

## **“Where is God When I Suffer?”**

Romans 8:18-28

*Series: Wrestling with God Week 5. Why Does God Allow Suffering?*

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Chippie the parakeet never saw it coming. The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said “hello” when “ssssopp!” Chippie got sucked in. The bird owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie -- still alive, but stunned.

Covered with dust and soot, she grabbed Chippie, raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held the parakeet under the running water. Realizing that Chippie was now soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do . . . she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air.

Poor Chippie never knew what hit him. When asked how the bird was recovering, his owner replied, “Well, Chippie doesn't sing much anymore -- he just sits and stares.” Sucked in, washed up, and blown over . . . That's enough to steal the song from the stoutest heart.<sup>1</sup>

It's enough to make you groan. Do you ever feel a little like Chippie – stunned and speechless? Do you ever feel like letting out a long, low groan? You get your term paper back and it's hemorrhaging red ink: groan. The train breaks down, the flight's delayed, you're stuck in rush hour: groan. You open the credit card statement, peek at the new balance, then you get the bank statement: groan. There's a shooting pain in your back, a tense pain in your neck, a cramping pain in your gut: groan. Then there are those painful life changing moments that make you cry and shout and, most of all, groan.

As a physical therapist, my wife asks every patient to rate their pain from 1 to 10. Groaning may be from one to five. What happens when we move up the scale?

There are nine months of excitement and expectation. But when the baby is born there is something wrong: a rare disease, a high fever, a birth defect. You can't bring the baby home from the hospital. Perhaps there is no baby to bring home.

Your parents don't understand your feelings and problems. They don't give you a chance to speak before they interrupt and interject. Or the children, in whom you've invested your life,

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<sup>1</sup> Max Lucado, *In the Eye of the Storm*, Word Publishing, 1991, Page 11

now rebel, defy or ignore you. The parents who raised you long ago, now can't take care of themselves without you.

A car accident leaves a victim crippled, paralyzed or in a coma. Only an hour ago she was so healthy, he was so strong. Now it takes a machine just to take a breath.

A cruel stroke, a heart attack, a spreading cancer seizes the one you love and things will never be the same.

What do you do when you lose someone close to your heart? You built your whole life around him. You can't live without her. But now you are forced to do just that. And there is an empty chair, an empty bed, an empty house to remind you your beloved is not coming back.

What do you do when suffering and pain come into your life? What do you do when night comes – when things seem dark all around you? Most of us live our lives in the daylight where circumstances are free from deep suffering and pain. In the daylight, everything is clear. Life is dependable, predictable and routine in the daylight.

But when night comes, when suffering arises, everything changes. Routines are interrupted, plans put on hold or cancelled, expectations crushed. What was clear in the daylight is unfamiliar and strange in the dark as you grope for answers. The next step is uncertain. You're afraid of stumbling and falling down. A torrent of feelings races through you: despair and hopelessness, exhaustion and weakness, depression and numbness, fear and loneliness.

Eventually in the middle of the night you turn to God and ask, "Where are you? Why is this happening to me? Don't you see what I'm going through? You used to seem so close to me God. O Lord, why don't you do something? The people I depended on are gone. Have you left too, Lord? Don't you care about me? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? All my prayers disappear in the dark when night comes."

Today's wrestling match with God is a question which never goes away: Where is God when I suffer? Why does God allow suffering? Why is there so much evil in the world? Philosophers have tried to solve this puzzle for centuries. They propose this trilemma:

- A. God is all-powerful
- B. God is all-loving
- C. Evil exists.

One of these three must be false. Some say God is strong enough to remove suffering from this world. He simply does not care about us. He is angry or indifferent to us. Others believe God loves us deeply, but He is unable to wipe out evil. He'd like to help, but He's too weak or too busy. Some religions deny suffering exist – pain is an illusion, try some meditation. The debate continues. Even if someone finds an answer that is intellectually satisfying it still cannot quiet the pain, the suffering and the emptiness in the heart when night comes.

The Apostle Paul was no stranger to raw suffering. He was imprisoned, shipwrecked, whipped, tortured. Paul and the Bible never attempt to solve the trilemma. It affirms all three to be true. Instead of focusing on philosophical puzzles, Paul tells us to fix our eyes on God.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

According to Paul, when we put suffering on one side of the scale and the future glory God gives on the other, glory outweighs suffering every time. There’s no comparison. To explain why there is suffering and where God is when we suffer, Paul doesn’t spin philosophical arguments. He focuses directly on our groaning and grieving. In Romans 8 he gives three examples of groaning. Two of these groans are caused by pain. But the third groan is a gift from God.

First, Paul says **God’s Creation is Groaning**.

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. Romans 8:19-22

According to the Bible, the Creation is not a dead thing. It is alive and in pain. The Creation is breaking down. And we are helping it along. The record heatwave in Europe this summer reminds us that the pollution we create is causing the temperature of the planet to rise. In a multitude of ways, we make the Creation groan. It is the calling of every Christian to take care of God’s creation, to tend the garden of the Lord.

Yet Paul also tells us God wants to set the Creation free. Famine, drought, plague, diseases, earthquakes, tsunamis – disasters which cause so much suffering are signs of a Creation that is groaning to be free, restored, made new. In fact, Paul says, the groaning of Creation is like a mother writhing in the pains of childbirth, hoping for new life to be born. What is the cause for some of our suffering? Paul says this world is broken and breaking down. It’s not as it should be nor as it shall be. God will one day set the Creation free. God will make all things new.

The second **God’s Children are Groaning**. Paul writes,

Not only (the creation), but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved (Romans 8:23-24).

Christians live in between. We are in between Jesus’ first coming and His second. And sometimes, while we wait for Him to come again and put all things right, it makes us groan.

When you give your life to Christ, the Bible says you are adopted into God's family. You become a child of God by adoption. Those who adopt children tell me it is a long process that sometimes makes you groan. I have friends in Doylestown who waited years to adopt a child from Vietnam. Several times they were given the green light only to find the trip was cancelled at the last minute. Finally, the wife was able to travel to that far country only to face more red tape, bureaucracy, and the fear it all might fall through. In the end, she brought home from an orphanage a beautiful seven year old daughter smiling ear to ear. Here in the U.S. she received the medical attention which was impossible in that poor country. Now, she can hardly remember her life in the orphanage. That's because she has come home.

You and I may groan in this life while we wait for our adoption by God to be complete. The papers were signed and sealed long ago with the blood of Christ. There is no question He is coming for us. But waiting can make us groan. We still have to face crime and injustice, triple bypass surgery and cancer treatments, headaches and heartbreaks. Have hope, Paul says, He's coming to complete the adoption and bring you to His Father's house where all wounds will be healed. You will hardly be able to remember the pain of this life because you will finally be home.

How do you know that Paul is right? That's the third groan and it's God's gift. **God's Spirit is Groaning with Us.**

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. Romans 8:26-27

Jesus fills you with the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit is ready to help you with all your weaknesses. Commenting on this passage, John Calvin writes,

The Spirit itself takes part in the burden which oppresses our weakness, and not only gives us help and aid, but lifts us up, as though the Spirit itself underwent the burden with us.

The Spirit is in you to help you carry the load.

When my children were newborns, they cried about everything. So Lisa and I fed them, burped them, changed their diapers, rocked them and did whatever else came to mind. At times, I wished they could just tell me what's wrong. When I was a new father, my Dad said, "That's the way it is, you just have to be patient and wait. They won't be able to communicate with you until they're 22." I was 21 at the time.

When we come to our heavenly Father during a time of suffering, we don't quite know what to pray or how to pray. So the Father gives us the Holy Spirit to be our interpreter. Paul says the Spirit himself prays for us. And what I find truly beautiful about this passage is the Holy Spirit gets down and groans with us – groans you can't put into words. The Spirit places before the Father your deepest feelings of sorrow, pain and frustration. So when you feel nobody understands your hurts and wounds, remember the Spirit suffers with you. When you feel God doesn't answer your prayers, remember the Spirit prays for you. When you feel your burdens are too much to bear, remember the Spirit groans with you and helps lighten the load.

Are you groaning? Whenever you face suffering, remember this is your Father's world. Remember that you are God's child. And remember that you have the Spirit to prove it.

In the middle of the horror of the holocaust, Elie Wiesel asked God, "Where are you?" In his book entitled, Night, Wiesel writes of his experiences as a teenager in the Nazi death camp of Birkenbau. He saw all the Jews in his village banded together in a ghetto, then stripped of their possessions and loaded into cattle cars where a third of them died. The first night his train pulled up at Birkenbau, coils of ominous black smoke billowed from a massive oven. Later he saw his mother, sister and all his family disappear into an oven. Wiesel himself, frequently battered and beaten, escaped death only by an accident.

In one passage he describes the death of a fellow prisoner, a young teenager about his age, caught working for the underground. To make an example of him, the guards forced the other prisoners to watch him being hung. But because the boy was so light, it took a half hour for him to die. For minutes that seemed eternal, the people stood in horror as this child with the face of a sad angel had the life strangled out of him. As he stood watching, Wiesel heard someone behind him shout, "Where is God? Where is God now?" Wiesel heard within himself a voice say, "Where is God? There, there is God, hanging on this gallows!" On that day, the God of this young Jew died in a Nazi concentration camp. He writes,

Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never!

For Wiesel and for so many Jews the God of love, of gentleness, of comfort, of compassion; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob vanished forevermore into the Night of the Holocaust.

Where can we turn when the pain is too much? Who can heal our broken hearts and aching spirits? How can we get through the darkness as we stretch out our hands and grope for answers in the night? We ask Wiesel's question, "Where is God when night comes?" In a way, Wiesel had the right answer: *God was there* suffering with His people. God was there in the midst of the ashes, the smoke, the hatred, and the death. God was there in the darkest night. For like that Jewish boy who hung on the gallows, there was another Jew who prayed one dark night, a Jew who was whipped and beaten, a Jew who was nailed to a Roman cross on a rocky Judean hill while all the people stood about and watched, a Jew who cried out into the blackened sky, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" Where is God? There is God suffering the full weight of our agony and pain. There, there is God dying on the cross!

But unlike the utter despair and hopelessness Wiesel experienced, the word of the Cross is not doom, despair and defeat. When night comes, the word from the Cross is "Fear not, I am with you, I have overcome the world." The Cross is a human instrument of torture and execution. It is the symbol of the pain, the suffering, the great evil that humanity has endured through the ages. In Jesus, God became one of us. God suffered and died. In Jesus, God took the cup of our suffering and sin and drained it to the dregs. God loved us so much He laid down His life for us.

The Cross is the sign of His love. But the empty Cross is also a symbol of the power of God. In Jesus, God endured our darkest night and turned it into day.

When night comes to you, when suffering breaks into your world, remember, remember Jesus knows your pain. He tasted it long before you were born. He has already walked this path before you. He knows where it ends. He offers no intellectual answer for your suffering. He simply gives you himself. "Here is my hand," He says, "let me lead you through the night."

Perhaps even Elie Wiesel has discovered something of this truth. One reporter asked Wiesel, "I've heard that twenty years ago you hated God. Now you love God. Which is it?" To this Wiesel replied, "Twenty years ago I hated God. Now I love God. But in all that time, I was never without God."

Brothers and sisters, when night comes to you, reach out into the dark and take His nail-scarred hand. Then you can say, with countless others through the ages, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." May it be so. Amen.