

CAN YOU HEAR THEIR CRIES

Dear Friend,

Its easy to go along with the crowd and become a part of this world. How can we prevent being conformed to this world and instead be transformed by the renewing of our minds? This transformation that is spoken of in Romans 12:2 takes place when we are shocked by hearing the cries of the suffering. Hearing the groaning of creation as described in Romans 8:22 can awaken us to the injustices of that which is considered normal.

Such an awakening is necessary if we are going to be delivered from that form of religion that denies the real power of a living relationship with Christ. This type of religion that removes all the groaning of creation and the cries of the poor is a religion that is so personalized, it builds walls of indifference around the individual. Only when the Holy Spirit breaks cracks in these walls of isolation and indifference can true conversion take place. Then the cries of those the world considers disposable can truly enter in. This conversion awakens us to another possible world where we hear the same cries of the suffering that God hears, so that we will seek Him for solutions (Matt. 11:15).

The Scriptures are filled with the cries of the suffering and the groaning of creation. It is the voices of the hurting which the Holy Spirit often uses to awaken us to the just and creative solutions provided by God Himself. These sounds of suffering can break through our walls of indifference so that we become the salt and light that Scripture speaks of.

When the poor and elderly cry out, and the special interests of those profiting from the existing system are disturbed, the police are called out to arrest the ones who are disturbing the peace. If the cries are too loud, the one who is crying out could even be put in a psych ward, in jail or locked up in some nursing home. The goal for many is to keep the cries of the hurting out of sight and out of mind. Even in the church many desiring to be blessed don't want someone to stand up in the middle of the worship and cry out, "I am worn out crying for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for God. Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me. I am forced to restore what I did not steal"(Psalm 69:3,4) see also Psalm 102:19, 20).

As believers we need to ask ourselves what causes the prisons, poor, homeless and elderly along with the rest of creation to cry out for help. Instead of asking such and declaring war on poverty, it is all too easy for us to join the status quo and declare war on the impoverished. This is done by excusing our indifference, by finding fault with those who are crying out and blaming them for the problems that they are experiencing.

Jesus knew that hearing the cries of the hurting under the anointing of the Holy Spirit would develop a passion within the soul resulting in direct action. He compared such passion, which would ultimately be an enemy of imperial reality, as salt and light. In Matt 5:13-16 Jesus declared, “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men (and women), that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

Jesus knew that it was critical that believers in the God who heard the groans of creation, did not lose their ability to penetrate like salt, the rottenness of the imperial economic system which thrives on a permanent underclass. Jesus tells us we must let our light shine. He knew that the light of our good deeds in this dark world would cause the corrupted imperial cockroaches to run.

The halls of power don't want to hear the cries of the poor. Imperial economics is designed to keep people drugged so they do not notice the pains they are experiencing. Its policy is to block out the politics of the denied ones and see to it they do not get the health care and other assistance they need. Its religion is to be a drug so that no one will be able to discern its misery or hear the voice of God given direction on how to respond. This is not the Biblical way. In the Bible when a cry goes forth it is not swept aside or silenced. “Then the Lord said, ‘What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground’”(Gen.4:10).

Attentiveness to the cries of the poor and the groans of creation is particularly present among the prophets. An example of this is how Isaiah lets his light shine in Isaiah 5:8-30. Study the seven woes given in these verses and see the divine judgments that come upon those who refuse to respond.

The question is when are the cries we are hearing coming from those who are suffering and when are they noises made by those who would prey on the good will of the truly compassionate. It is this fear of being taken advantage of that causes many to build the walls of indifference around them. Jesus in Matt.10:16 says, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves." When we are as wise as serpents we will see that the con artist or hustler will not be interested in addressing the social causes that may be contributing to the need he is expressing. If he is on a street corner saying he wants money for food, and you doubt that, then give him food like a sandwich, a granola bar, a piece of fruit. Ultimately the key is getting to know personally the one who is coming forth with the cry for help. Once you begin to investigate the cases you will be surprised how many people there are who really are in need of help.

For our own spiritual well being we must be willing to hear the groans of creation and the cries of the suffering. Proverbs 21:13 says, "If a man (that includes a woman also) shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered." This cry is a declaration that things are not the way they should be. "They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed"(Amos 2:6,7). In the Scriptures the cries of the needy are not ignored. In Amos 5:14 we are told, "Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord almighty will be with you, just as He says He is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts."

When one hears and responds to the cries of the needy he or she will often encounter opposition. Even as I write this a man and his sons have just come into our building asking if they can feed the hungry inside, because as they tried to do so outside in the park they were threatened with arrest by the police. It is not acceptable to the status quo to admit there are hungry people everywhere.

Exodus 22:25 declares, "If you lend money to one of My people among you who is needy, do not belike a money lender, charge him no interest," Not only is this Biblical principal ignored but payday loan centers charge the needy who take a short term loan exorbitant rates of interest. In fact the state not only lets those money grabbers exist virtually unregulated, they allow the utility companies to use them to collect the payment of utility bills. The other day I had a needy woman in desperation share with me how she was now enslaved to one of these payday loan centers. She is unable to ever catch up with her payments due to the high rate of interest. "In his annoyance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught

in the schemes he devises. He boasts of the cravings of his heart; he blesses the greedy and reviles the Lord in his pride. The wicked does not seek Him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God. His ways are always prosperous; he is haughty and your laws are far from him; he sneers at all his enemies. He says to himself, 'Nothing will shake me; I'll always be happy and never have trouble'" (Ps.10:1-7). The poor and homeless can feel totally alone in the midst of the arrogance and oppression of the rich and powerful. But as the Psalmist declares, "You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more"(Psalm 10:17, 18 and see also Matt 5:4.)

Injustice also produces damage to the earth that comes forth as mourning. Hosea 4:1-3 explains this when it declares, "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away." The mourning of the land and the cries of the poor have a place of prominence in the Scriptures. In spite of those who desire to only blessed, the reality of the Biblical landscape includes the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation. What happens when such cries are excluded as an expression of faith? When those who claim to be believers don't care the poor are neglected and those who are hurting are relegated to the prisons, psychiatric hospitals, alleys, old age facilities, and substandard housing. In our society the human cries for justice and groans of creation are dismissed in the name of economic development.

We feel uncomfortable when we must face the fact that things are not right and injustice is taking place. We don't like to think that the things we refer to as blessings often come at the expense of great suffering to others. The lack of lament in the worship in church eliminates the questions of justice. As a result issues of structural violence get accepted and legitimized. God's response is, "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from your; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong, learn to do right, seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the cause of the widow"(Is. 1:15-18).

When we respond to the cries of the suffering and the groaning of creation we open ourselves up so the Holy Spirit can bring forth transformation, renewal and restoration. The cries of human and ecological suffering are both a sign of judgment and hope. They call the Body of Christ to question the structures of

power until they seek God for answers and then by His grace step out in faith to bring about these solutions.

All of creation along with those in need are groaning for the redemption of humanity. As a part of the redeemed may we get quiet before God until we not only recognize the needs around us but also seek Him for creative solutions in response to their cries that are going forth. As we open our hearts and minds to the leading of the Holy Spirit in this culture of death and the cries coming forth from it, we will indeed see the Lord do a mighty work through us.

Yours in Christ,

Larry Rice