the Spirit in heaven crying out on our behalf. Read the whole chapter and you'll see what I mean. In these three groans we find the deep empathy that is necessary at the

heart of intercessory prayer. 'Prayer is not,' as Martin Luther said, 'overcoming God's reluctance, but laying hold of his willingness.'

### **The groaning of creation**

The first groan in Romans 8 is that of 'the whole creation (which) has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.' (v.22). Do we hear this groaning all around us? Do we allow ourselves to feel it? Or do we anaesthetise ourselves from the heartbreak of the bereaved in our street, the cry of the oppressed in our city, the quiet despair of the cancer ward, the food bank and the family court?

### **The groaning of the saints**

Of course, we feel it because we are part of it! And here we have the second groan of Romans 8: 'We ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly as we wait for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.' (v.23) We are not immune as Christians from the trials of this present darkness. Our bodies decay with the best of them. Our dreams sometimes shatter too. And so, we groan in solidarity with the pain that is around us and the pain that is also within us. We travail with our neighbours. We carry our colleagues in our hearts. We care for aging relatives and dysfunctional family members. We participate actively in the tribulations caused by broken economic systems, broken ecological systems, and broken political systems. Our hearts break not only for our own predicament but also for that of others (and this is where petition becomes intercession).

This is more than an existential scream emitted into the darkness of despair. The apostle Paul carefully deploys the poignant metaphor of a woman giving birth (v.22). Childbirth is, as my wife often reminds me, excruciating. The woman in labour cries out in pain like the woman at death's door. Her expression is identical, but her experience is totally different. Our prayers and even our tears as Christians flow from expectancy rather than despondency. To use one of the apostle Paul's favourite expressions, we 'wait eagerly', we pray with rising hope.

### **The groaning of the Spirit**

The third cry comes from "The Spirit himself (who) intercedes for us through wordless groans." (v.26) In other words, God himself is praying for us right now – as I write this, as you read this – not politely, but with deep wordless emotion. How different this is from the common depiction of a dispassionate divinity demanding persuasion or even the irate divinity requiring appeasement. These are the groans of the Creator for his creation, the longing of the Prodigal Father to welcome his adopted sons and daughters home.

We assume that the baptism in the Spirit is a kind of ecstasy and it often is - thank God! But it is also inevitably a kind of agony. It is to be immersed in the Father's eternal longing that 'none shall perish' (2 Peter 3:9). It is to live like Jesus 'to intercede' as 'a man of suffering and familiar with pain' (Heb. 7:25, Is. 53:3). And it is to experience the 'wordless groans' of the Holy Spirit.

To encounter the love of God is to encounter the joy of heaven but also the pain of the world. It is to be awakened from the dreary dullness of a selfish monotone existence to the stark primary colours of life's fullness. There's a technique in painting known as *chiaroscuro* which deploys dramatic darkness to accentuate light and to create a sense of volume. You'll have seen it in works by Rembrandt and Caravaggio. Actually, you'll have seen it in the contours of life itself because God himself paints in *chiaroscuro*. He invites us into the darkness as well as the brilliance of life. To be filled with his Spirit is therefore to enter a state of heightened empathy. We laugh more and we weep more because we love more.

And so the posture of the intercessor is cruciform. We are torn between the groaning of creation of which we are a part as Son and Daughters of Adam, and the groaning of heaven where our citizenship resides as Sons and Daughters of God. These two axis – the horizontal and the vertical – intersect in our mortal-eternal, dying-rising bodies. We are driven again and again to our knees in the agony of solidarity and the ecstasy of hope.

What marks out the true intercessor? The daily decision to feel the pain and therefore to fight the predicament of the world. As the Quaker educator Thomas Kelly says:

*"We are torn loose from earthly attachments and ambitions, and we are quickened to a divine but painful concern for the world. He plucks the world out of our hearts, loosening the chains of attachment. And He hurls the world into our hearts, where we and He together carry it in infinitely tender love." (A Testament of Devotion)*