

Victory in Christ

Romans 8:22-27

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Today we celebrate Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the church. Many of us may wonder what the Spirit is doing today. It is one thing to read about what the Spirit of God did in the first century. But is that Spirit alive today, and in what ways is the Spirit manifest among us? Our scripture from the eighth chapter of Romans assures us of the activity of the Spirit in the lives of believers who are 2,000 years removed from the vibrant activities of the second chapter of Acts.

The characters in Raymond Carver's "A Small Good Thing" live "with sighs too deep for words" (v. 26). This short story by one of America's greatest writers is about Scotty, who is hit by a car while walking to school the week of his eighth birthday. His mother, Ann Weiss, has already gone to the local bakery and ordered a special cake for the birthday boy. Everything had seemed right in the world of Ann and Howard Weiss.

Everything changes in the Weiss family's world as Scotty is taken to the hospital and slips deeper and deeper into a coma. Raymond Carver takes the reader into the pain and bondage of the Weiss's' agony, an agony that Paul knew as he wrote to the church in Rome. In Romans 8:22-27, the apostle foretold a future glory but was mindful of the "groaning" and "sighs" that belong to the "children of

God" in the present age. Paul asserts that "the sufferings of this present time" are "not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (8:18). Clearly, Paul knew he could not focus solely on the future glory. It is the present suffering that was on his mind as he wrote to the Christians in Rome—particularly in this brief passage.

Paul confirmed that his readers "have the first fruits of the Spirit"; yet they and we "groan" because we in every age await the "redemption of our bodies." Paul navigated the choppy waters of now and not yet, of the present time and the time when all that plagues the "children of God" will be conquered "through him who loved us."

The apostle acknowledged that "in hope we were saved" (v. 24). We hope for that which is not seen, and "we wait for it with patience" (v. 25). Most of us know firsthand that as followers of Jesus we do not often wait "with patience." In Raymond Carver's poignant story, there is no patience. The baker is anxious for Scotty's birthday cake to be picked up and paid for; the Weiss's are full of anxiety as they hope for what they do not see in their coma-bound young son; and the medical staff impatiently searches for answers. All of Carver's characters are hopeful, but none is patient. So it is with most of us.

Like the apostle Paul, we know that it is no comfort to the faithful to deny present suffering by focusing on the hoped-for future glory. In an ironic way, reflections on the future must be postponed, even as it is the hoped-for future that pulls the Christian through this present time with all its "groaning," pain, "weakness," and "sighs too deep for words." As we care for each other, as we listen, it is not the future but the present that demands our most careful listening. We do not pass over the present; rather, we pass through it as we face with each other the "hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword" that are named in the compelling crescendo of Romans 8.

As we listen and walk with each other through the darkest valleys, we boldly claim in faith, hope, and love that the "Spirit helps us in our weakness" (v. 26). This strong assurance comes to the faithful even when "we do not know how to pray as we ought" (v. 26). When we cannot find words, the Spirit, according to Paul, is one with us in our "sighs." The presence of the Spirit in the time of the present suffering is an ever-present reminder that God is present with the faithful always. Paul teaches that God searches the heart, loves us in Jesus Christ, and knows the mind of the Spirit. In our weakness God is present with us in the one "who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us" (v. 34). **J. Barney Hawkins IV**

We may feel like Scotty's parents, depressed by the thought that they are abandoned by God. Our suffering may also stem from a feeling of powerlessness. Furthermore, we know that in this world all things perish. But we also know that the cross of Jesus Christ stands in the midst of this lonely, forsaken world, and this cross is the sign of hope. Easter proclaims that at the end of our possibilities God creates a new beginning. Therefore we may say to all humans that we are not deserted by God, even if we think that God is not with us. In this situation God comes to us and stands by us and resides with us. God strengthens us by his Holy Spirit and gives us energy to resist the world's principalities and powers.

Eberhard Busch

We pray for each other – we both stand with the faithful in our groans and weakness and proclaim the good news of God's future in Jesus Christ, even in the present age. Raymond Carver's short story ends with Scotty's death and a vision of the redemption and wholeness that will characterize God's future. Scotty's grieving, anger-filled parents find redemption and wholeness, at least for a moment, at the bakery in a late afternoon visit with the baker who had been phoning over and over again, requesting that they pick up and pay for Scotty's birthday cake. The baker

apologizes for the incessant calls and breaks open a rich dark loaf of bread. Ann and Howard partake of the rich dark bread, and the baker tells them that eating is a "small good thing" in a time of groaning, in a time of "sighs too deep for words." The baker listened to Scotty's parents, and they to him.

We are called to sacramental acting and listening when faithful people struggle with living now, as they await a hoped-for future. Hoping for what is not seen, we and listen patiently with courage and proclaim boldly with assurance the good news of Jesus Christ, the one who lived in times like these and who now lives eternally with the God of our future hope. **J. Barney Hawkins IV**

The Holy Spirit is indeed the presence of God among us. In the Holy Spirit, God becomes our intercessor. The Spirit of God is the power by which God "helps us in our weakness" (v. 26). We are still poor creatures who are powerless before the principalities and powers if the Spirit of God does not enter our hearts and lives. When the Spirit enters our lives, we do not become despondent and passive. We find ourselves given courage and hope. The Spirit empowers us so that we do not resign ourselves to what is, but live in hope for God's future. The Spirit gives us "fresh legs" and lifts us up. The Holy Spirit is given to us anew every day. It is the Holy Spirit that reminds us that we have victory in Christ! We pray that God's Spirit will lift us, straighten us up, and empower us. And we may pray this with the certainty that God will answer us and give us His victory. **Eberhard Busch**

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