

**Sermon for Sunday, May 23, 2010**  
**Clay Smith**

**PRAYER AND THE SPIRIT**  
**Romans 8: 26-27**

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day in which we celebrate the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the church, anointing God's people with the promised indwelling power of God. He is in us to testify within us that we belong to our Father, to guide us. He has gifted us. This was promised many places in the bible: Joel, Jeremiah and others.

Our passage comes on the heels of Paul teaching us that creation groans as it waits for redemption. We are God's adopted Sons and daughters, deeply loved and cherished by our Father. Since that is true, how do we communicate with Him in the midst of a broken world? The Spirit has been poured out. How does he affect our prayer life?

**Romans 8:26** In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

<sup>27</sup> 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.

Have you ever spent time in the waiting room? It can be unnerving, can't it?

There are things in this life that make us groan, that the only adequate response is a low guttural groan. We groan because there doesn't seem to be anything else we can do.

A few years ago, some of you are close enough to Missy and me to have lived with us through one of the most difficult things of our life together. As you know, we are an adoptive family. The Lord had blessed us with Emma Kathryn, but we wanted to share love more broadly, so we began to think about adopting again.

A friend put us in touch with a dear unmarried woman who had just gotten pregnant and was unsure what to do about it. Missy and I talked with her on the phone a number of times, the first of which when she was a little over 6 weeks pregnant.

After a short while, she told Missy and me she wanted to place her child with an adoptive family and she wanted us to be her baby's parents. Missy and I were elated and thrilled.

So we began to act like parents of this child. The ultrasounds that we paid for went up on our fridge. Our baby girl, as we came to find out, was put on our fridge. Just as if Missy was pregnant. We paid for all the doctor bills. We called and talked about the baby's development...and hers.

But in the back of our minds was an amazing and frightening statistic. Over sixty percent of birthmothers change their mind and keep their children after agreeing to place them with an adoptive family. I'm not knocking it. In many cases it is a very good thing for these children to be raised by their biological parent. But for us, who had given our hearts to this little girl that we had named, that statistic haunted us. Are we in the sixty percent of parents who go home from the hospital empty handed?

We were in the waiting room for seven and a half long months, waiting to see what she would do. Hoping all the while, groaning all the while, praying and hoping some more that this little girl we named Lucy Grace would come home with us.

Lucy was born and Missy and I went down to another state to meet our baby girl and care for her in the hospital until the doctor would send us home. Ooing and ahing over her, smiling at her, feeding her, and

changing her. We were taking care of our little Lucy. She was our girl. Yet, we waited...what happens if the birth mom changes her mind? No, it couldn't happen to us.

The day came for release from the hospital. We went down to her room, glad to see her. A bit later, we started collecting Lucy's things to bring her home. Packing her little outfits, many of them given to us by you, this congregation. We fed Lucy again, burped her, changed her. We took her back to the nursery to get the final belongings together. We would be leaving in just over an hour to come home.

Then the phone rang. It was our attorney. He said he had some bad news. My heart - well, I can't describe the devastation. The birth mom had just called him to tell him she couldn't do it, couldn't go through with the adoption. She wanted to raise Lucy Grace herself.

Missy and I collapsed into one another's arms, uncontrollably crying. The kind of crying where you just can't stop. Why? Because our baby was not coming home with us. All this waiting for our child and we felt like our baby had died. We held her in our arms and she would never come to our home, to the nursery decorated just for her at our house.

What kept us going? We groaned, as the passage says, and cried. And we sought to hold onto hope. Hope that although this love would never be brought to fruition, the Lord could do something to heal us. Perhaps He would bring us another child someday. But before He could heal us, He would have to restore hope in our hearts. Hope was good...but it couldn't make the desperation go away in our souls. We were in the waiting room, God's waiting room, feeling helpless, hopeless, shattered of heart, unable to know what or how to pray.

One of the most helpful things in the waiting room is the company of a friend. Someone to hold our hand, to pray with us, to distract us. Or just sit beside us. Another trusted person is invaluable in the waiting room.

We had friends in this metaphorical waiting room with us. Some cried with us. Some just sat with us. Some held our hands. Some did normal life with us. But their presence brought us a measure of healing. Another person can do that, you know. Their presence put skin on our hope.

The context of our passage is Hope in the midst of suffering. This creation, Paul says, is in bondage of decay and it and we are waiting for redemption. In our waiting, sometimes all we can do is groan; we groan as we wait for our Father to complete His work and bring healing to our lives. But now we wait in hope, He says. The hope carries us forward, even saves us, Paul says. But we have something more. Someone puts skin on our hope.

Who is it that really does it? The Holy Spirit. Did you hear it? Verse 26: Likewise, In the same way, (similar to hope helping us) The Spirit helps us in our weakness. Just like the best of friends. The Holy Spirit is with us in our weakness, not our strength, groaning for us. He is present within us to convince us of who we are as children of God, reminding us that no matter what life looks like on the surface circumstances, we have a Father who loves us. He is with us in our weakness.

The posture of waiting, groaning, is weakness. We don't like this very much. We like to be strong, competent and fully in command of our lives. This weakness challenges our chief idol in our culture: personal autonomy and a right to comfort and happiness. As Americans we worship our autonomy, no one telling us what we have to do, no one telling us we CAN'T do something. The truth is that we are weak and need someone to do something for us that we can't do for ourselves.

Friends we are weak, and yet not alone! The Holy Spirit comes to us in this position of weakness and waiting. In the time of waiting, we pray, we communicate with God. The Holy Spirit groans, communicates with the Father when we can't. We are enabled to pray, to get before the face of God while we wait.

Our passage has three simple reasons as to why we pray, we groan before God.

## **Pray, because the Spirit teaches our hearts what to pray for.**

Romans 8:26: In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

We may not even know what to pray for in the waiting room. But the Spirit does and he intercedes for us. Why do we not know what to pray?

### **Don't Know How to Pray?**

Some folks may say they don't want to pray because they don't know how. They feel embarrassed. But if you are sick and go to doctor, however feeble you are, you can seek out the reasons for your visit. Why is prayer so much more difficult?

We don't have to be so concerned about the structure of our prayers even if we're not sure how to put it all together. Remember, you are a child of God. How do children talk to us? They ramble in their conversations saying whatever is on their mind! We know what they think about and are concerned about because they tell us. <sup>1</sup>

Why can't our prayers be the same way? Not that we aren't disciplined and have some order to our prayer. Not at all. But if order is getting in the way of talking to your Father, just tell him what is on your heart. Don't worry so much about getting prayer into outline form. Just talk to him...to your Father. And the Holy Spirit takes your prayers and perfects them according to God's will. Pray!

### **We Feel Beaten up by the World**

We may be groaning over the pain we must endure in this world that groans for the day of redemption. It may be over woundedness from your past or things just too painful for you to even think about talking to God about it.

What a blessing to know that the Spirit prays for us in those moments. We can pray the weakest prayer, even a wordless prayer of a long groan or sigh. Our Father knows what that means. But we have freedom to come to him and just sit, or sigh, or scream...because he is our Father.

### **We Feel so Beaten Up by our Sin!**

Shame is powerful. And sometimes feeling shame about our sin leads us to mistakenly believe we can't talk to our Father. He's like a stern Father who expects you to dress for dinner, and unless you are perfectly groomed, you can't share fellowship with him. NOT TRUE! Did you hear verse 26?

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. Our Father knows all about our sin. In fact in Revelation 12, we read about Satan, the accuser of you and me, being cast down from his seat to accuse us. It says that salvation and power have come because the accuser has been thrown down. And they (that is you and me, the rightly dirty with our sin) have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb. Our Father knows all about our sin. In fact, Satan tells Him about it all the time, day and night, it says here.

But did you hear the good news? We don't stand in his presence because of making up for the bad stuff but because of the blood of the Lamb. When you feel beaten up by your sin, beat back. Remember your accusation is silenced because you are covered in the blood of the Lamb, Jesus sacrificed for you! So pray! No accusation of your conscience should silence your voice if you are trusting in Christ.

Sometimes we think, "If I were stronger as a Christian, I'd pray more fervently." It is true that the stronger we grow in our faith, the more likely we are to pray. But not because we sense how strong we are. When we grow in faith, we pray more because we understand and get exactly how WEAK we are. The stronger we grow in our faith, the less we need to pretend we are strong and hide our weakness from self or others. Weakness is the way we receive God's grace and from this text, the presence of the Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Miller, *A Praying Life*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2009), p. 40.

**This is Paul's point here: Awareness of weakness is proportional to a life of prayer!** Awareness of our weakness and sin forces us to our knees to cry out for help.

You see, the gospel only works in our lives when we realize and admit that we don't have it all together. When we realize and embrace that we are weak. It is the same way with prayer. The Spirit of God takes weak people and turns our cries of weakness into confessions of his strength and power!

### **Prioritize Our Kingdom rather than God's Kingdom**

I'm to be honest about my heart for a moment and ask you to see you own heart in light of mine that is often so cold and prayerless for a different reason. Sometimes we don't pray what we ought because our hearts aren't captured by what our Father's heart is.

We devote so much of our prayer initiative around what causes us to groan, and give precious little thought beyond me and my world to what makes our Father's heart groan: the mission of God in this world, the pursuit of sinners and transforming lives.

The Holy Spirit's role throughout the Bible is to shine a light on the plan of the Father and accomplishment of Jesus. If we ask the Spirit to groan for us, are our prayers and heart given to pray for the lost?. As one of the pastors of this flock, we confess as a people, we have not prayed enough for you. But as we see our hearts before God, we will ask Him to teach us to care enough about you, to love you enough to pray for you. Not to treat you as a project for conversion, but a person to love that God loves. We are called on and enabled to love with the same love we've received from Him.

The mission of God should occupy more of our prayers! That God would do things in us and through us to change the city. But we don't pray about those things, truth be told, because we don't care about those things as much as we care about our things. And we aren't going to have our loves oriented properly until we sit with our Father in prayer and in His word and ask Him to shape our hearts to love what He loves, until we have our hearts impressed what He cares about. So that as we sit face to face with the Lord Jesus, the gospel he died for will impact our hearts.

We won't know what to pray if we fail to ask Him to help us love what he loves.

### **Pray, because prayer reaches God's heart.**

Romans 8:27 - 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.

Did you hear that? The Holy Spirit intercedes, makes our voice hearable, to the Father in accordance with the will of God. What is that will of God? The next verse, verse 28 says, "All things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose being conformed to the image of his Son." So the Holy Spirit, the indwelling God in you and me, searches our hearts, and takes what he finds, then massages it and speaks it to the Father, all in accordance with His will.

Did you hear what I just said? The Holy Spirit pleads with your Father to order this world for your eternal good.<sup>2</sup> Your prayers, your groaning, your praises, are all communicated to the Father through the voice of the Holy Spirit.

I remember doing something as a child that would never be allowed today: driving the car. I recall sitting in dad's lap, hands on wheel. I think I'm steering, but who really is? Dad's hands are there too, really guiding car, making it go where he wants it, but using my hands on the wheel to direct it.

The Holy Spirit does this in our prayers. He directs us into the will of God. My heart is a mixed up mess, selfish, unable to know what to do, self absorbed, and yet, the Holy Spirit makes my prayer precious to my Father's heart, and he directs and perfects my desires to His will.

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<sup>2</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Praying Backwards*.

And as he massages our prayer before our Father, he is at the same time, through his inhabiting power within our hearts, massaging our hearts to desire God's will. So pray! As we pray in this waiting room, the Spirit intercedes, makes hearable our needs before our Father, and he shapes our hearts to desire the Father's will.

We have comfort to realize that even if we don't feel all that important or powerful, that our Father hears our prayers because it is through the Holy Spirit He hears them. It is with the force and fervor of the Spirit of God that our concerns reach our Father's heart. Whose voice is unimportant when the Spirit of God inhabits it?

The poor person who feels unacknowledged by anyone else has the mighty Spirit of God who controls the hearts of kings and ensures the heart of your prayer reaches the heart of your Father. The house bound elderly man has an audience in front of the King of Kings, the one who has the power to speak the universe into existence. You, housewife, feeling trapped in kidland and yet desperate and fearful about the future of your child, your heart is translated by the Holy Spirit to your Father. The resources of heaven are yours! There are no unimportant pray-ers because the ones who pray are animated by the Holy Spirit.

**Pray, because God is committed to our glory, that is His glory at work through us!**

Back to verse 27 and into the next few verses: The Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. And his purpose (verse 28) is to conform us to the image of Christ.

He is interceding for us according to the will of God, which we honestly don't know in detail. Would God really be God, an all wise God, if we knew all the time what He should do and He simply responded to our wisdom? Of course not; that's backwards. Rather, the Spirit prays for us in weakness and in our lack of ability to understand what will move us along toward glory. Do you note the movement in the passage? From groaning and suffering, to prayer, to all things working for our good, to conformity to be like Christ, to glorification. And often we don't want or can't know how to pray what will move us from suffering to glory.

In Mark 4, Jesus led his disciples to something they would never pray for on their own: having their false faith revealed so that he can call them to a deeper relationship and trust and demonstrate his power! Remember, it was after a day of teaching and the disciples at night got into a boat to cross the lake. A storm came up, beating against the side of the boat. You can almost hear the crashing of these waves onto the side of a wooden boat.

The disciples, probably angry, shouted the question: "Don't you care?" This was not just a question. Imagine how it would have been for them. Fear, terror, darkness and a boat about to capsize.

Jesus set the whole thing up. Remember whose idea it was. Mark says it was Jesus' idea to go across, inviting them innocently; "let's cross over to the other side" or how we may hear him say, "Fellas, let's go on a little journey." But the journey wasn't about the lake and storm, the journey was about their souls! and their hearts. He revealed their need of him to them. all through this experience.

Do you think they would pray for this? NO. But it needed to happen.

Our Father does the same loving thing with us. He searches our hearts, not to zap us, but so that He can bring us to glory. So that He can work the things we trust for security in the depth of our hearts onto the surface of our lives. When we see them and turn from them, we are moving along this path from suffering to glory!

We often find in life that when God does not answer a prayer, He is up to something. Many, many times it is that He has something in me He is shining a light on, something He seeks to expose, some thing I'm giving my heart to that I think might save me when I doubt Jesus.

We are in an intense loving and personal relationship with this God. We are sons and daughters of this Father. And He wants to move in and shape us as much as He wants to hear from us in prayer. It is all part of the same program. He sent His only Son to live and die for our sins so that we would be brought toward glory!

The truth is, friends, that God's delay in answering prayer can feel like He doesn't care. But it often simply reveals our heart that refuses to wait on Him in this waiting room. And when I refuse to wait on God, it is often because I feel like salvation has to come from me.<sup>3</sup> If He can't get it done in my timeframe, I have to take matters into my own hands.

So we pray calling out for His aid to bring to completion His work that is going on within us. What seemingly inscrutable thing is your Father doing in you, His child, that is calling for you to call out to Him in a lack of understanding and weakness?

Friends, I ask you this morning to get before your Father and ask a question. What waiting room are you in? What thing is going on in your life over which you feel helpless and anxious? And feeling that weakness, pray! Pray because the Spirit will teach you what to pray for. Pray because through the Spirit, your prayer reaches God's heart of grace and love for you. And pray because your Father is committed to your glory. He is fitting you to be with Him for eternity.

In weakness, you have an intercessor who always lives to pray for you and demonstrate the love of God for you, His child.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Miller, *A Praying Life*, p. 255.