

# Groaning for God in Society

## 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 17-19; Romans 8:18-27



We live in a society focused on entertainment, pleasure, and comfort. In spite of that focus, our reality speaks more of distress, pain, turmoil, and disappointments. Groaning and grieving would seem normal parts of our lives, though a portion we would rather forget. We all have experiences of distress or disappointment that cause us grief. We like to put a happy face on our troubles, but the groans inside are real. Where is God in our groaning? Is there a point to it all?

Paul's words in Romans remind us of the universality of pain, distress, suffering, and grief. Buddhism would remind us that suffering exists because we have unmet desires and expectations. Paul reminds us that even God has unmet desires and expectations. God groans on our behalf, and on behalf of all creation. God groans, for it is part of the character of love.

Elijah had some positive expectations and desires. He wanted things to be right in Israel. There was nothing wrong with wanting God to be in charge, after all, was there? Elijah knew that things were not going well. He knew that if the king would repent and turn to *Yahweh* things would turn around for the people. God would restore the nation to its rightful place.

The showdown had been on Mount Carmel. It was a while in coming. Elijah had come before Ahab and announced *Yahweh's* word before the king. God would seal up the heavens and there would be no rain until *Yahweh's* further notice. Ba'al, Ahab's "god of fertility" would be unable to countermand *Yahweh*. In due course, there would be recognition that there was but one God in Israel, and it wasn't Ba'al. Delivering his message, Elijah fled and lay down by a stream to die. God sustained him there, then in Ba'al's home court in Zarephath.

After three years of drought, Elijah returned to face off with Ahab and the prophets of Ba'al on Mount Carmel. 450 prophets lacerated themselves and pleaded with Ba'al to send fire to consume their sacrifice—nothing. Elijah had water poured over his altar, prayed, and *Yahweh* sent fire to consume the altar, sacrifice, and all.

It was a great day of victory for *Yahweh* in Israel. The prophets of Ba'al were put to death as the imposters serving a false god. Elijah prayed, and *Yahweh* ended the drought in showers of grace. Even so, Jezebel sought Elijah's life. The great showdown was for naught. Elijah fled again in fear, asking God to take his life. If the king would not even now restore the nation to its covenant with *Yahweh*, all was lost. There was no hope. There was only despair, disappointment, and hopelessness. Elijah had yearned to restore Israel to worshipping *Yahweh*, but it was not to be.

There was nothing left to do. After the face-off on Mount Carmel had come to naught, there was no hope of restoration. The power structures of Israel had categorically denied their allegiance to the God of Israel, accepting an impotent imposter to stand in God's rightful place. There was no more hope to bring Israel back as in the days of David. All was lost, and Elijah was left in despair, groaning over his loss. His vision of restoring Israel was dashed to the ground, wiped away as though it had never existed. Despair settled over Elijah as never before.

At Mount Horeb, God came to Elijah. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Groan! All was lost in the crusade to take Israel back to God as in its day of glory. How can God be so nonchalant in the face of such disaster? Elijah was not crying for himself, he was crying and groaning about restoring the nation to faithful service to *Yahweh* as its only God. He was groaning and grieving over the abandonment of faith and faithfulness in Israel.

Did God not care about Israel’s faithlessness? Did God not care that the power structures of Israel had cast *Yahweh* aside as so much excess baggage that was no longer needed? Did God not care that Elijah’s yearning for the nation’s leader to serve and promote true faith and faithfulness had been shoved aside with yesterday’s refuse?

Elijah recognized God’s word in the still, small voice. It was in the silence that God spoke to him. It was not in the great earthquake shaking the mountain rocks. It was not in the fire, nor in the great tearing wind. God’s word came in the stillness—the overlooked and disregarded presence of the Almighty.

God shared Elijah’s concern for faith. God did not share Elijah’s concern with earthly power structures. God was not put off by Ahab’s status as king, nor the force and power of his position. God was not concerned that the power structures in Israel serve to promote faith, obedience, and submission to the covenant. God was concerned rather with the individuals within the community of Israel who had kept themselves pure. The political powers were but a distraction in God’s eyes. As the prophets of Ba’al on Mount Carmel, they were but a masquerade of helpless imposters. Their power and status were of no significance.

God was not overly concerned with the defeat of Elijah’s aims. God was not undone by the outcome. God was, however, concerned with Elijah’s groaning despair. Through that still, small voice, God came to encourage Elijah to climb out of his despair, placing his hope and confidence in the faithful care and power of God, rather than in the structures of his society. Despite the actions and objectives of the king, God had kept 7000 faithful who had not bowed to power. They had remained pure and constant in their service and devotion.

God had won the standoff, in spite of the official tally and posturing of Jezebel and Ahab. While Elijah groaned for God to be promoted in the social power structures of the day, God was more concerned with being present in the lives of the people. Elijah groaned for God to be worshipped and hailed as rightful King and Lord. God just did not need the king’s help.

As we look around at our own world and society, there are many groaning like Elijah. Many would impose an earthly concept of power and position as the means to accomplish God’s will. God does not need the structures of this world to accomplish his desires. God groans for servants who will be faithful, regardless of social structures. We need not despair. God is greater than the world’s power.

In the midst of Elijah’s despair, God stepped in to comfort and direct him toward hope. God knows our groaning and the desire of our hearts. Though the world around us fall away from faithful service, will we remain faithful? Will we shift the attention of our desire off the things of this world to accept the fullness of God’s desires? All else is as useless as clamoring after non-existent gods.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*