

The Groanings of God

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Romans 8:26-39

This week, like most weeks, just open your newspaper or the news feed on your smart phone, and the shock and sadness and groaning begin: a beautiful Australian bride-to-be is slain in yet another tragic police shooting; baby Charlie loses his fight in London leaving two grief-stricken parents behind; ten undocumented immigrants perish in the back of a sweltering, locked tractor-trailer with dozens more severely injured; LGBT persons are yet again painfully reminded that their rights and place in this society are not yet secured.

And then in our personal lives, struggles and setbacks take their toll: a friend or family member fights a deadly disease or a crippling disability; a marriage is on the rocks, despite earnest efforts to save it; a loved one dies--and while many say "It's for the best," the loss still breaks our hearts. Trials like these can leave us peering at the heavens with suspicion and anger and maybe even, defiance, as the wrenching cry, "Why God, *Why?!*" comes roaring up from some place deep inside.

And yet if God notes the sparrow's fall, as Jesus taught, and has the very hairs of our heads numbered, then maybe it is not *we* who feel these losses most profoundly. Maybe the One who lives *inside* every person's pain, reels at their bewilderment and anguish in a way we cannot imagine. Maybe every time tragedy strikes, the first tear to fall, falls upon the face of God.

In his book, *The Hole in Our Gospel*, Richard Stearns notes that when an airliner crashes and two hundred people die, that is international news. But just yesterday, more than 25,000 children died due to famine and preventable diseases. And that tragic death toll will sound again today, tomorrow, and the day after that.

So how come the equivalent of more than one hundred airliners filled with children crashing every day isn't news? Is it because those deaths are so common and feel so hopeless? Or because we lack a personal connection to those parents and children?

But what if God, the divine mother and father of us all, knows each of those children by name? And they and their heartsick parents are just as precious to God as my daughter and grandsons are to me? Then suddenly, our world is upended. For we cannot long remain the self-righteous accusers of an uncaring God once we discover that our heavenly Abba is hurting and hoping and groaning with us and with all the world.

And that is precisely the shattering truth Paul sounds in the 8th chapter of Romans: that God was groaning and the creation was groaning long before we showed up to join the chorus. For despite all the pious talk about this or that being the will of

God, a great deal that goes on in this broken world is most decidedly *not* the will of God.

And yet all that groaning and groping is not meaningless, fruitless pain. For these are labor pains, Paul assures us. This is pain in the service of new life. This is pain that is going somewhere, serving some higher end. As Paul says it, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed.” This is a truth any woman who has borne a child intuitively understands. Because what mother who ever held a gurgling, gasping newborn in her arms would give up that precious child to be spared the travails of labor?

So how does our loving, gracious God take the labor pains of every strife and struggle and midwife them into vibrant, new life? First by sweating and straining beside us, groaning with and for us in the agony of our need: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For when we do not know how to pray as we ought”--which is a good deal of the time!--“the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). It sounds like God is more interested in the honesty of our prayers than in their eloquence. For when we are overwhelmed, not knowing how to pray, the Spirit shows up to express in heartfelt sighs, wounds too deep for words.

In the 7th chapter of Mark’s gospel, Jesus is confronted by a man, deaf and mute, desperate for healing (Mark 7:31-37). Jesus draws the man aside and in a private, intimate moment, puts his fingers in the man’s ears and touches his tongue. But before Jesus exclaims, “Ephphatha! Be opened!” he looks up to heaven . . . and sighs: “Then looking up to heaven, (Jesus) sighed” (v. 34). It’s the same word that sounds again and again in Romans 8: “And the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for

words.” Thus, far from declaring this man’s condition the “will of God,” Jesus sighs in anguish at this travesty of the will of God. Even so, the Spirit sighs over our dilemmas too.

But God’s sighing, as precious as that is, is not all that’s going on in the divine heart of hearts. There is intercession too: “And the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Romans 8:27). Later in this same chapter, Paul says Jesus intercedes for us as well at the right hand of God (v. 34). The point is not that Jesus and the Spirit are trying to persuade God to do something God is not inclined to do; the point is to reassure *us* that our anguish and need is swelling up in the heart of God, buoyed by love, even when, especially when, we don’t know how to pray or what to pray.

Shortly after her graduation from Emory University, Sharon Carr died of a brain tumor. Before she died, she wrote some moving poems published under the title, *Yet Life Was a Triumph*. One of those poems is titled, “Already praying.”

I asked you to pray for me. The suffering has begun, and the skull wracking pain is a shadow I know only too well . . . I wanted you to console me, for the breadth of my grief gnashes at me with steely teeth, hacking and clawing at my shreds of hope, and stubborn strands of faith.

And then you told me Jesus prays for me, that he pleads with his Father on my behalf, that the strength of the cross sustains me

The tears are falling from both our faces, friend. Let me comfort you, for someone in heaven has already comforted me.

And so God sighs, sharing our anguish. And God intercedes, holding an internal dialogue, mulling over what can and must be done to help. For God is not the detached watchmaker of Enlightenment rationalism, watching creation implode from afar. No, the

God who draws near in Jesus is personally and passionately involved in absolutely everything that is happening with you.

And yet, and yet, there's more! For our heavenly Abba is not just empathetic, *feeling* with us. Our heavenly Abba is active and able, *working with us* to wrest good from experiences that are punishing and awful in themselves.

Here sounds the great promise of Romans 8:28: "God works in all things for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose." *Not* "Everything works for good," a statement that is patently untrue. Because despite the folk wisdom that "time heals all wounds," it doesn't. Without antibiotics, you're going to die from certain infections. And without hard, persistent grief work, you can die from a broken heart too.

No, Romans 8:28 is best rendered as the New International Version or the Good News Bible has it: "*In everything*, God works for good," as surely as from the cross of Jesus, a thing hopelessly evil in itself, God wrested the salvation of the world.

But here's the catch, here's the clincher: God's will for your life is not--with apologies to Ben Franklin--to make you healthy, wealthy, and wise. God's will, God's purpose is to help "conform you to the image of God's son" (v. 29); that is, to grow you in your likeness to Jesus. So if we want to talk about the will of God, let's talk about that. Because when the Spirit intercedes for the saints, "according to the will of God" (v. 27), the Spirit is praying for you to grow into a person who thinks and feels and acts, more and more like Jesus.

Down in Georgia, they tell the story of a young man trying to establish himself as a peach grower. He invested his life savings and energies in an orchard, full of promise.

But sadly, an early frost killed his blossoms. Devastated, the young man dropped out of church and turned his back on God.

His pastor, an older gentleman, had lived long in those parts and knew how overwhelming such a loss could be to an orchard grower. So he was not surprised to find the young man very bitter.

"I'll never set foot in a church again," the angry orchard grower vowed. "How can I worship a God who cares so little for me he would let a frost kill my peaches?"

The old preacher nodded knowingly and was silent for a long, long time. Finally, he spoke.

"I understand something of how you must feel. But you see, God loves you better than God loves peaches. And God knows that while peaches grow best without frost, it is impossible to grow people without some hard times."

"God's purpose, you see, is not to grow peaches, but to grow people."

Again, none of this is to say God sends frost or cancer or tragedy or trial to teach us a lesson. Life generates quite enough trouble on its own, with no need for God to pile on. But it is the promise of scripture that nothing, not even death, can stop God from accomplishing God's purpose for you.

For God intends, Romans 8 sings, that Jesus be the firstborn of a large family of those growing in their likeness to Jesus (v. 29) by making sure that the labor pains of your groaning, and the Spirit's groaning, and the groaning of all creation, not be for naught. Rather, that all this writhing and groaning and struggle produce a vibrant new life. Even when that new life must be snatched from the tomb of some death or reversal you thought was the end.

“If God be for us,” cries Paul, “who can be against us? For the One who did not withhold the only son, but gave him up for all of us, will not this God with him give us everything else?” (v. 31-32).

Carlyle Marney was one of the greatest theological minds Southern Baptists ever produced. But given his soaring intellect, he often spoke above the heads of his hearers.

On one occasion, when Marney was addressing a class at Southern Seminary, a student grew exasperated at Dr. Marney’s esoteric teaching. “Dr. Marney,” he sputtered. “Could you please explain in one sentence what you are trying to say?”

Marney walked to the blackboard and wrote in big, sprawling letters, “God . . . Is . . . For . . . You.”

“*That*,” Dr. Marney declared, “is the gospel in one sentence: God is for you.”

No, despite what life’s most daunting challenges or your own heartbreak may lead you to believe, God has not abandoned you to some cruel, unfeeling fate. Rather, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is at work, even now, at the epicenter of your pain, striving to bring good from evil.

And we dare to believe this, not because “everything always works out for the best” or because circumstances conspire to make that an easy confession. But because we have seen revealed in Jesus Christ, the shape of a holy, healing love that meets us on the very cross, where life as we knew it, came to an end; before God found a way to turn our groaning and pain and struggle into the gasping and gurgles of a whole new life.

“What then shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?”

“No, *in all these things* we are more than conquerors through him who loved us!”

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!”

(v. 35, 37-39).

Gracious God, for those brothers and sisters in this family of faith, frightened and despairing, calm and encourage them in the embrace of your Spirit. Help them help us to believe, or to believe again, that you are at work in hidden, if powerful ways. Give us the strength to hold on through the long, dark night of the soul until Easter morn peeps over the horizon. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.

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