



I want to start by asking you an unusual question: What is making you groan these days? Groan isn't a word we use much. To groan is to make a deep inarticulate sound in response to pain or despair. When someone groans, it's never a pleasing experience.

As we look around our world, we see plenty of reasons to groan. From 2001 to 2015, Americans have witnessed at least one major tragedy every single year. Even if it didn't happen on U.S. soil, we saw it on our television and computer screens. Each year our sensibilities were challenged and ultimately hardened.

In 2001 New York City was attacked as two planes flew into the World Trade Center leaving 3,000 dead. Soon after we engaged in a war in Afghanistan and after that, Iraq. Other parts of the world suffered genocide and civil war. In 2004 a tsunami in the Indian Ocean left over 230,000 dead. In 2005 Hurricane Katrina ravished New Orleans and 1,800 people died. In 2008 the financial markets collapsed. We've experienced various outbreaks of flu and disease. In 2010 a massive earthquake in Haiti left over 300,000 dead and the Gulf oil spill disaster ruined an ecosystem for months. In 2011 another tsunami in Japan quickly turned into a nuclear crisis. Year after year, here in the US, we've seen mass shootings like the one in Newtown, Connecticut. Most recently we are witnessing an incredible humanitarian crisis flooding out of Syria and into Europe. If those events don't make you groan, then you might want to pinch yourself and make sure you're alive.

National and world events are one thing, but for some of you, there are things going on in your personal life that's causing you to groan in anguish as well. I won't depress us with another long list of those possibilities. But, in the face of all the things that make us groan, how does the follower of Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, respond?

A person could mistakenly believe that suffering and hardship should be eliminated or lessened from the Christian's life. And for good reason. Over the past weeks we've been learning the amazing changes that come with living the Spirit-filled life. Two of them were: Romans 8:15 says we call God our "Daddy;" Romans 8:17 says we are heirs of the God of the universe—we are his child with all the rights of sonship.

With this amazing relationship and power available to the Christian, some have reasoned that suffering should either be eliminated from the Christian's life or if it's there, it's the result of your sin. Our scripture today clearly shows that neither is

the case. In today's sermon from Romans 8, I'm going to show you the root cause for suffering in the world and explain how God uses suffering for his purpose in your life. As an introductory idea, Romans 8:18 sets the framework for a proper understanding for **all** of the hardship and heartbreak we face.

**I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (v. 18).**

To get us warmed up to the explanation that's coming about suffering, Paul gives two truths here that are required to properly understand all of the hardship we face.

**There is a present age and an age to come.** The present age, affected by sin, is thoroughly broken. Creation is affected. The human heart is affected. Ambition, emotions, desires are all tainted by sin and death in this present age. But there's a future age that's filled with glory. This future age is when God's kingdom will come in its fullness after Jesus' second coming. This will be an age of God's pure and holy glory. So pure that it can't be corrupted. So holy we can't quite wrap our sinful minds around it. Revelation 21 describes this future glory as a time when we will be with God and Jesus will take away death, mourning, crying and pain. The most legitimate reason a person has to groan about this broken world is the comparison to the glory that exists in God's presence.

**The sufferings of the present age can't be compared to the future glory.** This is God's way of saying, "I know all about your hardships and I know all about something you don't know – my glory. And God says, 'my glory will make all of your hardships seem like a light weight. So hang on. Don't give up.'" *"For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all"* (2 Cor. 4:17).

Paul is thoroughly convinced of these two truths, so he starts verse 18 with the two words: "I consider." He is focusing the thoughts of his mind, not allowing his thoughts to run wildly. He is disciplined in reminding himself of these foundational truths because they give his life a firm foundation as he faces hardships. Maintaining God's perspective on suffering helps.

But a person could still protest. Why doesn't God just end the suffering in the world? Clearly, nobody wants it. Since God's all-powerful, why doesn't he just make everything good and glorious now? The next verses address this question and expand upon the impact of suffering. It's not just about you. Creation is

groaning; humanity is groaning, and the Spirit of God is groaning all because of the suffering in the world.

**For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.**

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

**In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God (verses 19-27).**

Pain, the gift that nobody wants.

Is groaning like crying? Wailing? What does it express? Discomfort? God cannot ignore the cry of someone who's afflicted. God listens to our cries. God is close to the broken hearted. Jesus says, come to me all you who are weakened and heavy laden. My yoke is easy and my burden is light. The effect of sin is so thoroughly felt that creation groans, humanity groans, and the Holy Spirit groans. We'll look at each of these.

## **Creation Groans**

The language describing how creation suffers is strong:

- creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed
- creation was subjected to frustration
- creation itself hopes it will be liberated from its bondage to decay
- creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time

In explanation of this, Biblical scholars look back to the fall of humanity. When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they introduced sin and death into God's perfect creation. God's "creation" often personifies "nature"—the heavens, seas, earth, fields, trees, rivers, mountains, etc.—all are part of creation.

When sin and death entered the world, creation was touched. Imagine sin and death have a finger and it stretches out and

touches the universe. And from that point of impact you can see the lines of death and decay spreading with unstoppable force. Animals are afraid of people, droughts ravage the land, floods destroy life, earthquakes rip the surface of the earth, tsunamis send water where it shouldn't go. Any ailment that affects humanity would be included here too. Sin obviously brought spiritual and physical death.

Sin also brought the paths to death. Diseases like cancer and Alzheimer's; any physical problem like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, epilepsy, etc., would be included. They all have their root in the fall. That is why the Bible states in Romans 8:20-22 that creation is longing for its redemption.

We also see the effect of sin on societies. They war against each other. There is mayhem, killing, theft, adulteries, murders, lying, etc. Our jails are filled with those who are ruled by sin. When Adam fell, the creation was touched by his fall because death was not a natural part of God's original creation. So the creation groans in pain, longing for the time when God will bring the suffering to an end.

## **Believers Groan**

The second group that's groaning in these verses are followers of Jesus.

**but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies (v. 23).**

We know a Christ-follower is being described here because these people have the "firstfruits of the Spirit," meaning they have experienced some of the power of God's Spirit. Yet, this doesn't bring escape from the effects of sin and death. This too was caused by the fall of Adam and Eve. Before the fall, Adam was sinless and perfect. He had a "good" nature. But, after the fall, he became a sinner. His nature was changed from "good" to "bad." Since we are his children, we inherit his sinful nature (Rom. 5:12) and our mind, body, soul, spirit, emotions, and thoughts are touched by sin.

The follower of Jesus has Spirit-filled joy and the glory we hope to share, but we are not immune to the effects of sin and death. Christians still face their own sin and the pain of other people's sin nature and we groan inwardly when it happens. The way I think of it is this: I bump into you and you bump into me and we hurt each other. Here are a few examples of what this looks like:

My grandfather was an angry alcoholic. His anger stifled love in his home. And as he bumped into my mother and her siblings, they were hurt. As these verses describe in Romans, they groaned inwardly.

In 2005, after considerable prayer, Cassie and I bought our second home. A year and a half later when we sold it for a \$100,000 loss, there was considerable groaning.

All of us are suffering in some way. We could spend the remainder of the day sharing examples of how we're suffering and groaning inwardly. Nobody likes it, but the Christian should not despair about it. We should hold to the hope that something better is coming, either at our death when we're in heaven or at the second coming of Jesus.

For now we wait in the tension of what God has started by giving us the Spirit and what he will complete. During this in-between, there's an inward groaning in anticipation of the full expression of our adoption to sonship. Romans 8:15 says we have been adopted to sonship, and that's true, but we haven't yet been given the full benefits of this adoption. We only have a taste.

To illustrate the groaning and the taste of our adoption to sonship, image this situation: A father is hiking in the woods with his one-year-old son in a carrier backpack. At the beginning of the hike, they are both blissfully happy. Then it starts to rain. The intensity of the rain picks up until it's falling so hard that the only thing you can see is water. The thunder booms, shaking the ground, and you can feel it in your chest. In utter terror, the one-year-old is wailing and screaming at the top of his lungs. From his perspective, all he knows is the storm. There's nothing else to him. He sees no reality beyond this horrible scary storm.

The dad takes him off his back, cradles him in his arms and puts his mouth directly on his ear. He whispers, "we're going to make it. You're ok. I love you." Over and over and over. The baby continues to wail in great frustration not knowing that he's safe and not knowing that his dad will do anything to get him home.

Maybe you feel like that child, crying and moaning. I think all of us do in some way. You get confused by why God would allow you to go through such hardship. Maybe you're even resentful for it. Remember, God has not abandoned you. He is holding you tight. He has given you the firstfruits of the Spirit. And the Spirit is interceding for you through wordless groans. That's the third groaning described in these verses.

## The Spirit Groans

- The Spirit helps us in our weakness (v. 26)
- We don't know what we ought to pray (v. 26)
- The Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans (v. 26)
- The Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God (v. 27)

What an encouragement! While we are screaming our heads off, the Spirit is helping us. No doubt, we know what to pray sometimes. But sometimes we are beyond ourselves. And what a comfort to know that we are not left stranded at these times. We

are never left stranded! God is holding you, you are sustained by his strength, and the Spirit is praying for you.

Charles Spurgeon once wrote, "It's a mark of wondrous condescension that God should not only answer our prayers when they're made, but should make our prayers for us. That the king should say ... 'I will be your secretary. I will write out your petition for you. I will put it into proper words so that your petition shall be framed acceptably,' this is goodness at its utmost stretch." What a powerful truth that you are never alone to face the hardships in your life. God is always with his children through the presence of the Holy Spirit who's endlessly pleading our case with the Father.

So far in these verses today we've seen that creation is groaning, followers of Jesus are groaning, and even the Spirit of God is groaning. Everything and everybody is groaning because the fall of Adam set sin loose. Death and decay affect everything. So are we powerless to the whims of sin and death? Is there anything redemptive to the suffering we endure?

The next three verses are some of the most cherished in the Bible because God tells us that your suffering is not pointless. God is not only with us in the suffering, he's sovereignly using it for his good purpose.

**And we know that in all things God works for the good of "those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (v. 28).**

- "All things" – everything, God is never surprised.
- "God works" – putting the events to work, to a purpose.
- "the good" – "good" according to God's definition. Primarily for God's glory. Secondly, for a good for us that molds me more to look like Jesus.
- "Those who love him" – for the person who's in a relationship with Jesus.

This verse explains God's sovereign perspective and his eternal work through the hardships of life. That means we don't need to fear anything that comes because God will always take everything and use it for good.

Let's not rush past this. We don't need to fear anything because God will always take everything and use it for good. This is God's call to deeper surrender. Will we wade through the shallow waters of faith letting anxiety, selfish ambition and fear rule our emotions? Or will we say "yes" to God's call to a deeper surrender? Where our heart says, "Abba, Father, not my will but yours be done, not my control but yours."? As Jack Miller wrote, "We have an obsessive need to feel in control of our lives. Such a hunger is a primary obstacle to the Spirit's working mightily in us and through us."?

What lies behind our objection to suffering? The answer is that we want to be in charge of our lives. We fill our lives with business

because it makes us feel like we're mastering our world. We construct safe, predictable lives for our children because it makes us feel good and productive. We cling tenaciously to material possessions, careers and reputations all because we want to be in control. All the while, God is using suffering as a tool to move us to deeper and deeper places of surrender to God. And this is good.

Of course, this is completely counter-intuitive! When we are suffering, our nature wants to escape as fast as possible! That's why Tim Hansen said, "Pain is the gift that nobody wants." That's why Paul said earlier in Romans, "*... we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character hope*" (Rom. 5:3-4).

And that's why Paul concludes his thoughts in Romans 8 with assurance. Just as trustworthy as God is to bring people to salvation and ultimately to heaven, that's how trustworthy God is to redeem your suffering. It seems counter-intuitive, but it's God's truth.

**For those God foreknew (foreloved) he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified (verses 29-30).**

Since God is trustworthy and loving to give salvation and ultimately glory, he is equally trustworthy to redeem your suffering. When you're going through really dark times, it seems like you are out of control. Because you are! Creation groans, you groan, and the Spirit of God groans, longing for the suffering to end. It's

not easy. But for the Christian, there is purpose and hope for a glorious resolution.

In his talk entitled "The Sense of an Ending," Jeremy Begbie tells a story about attending a worship service in a poor South African township. He tells how a few days before a tornado cut through that town, ripping apart fifty homes; killing five people. Not only that, the very night before, a gang ran down a 14-year-old, a member of the church's Sunday school, and stabbed him to death. The pastor began his opening prayer: "Lord, you're the Creator and the Sovereign, but why did the wind come like a snake and tear our roofs off? Why did a mob cut short the life of one of our own children when he had everything to live for? Over and over again, Lord, we're in the midst of death."

As he spoke, the congregation responded with a dreadful sighing and groaning. And then, once he finished his prayer, very slowly they all began to sing, at first very quietly, then louder. They sang and they sang, song after song of praise to a God who had come in the person of Jesus and suffered to give us a promise of glory. It's like the singing gave the church a foretaste of what's to come. The groaning wasn't just the painful groaning of those who've suffered, but it was the beautiful groaning of those anticipating the glory to come.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*