

# Responding to God's Groaning

## John 4:27-35; 5:5-8; 8:3-11; 9:1-7; Romans 8:18-31



Creation groans for wholeness and fulfillment. We yearn for the fulfillment of God's purpose for our lives, even as we refuse to accept God's plan for getting us there. Sin distorts our appreciation of God's will, as well as getting us off the track of God's design. We yearn for God's fulfillment, yet we refuse to bow to life in accord with God's plan.

We are aware of our own groaning. We understand our desires, even if we cannot fulfill them adequately. We understand that deep down we desire intimacy with God, even as we are uncomfortable with the thought. We want God present and visible in the social order of our world, and yet we want life to work by our rules, rather than by God's. We want to live lives of contentment, yet we wrestle with a longing for more and greater comfort. Given all this internal conflict, how can we ever find satisfaction or even comprehend God's groaning on behalf of creation?

Paul paints us a picture of creation in expectant anguish. It is an expectation that yearns for what has not yet come to be. 2000 years after Paul's writing, we still perceive the same anguished yearning for what is still not our reality. God groans on our behalf, offering us the opportunity for intimacy, contentment, and fellowship with one another and with God. God groans for the very creation, just as God yearns to fulfill our lives, bringing us into his family. If God shares an unmet desire with creation, what would that be? How can we find and respond in concert with God's groaning?

In the fullness of time, God entered the world through Jesus Christ. Elijah would have been frustrated by Jesus' refusal to accept political power. Elisha would have been shocked to learn that God desired to share intimacy with all. The disciples struggled with Jesus' proclamation that material blessing was not the means to a contented life. Beyond these elements of teaching the way of living according to the gospel, what was the essence of Jesus' ministry and description of God's deepest groaning?

Taking a look at some of the people John highlights for us in his gospel may give us a glimpse of God's deepest groaning.

In John chapter four, we find Jesus at the well in Samaria. This was a place that no self-respecting Jew would venture if there were any option to avoid it. Jesus felt it necessary to go through Samaria, though he did not rush through the region as was the norm. The shortcut he made saved him no time at all, for he ended up staying several days in Samaria. There he found a woman of questionable character and reputation. Jesus set aside the social norms of the day. He began a conversation with her, asking her for water and engaging her in conversation.

This was one of those women with whom we would not normally associate. Her reputation was beyond questionable. Her way of life was unacceptable. Her marital status went beyond the extremes of the day, even beyond the Hollywood extremes of our own society. Jesus did not ignore her. Jesus did not criticize her. Jesus did not call her to account for her actions. He simply accepted her and led her to know that God was seeking those who would worship in sincerity. This no-account woman became the vehicle Jesus used to share the good news of God's love and acceptance with the whole town. God yearned for so much more than the disciples understood. God wanted fellowship with Samaritans, too.

In John chapter five, we find another whom Jesus touched with grace. This was one who had no hope. This was a man who had remained invalid for thirty-some years. Not only did he have no hope, but he had no one to help release from his infirmity. He had no way out of a desperate condition, yet Jesus came to offer him a way of release.

Jesus' intervention took him outside the norms of appropriate action. The healing went against sacred tradition, for Jesus healed him on the Sabbath. He stood against the traditional regulations of what was and was not appropriate. He placed the yearning to grant grace, mercy, and release above any definitions of propriety, tradition, and acceptable action. God's groaning to grant mercy was greater than any of these. God groaned to present real hope, even against the barriers of tradition.

The woman in John eight was thrown at Jesus' feet as one to make us uncomfortable. It was a test designed to trap Jesus. His response was unexpected. Her lifestyle or actions would make us feel uncomfortable. By all rights, she stood condemned to death. Jesus took an unexpected tactic in dealing with her, however. He declared that all are guilty and likewise condemnable. In granting grace to this woman, he called us to grant grace to all.

God's desire is that none should perish or stand in condemnation. God's will is to turn our lives around and help us to escape the effect of sin in our lives. God's will includes offering grace, mercy, and forgiveness to those we feel justified in condemning.

In John chapter nine, we find the story of a man born blind. This was another story of one without hope. It was the story of Jesus intervening in the life of one who needed a wholly new kind of intervention—something that had never before been accomplished.

In the sight of the people, the man stood condemned. It was assumed that sin was the cause of his blindness. The only question was whether the sin was his own or that of his parents. Jesus cast this kind of speculation completely aside. Rather than delving into the effects of sin and the causes of suffering, disease, and handicaps, Jesus announced grace, mercy, and God's intervention. Jesus brought hope to this situation that utterly lacked hope, blessing, and grace.

Jesus did not act upon the basis of what had been done before. Jesus did not treat the man as had been done before. Jesus did not look upon him as had been done before. Jesus did something new and altogether different. He looked at God's desire to assist this man in overcoming the problems he faced. He brought him new sight, in order that he might be restored, along with the understanding that God did not look upon him in condemnation, but in grace and love.

In all of these stories of lives that Jesus touched, we find God's groaning desire to speak words and actions of grace, love, acceptance, and comfort. These were all individuals who society rejected. They were each one outside the boundaries of those with whom we would seek association. They were all people Jesus went out of his way to touch, heal, cleanse, and restore. Jesus sought out those we would neglect, overlook, or otherwise ignore. God's yearning for all of creation found in Christ Jesus a special impetus to touch the untouchable, pardon the unpardonable, heal the incurable.

God's groaning to fellowship with all of creation is a groan for all of creation. Can we respond to the world around us with this same scope of love, acceptance, and grace?

*—Christopher B. Harbin*