

Romans 8:23-27 We who have the firstfruits of the Spirit groan inwardly

To groan inwardly doesn't mean being miserable all the time. It is however to recognise that the Christian life involves struggle, and prayer plays a key role in that struggle. We face challenges from within and without, yet ultimate victory is assured for all those who remain faithful to God's Spirit and to His promises in their lives. Suffering as well as the Spirit bear witness to the glory to be revealed.

Paul often uses an argument called 'light to heavy' in his letters, (also used throughout Scripture,) and there's an example in our passage. The argument goes like this: if A is true, *how much more* is B true. Bear in mind that A has to be true for B to be true. (For examples see Luke 11:13, Romans 5:10, or just do a concordance search of the Bible for the words 'how much more' or 'much more' for many more.) Sometimes the light to heavy argument doesn't use the words *how much more*, but is rather implied, as in Romans 8:22-23. If it is true that the whole of creation is groaning, *not only so* (= how much more) do we who have the firstfruits of the Spirit groan inwardly.

The firstfruits of the harvest were given as an offering to the Lord, for example at the Feast of Pentecost. In Judaism Pentecost is associated with the giving of the law at Sinai, and this in turn has connection with the kingdom of God (Exodus 19:6). Following the resurrection of Jesus the Spirit was poured out in the first disciples at Pentecost and as the gospel was preached 3000 men were saved, a kind of firstfruits of the kingdom.

This was only the inauguration of the kingdom; the consummation is yet to come. As with Mr Trump, he has been elected but is not yet President. We live in this in-between time of the now and not-yet of the kingdom. We are blessed (Ephesians 1:3) and citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20), but this is still only the firstfruits, only a taste of the powers of the age to come, only a down payment and guarantee of our inheritance (Ephesians 1:13-14).

It is also important to note that Israel is described as the *firstfruits of his harvest* (Jeremiah 2:3). The idea here is that Israel is the firstfruits with the view of a much greater harvest among the gentile nations of the world. This is significant because Paul was called as an apostle to the gentiles (Romans 1:5). He is writing primarily to gentiles in Rome. In view of the fact that most of the Jews didn't believe Jesus to be the Messiah, where does this leave the Jews now? Paul is thinking ahead to answer this all important question. He says, concerning the Israelites, actually it is *to them that belong the adoption [as sons], and the glory [of the coming kingdom]* (Romans 9:4). Christian theology often considers Romans 9-11 to be a distraction from Paul's main message. On the contrary, it's only as we get into these chapters will we get to the main thrust of Paul's message to these gentiles, who have come out of an extremely anti-Semitic Roman culture. This will be relevant because anti-Semitism is a live issue today.

But let us return to the theme of 'groaning'. To groan means, "to make a sound which is expressive of severe pain or distress, physical or mental." In what ways do we, who have received the firstfruit of the Spirit, groan inwardly?

1. We groan over lost souls and spiritual blindness of human beings

Jesus wept (groaned) as he looked out over the city of Jerusalem, lamenting their choice to reject God's call to repentance:

Luke 19:42 *Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.*

Paul expressed the same kind of burden he carried in his heart for his own people, the Jews (Romans 9:1-3).

Both Jesus and Paul reflected God's heart for the lost and we also know something of this burden. If we feel it, how much more is God concerned for those who are lost?

2. We groan over Christians who go astray

The Christians in Galatia were battling false teaching, and some were going astray.

Galatians 4:19 *My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.*

Paul expresses his anguish (groaning) and prayers as like birth pains, until their faith in Christ was secure.

3. We groan over human tragedy in this sinful world

There is much human tragedy in this world, which makes us groan inwardly. For example, Jesus wept over the untimely death of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35).

4. We groan in our own experience of suffering

We groan in our own suffering in all different kinds of ways. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus *began to be greatly distressed and troubled* (Mark 14:33).

In all these examples there is a strong connection between our groaning and prayer. In Egypt God's people were under the heavy burden of slavery. The Scripture says, *And God heard their groaning* (Exodus 2:24-25). God heard because their groaning was like a prayer. When God hears it means he is going to do something about it, which He did in the great Exodus to the Promised Land. This is a picture of God gathering together all the collective prayers of His people throughout the ages, and answering them with the coming of the Kingdom of God at the end of this present age.

We often don't know how to pray as we ought, and if you feel like that you are in good company. But the Spirit helps us in our weakness, so really we have no excuse (Romans 8:26-27). By the Spirit we cry *Abba, Father*.

Creation is groaning. If this is so, which it is, how much more should we be groaning and praying to God our heavenly Father, *Thy Kingdom Come!*