

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Prayer Is a Struggle**

Romans 8:18-27

On recent Sundays, our worship gatherings have focused on the gift and work of the Holy Spirit, God's powerful presence among us in our life as his people. We've reflected on how the Spirit creates and cultivates togetherness, how the Spirit guides us in our daily ministry and witness, how the Spirit teaches us and enables us to hear Jesus speaking into our lives, individually and together. In today's text from Romans, we get another perspective on the work of the Spirit as Paul speaks about the Spirit dwelling in us.

According to Paul, when you have the Spirit in you, you experience a sense of security and assurance that comes from being a child of God, adopted by a loving Father through the work of the Son. You're part of God's people, a member of God's family. In the depths of your heart, there's a gladness about living in this child/parent relationship with God and growing into greater maturity in Christ, along with your siblings in the family of God.

In the verses leading up to today's text, Paul articulates this sense of assurance and gladness when he tells the believers in Rome, "You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (8:15-16). This confidence about God's fatherly mercy and love, and about being included in God's people, manifests itself in many aspects of the Christian life, including the way that we pray.

There's a story about a minister who was fond of saying profound and lengthy prayers. He frequently used words that people didn't know. As this went on week after week, it became very frustrating and distressing for the people in his congregation. Finally, a woman in the choir decided to take matters into her own hands. One Sunday, as the minister was waxing eloquent and verbose, she reached across the wall separating the choir from the pulpit, grabbed hold of the tail of the minister's frock, gave it a yank, and whispered, "Just call him Father, and ask him for something."<sup>1</sup>

Though that's oversimplifying things a bit, there's some truth in that woman's advice. As Christians, we do relate to a God who has related to us with parental love and forgiveness, and who wants us to communicate with him as sons and daughters, dependent on his goodness, provision, and care. But that doesn't mean that prayer is mainly a matter of just asking God to give us things. The *New Yorker* magazine once showed a cartoon that depicted a child carrying his teddy bear up the staircase. Turning to address his parents who are seated in the living room, he says, "I'm going to bed now to say my prayers. Anybody want anything?"<sup>2</sup>

How different this sounds from the kind of agonizing, struggling prayer that Paul talks about in today's Scripture passage. "We do not know what to pray for," says Paul, "but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express" (v. 26b). This kind of praying certainly has a different tone and feel from the kind of praying in which we know what to call God, what our status is before him, and how to relate to him. And Paul has

already indicated that the Spirit enables this kind of confident calling upon the Father. But now here's Paul saying that the Spirit is also there enabling us and helping us when we're deeply unsure about what to say or how to say it.

So is Paul contradicting himself? Is he trying to hold together two different understandings of prayer that really can't coexist? No, what Paul is describing isn't a contradiction, but rather a tension. A tension created by the fact that believers live in between the already and the not yet of God's redeeming work in Christ.

Recall that Paul opens this morning's passage with a bold affirmation: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (v. 18). Notice how Paul helps us see where we are in God's great plan of salvation. We live in between God's victory over sin and death through the cross/resurrection, and the culmination of God's triumph when Christ comes again. During this interim period, we still experience suffering, temptation, decay, death, and all the other things that are part of living in a world that's not yet fully redeemed. We still struggle with the effects of sin and the consequences of our rebellion against our Creator. But compared to what lies ahead for those who are in Christ, our present sufferings fade in significance. In fact, says Paul, our present afflictions are not even worth comparing to what God has promised to us when we, and all creation, are finally and fully liberated from "bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (v. 21).

But for now, the life of the age to come is still in its birth pangs. Now at first, it may seem a little out of place that here on Father's Day, we're leaning on a mother metaphor to understand our hope. But that's where our text takes us. Paul draws upon the image of a woman giving birth. As one commentator has put it, "This is hope as a woman in labor hopes: breathing through the pain, holding tight to a companion, looking ahead to what cannot yet be seen, trusting that a time will come when this pain is but a memory."<sup>3</sup>

So we groan. In fact, says Paul, the whole creation groans. Every square inch of God's world feels the effects of humankind's disobedience, and yearns for liberation from the havoc and corruption of sin. What's more, the Spirit joins in this groaning. The Spirit, who dwells in God's people and makes God's love and presence real to us, creates and participates in our yearning for the fullness of salvation. Indeed, because of the Spirit, we already have a foretaste of what God has planned for those "who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (8:28). That's why we groan with expectancy and hope. And "if we hope for what we do not yet have," says Paul, "we wait for it patiently" (v. 25).

But we don't wait alone. In the midst of our not yet fully redeemed condition, the Holy Spirit helps us. And this is the point where Paul brings in the subject of prayer. During this interim period, everything, including prayer—our relationship with God at the level of basic communication—is affected by the legacy of human rebellion and sin. "We do not know what we ought to pray for," says Paul (v. 26).

But the Spirit comes alongside us to help. The weight of being unable to pray as we ought is more than any of us can bear. So the very Spirit of God himself gets up under this burden with us and helps shoulder the weight of our load.

When it comes to prayer, we sometimes associate the presence of the Spirit with confidence and fluency of speech. We think that if someone has the Spirit in them, they'll have no trouble finding the words to say. They'll pray with boldness and assurance. Words of praise, thanks, confession, intercession, and petition will just well up in them and overflow

in eloquent expressions of worship, whether they're praying privately or in public. In other words, when the Spirit is present, prayer words will come naturally and in abundance.

Of course this can also open the door to long-winded praying. The great preacher Charles Spurgeon once wrote about the protracted prayers of a good and godly man he knew. Spurgeon said:

In some places where there are good, praying people, the prayer-meetings are badly attended, because certain long-winded brethren spoil them. I know a church which is endowed with an excellent deacon, a real godly man, but he will pray without ceasing at every meeting, and I fear he will pray the prayer-meeting down to nothing unless he is soon taken home. The other night, when he had talked for [a] full twenty minutes, he intimated, both to Heaven and earth, that all he had said was merely a preface, a drawing near as he called it, and that he was then going to begin. None of his friends were pleased to receive that information, for they had begun to cherish the hope that he would soon have done.

Spurgeon went on to note his sympathy with the Salvation Army's practice of striking up a tune when someone became too long and prosy.<sup>4</sup>

There's a difference between just being long-winded and genuinely being in the heights of spiritual rapture. In his letters, Paul points to times when he himself had experiences of great spiritual fluency and boldness of prayer. But as he indicates in today's text, a significant portion of his prayer life, and the prayer life of most believers, is spent struggling to find the words to say. I'm not sure what I should say to God, or what God is saying to me. I'm not sure what to ask God for, or what God is asking from me. I'm in such pain that I can't even focus on the act of praying. I'm so discouraged and depressed that I don't even feel like I have any words to pray. I've been praying about this for so long that maybe I've said everything I can say. My brain just isn't as sharp and focused as it use to be, and I can't concentrate when I'm praying. My mind just leaves God behind and wanders off into other subjects. All in all, it feels like my prayers are a futile exercise in fumbling and confusion.

The good news is that the God to whom we pray searches our hearts and knows our minds. He knows our condition and our needs. This God who is for us doesn't hold it against us when we struggle to communicate with him. Timothy Jones tells about a vacation with his parents in France when he was in high school. He says:

I had just completed two years of French, hardly enough to make me fluent. Still, there we were, tourists wanting to make the most of our time. So when we needed a bathroom, when we wanted to find a café, or when I lost my eyeglasses on the steps of the L'Eglise du Sacré-Cœur, I falteringly used my butchered French. I was trying—to the politely suppressed laughter of others—to speak the language. But I remember more than the townspeople's bemusement. I remember how they warmly received my efforts. They strained to hear past my fractured sentences. They honored me by responding.

Is God any less generous?

He hears all that arises from us—the words of our mouth, the longings of our hearts, the thoughts of our minds, the intentions of our wills. Regret, grief, thanksgiving, hope—God hears our emotions, not just our grammar. Because of his grace, not our eloquence, we can pray. Even if we stammer.<sup>5</sup>

Remember that your praying is more than just a spiritual discipline, an act of worship, or an expression of personal devotion to the Lord. While it certainly is all these things, it's also a way of participating in the struggle of God's world as it awaits full redemption. Prayer is a

way of engaging hurting humankind. We can see that in our personal lives, our households, our neighborhoods, our communities, our state, our nation, our world, things are not right. But out of his mercy and his reconciling love, God has acted in Christ to put things right, and we have the Spirit as the down payment of what's to come. So we long for the full arrival of God's reign. We wait for it. We work for it. We pray for it, which means that until Christ comes and the will of God is done on earth as it is in heaven, praying will always be an act of faithful struggle.

Pastor Sinclair Ferguson says that when he was a little boy he would travel in the summer to visit his mother's relatives on the northern coast of Scotland:

My mother had a cousin who had been grievously ill when he was just recently married at the age of 21, and he had become absolutely paralyzed. There was only one thing he could do with his body: he could move his head a bit, and if they put a cup of tea in his hand he could move the tea, and he could sip the tea. He used to sit in a wheelchair and from time to time he would make guttural noises: "Uuuuh . . . Uuuuh . . . Uuuuh." And after I got over the fright, the fear of the unknown, and the strange, I began to notice that every time these groans came from him, the woman he had married when he was 21 would appear by some, it seemed, mystical gift of interpretation, and give him exactly what he wanted.<sup>6</sup>

She knew what his groans meant. She knew what he wanted and needed. Whatever your struggles to pray, you can have assurance that God hears and comprehends the groans of his children. And not just the groans of his children, but the groans of his own Spirit, dwelling in his children. Paul says, "The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will" (vv. 26b-27).

So the Spirit communicates with God on our behalf. The Spirit says to God what we ourselves struggle to say to God. The Spirit takes our efforts to pray—our groans, our emotions, our longings, our broken words—and brings them to the Father in such a way that they're gathered up and aligned with the will of God. This means that our confidence isn't in our flawed prayers, but in the knowledge that the Father, and the Spirit who dwells in us, are in sync with one another in a way that redeems our imperfect prayers, and shapes our prayers so that they fit with and are useful toward what God wants for our lives and for the world.

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<sup>1</sup> "How Not to Pray." Green Baggins website. September 26, 2006. Accessed June 7, 2017 <<https://greenbaggins.wordpress.com/2006/09/26/how-not-to-pray/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Gary W. Klingsporn, "The Spirit Helps Us." A sermon preached at First Congregational Church in Nantucket, Massachusetts on May 19, 2013. Accessed June 7, 2017. <[http://www.nantucketfcc.org/files/2013\\_sermons/05\\_19\\_13thespirithelpsus.pdf](http://www.nantucketfcc.org/files/2013_sermons/05_19_13thespirithelpsus.pdf)>.

<sup>3</sup> Audrey West. Commentary on Romans 8:22-27. Working Preacher. May 27, 2012. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/day-of-pentecost-2/commentary-on-romans-822-27> (June 14, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Chase A. Thompson, "Charles Spurgeon on Prayer: Part 2, The Catastrophe of Long-Winded Praying." March 7, 2017. Accessed June 8, 2017 < <http://chaseathompson.com/2017/03/07/charles-spurgeon-prayer-part-2-catastrophe-long-winded-praying/>>.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Jones, *The Art of Prayer* (Colorado Springs, WaterBrook, 2005). Paraphrased in the November 4 entry of Men of Integrity (November/December 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, in his sermon, "The Mystery of the Third Groaning."