

"The sufferings of this present time"

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The words that form our title are taken from Romans 8: 18, and from that point till we reach verse 27 we find ourselves in an atmosphere charged with groaning. That word occurs three times in these verses, which is not surprising, since the contrast is drawn between the "bondage of corruption," which marks the present age, and the "liberty of the glory," which will mark the age to come.

First of all, "the whole creation" groans and travails in pain together. This was the case when the Apostle Paul wrote these words, and it certainly is so now. In these words the first reference is to the lower creation, which has been dragged down by the fall of man. Dominion was given to Adam over all, and by his sin he ruined all. He was, so to speak, the top link, intelligently connected with the Creator, with all other links in the chain dependent on him. When he fell, all creation fell with him; animals became wild and destructive. We may not have ears to hear the groan of the lamb or kid as the leopard pounces upon it, or of the fly as, entangled in the web, it feels the spider's bite; but the groaning is there.

And what about the human race? Well, as we write the newspapers give us a daily record of revolutions, whether accomplished or only attempted, of strifes, disorders and contentions. In the English-speaking world, many would tell us we "never had it so good," yet the daily story is of accidents, robberies, strikes, with an all-too-frequent murder thrown in. Added to this the marvellous discoveries of the scientists, which make the almost total destruction of the human race a possibility, cast a dark shadow upon us. They who know most of what is being developed, are most conscious how dark that shadow is. Yes, creation groans from the lowest intelligence to the highest.

And what about the saints of God? Verse 23 answers that question. We are indwelt by the Spirit of God, and He is Firstfruits of the coming day of glory, yet, while we wait for that day, we groan as well. You notice, it says that we groan "within ourselves:" that is, our groaning is of a quieter, less demonstrative kind. The sincere and earnest and instructed believer feels things deeply; he groans in his spirit and in his prayers, but he is not found amongst the noisy, demonstrating, shouting throng, that expresses in this way its grievances and discontents. But just because this is so, our groans are deeper and more sincere.

The Christian is called upon to suffer in this world, as is so frequently stated in Peter's first epistle. We fear that in our present easygoing circumstances this fact has rather eluded us, and we are apt — especially with the young — to present the Gospel, as an introduction to a life of pleasant goodness, and almost of Mollification, in the company of other converted and like-minded young people.

As presented in Scripture the case is far otherwise. There is abundance of joy in God, coupled with suffering for Christ, and with Christ, as we share in a measure His feelings as He passed through this world of death and doom.

A third groaning is mentioned in the passage we have before us. It is that of the Spirit of God. He has come to earth, indwelling the saints, and therefore is found in the midst of the groaning creation. He is not insensible to this, nor is He to the needs and sorrows of the saints in whom He dwells. Hence He intercedes for us in our infirmities. Though Christ is our Intercessor on high, He takes the place of Intercessor below, and He carries out this ministry, "with groanings which cannot be uttered."

This strikes us as a remarkable expression. When Paul was caught up to the third heaven, he "heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter" (2 Cor. 12: 4). No words were found in any human language which could convey these things; and equally no words can be found to convey the depth of the Spirit's groanings for and in the saints. He, to whom they are uttered, knows what is the mind of the Spirit in these groanings, for the mind of the Spirit is the mind of God the Father, and equally, we may say it is the mind of Christ.

This is illustrated for us in the record of John 11. Twice in that chapter do we read of His groaning. As Mary and others with her wept, "He groaned in the spirit;" and further we read, "Jesus therefore again groaning in Himself," went to the graveside of Lazarus. Here we have the Son of God marked by a groaning in Himself — in His spirit — too deep for words; an exact counterpart, we judge, to the groaning of the Spirit of God, which cannot be uttered.

Let us each ask ourselves, Do I groan, as I pass through this world so sadly blighted by sin? Possessing the indwelling Spirit of God, the answer must surely be, Yes. Only let us honestly confess how slight our groanings are — how little we live in the light of the glory to come and the liberty it will bring, so that we but feebly realize the darkness and the bondage of corruption that fills the earth at present. The more brightly we anticipate the coming "liberty" the more keenly we shall be sensible of the present "bondage" that fills a corrupt earth.

And the more desirous we shall be to stand apart from the bondage helping our fellow-Christians to do the same; and also to win souls for the coming day of "the liberty of the glory of the sons of God."