



PRAYER

and the *Holy Spirit*

The Holy Spirit is “the spirit of grace and supplications” (Zechariah 12:10). He has been sent forth into the hearts of God’s people “crying, Abba, Father” (Galatians 4:6). Consequently, any treatment of the subject of the believer’s prayer life must take into consideration the role of the Holy Spirit in this blessed activity.

Prayer must continue always, even in the most adverse circumstances. This is clear from Romans 8:26: “Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.” This verse is set in the context of suffering. It informs us that in the midst of suffering “we ought” to pray, which means that it is necessary to pray.

But prayer in the midst of adversity is not easy. Thus, it is imperative that provision be made for the believer to pray during the most difficult times. It is from that perspective that this verse is written. The verse contains the gentle reminder that we ought to pray in trying circumstances, but it goes on to address the particular infirmity with which the believer often struggles when praying in the midst of trial: “We know not what we should pray for.” It seems impossible to pray because

of this infirmity—not knowing that for which we should pray.

The text proceeds to present the child of God with great encouragement. The One who knows all the infirmities of the believer, knows about this one also, and so has made provision for the saint struggling in prayer. The text reminds us of three ways in which the Spirit makes provision for the believer pursuing a life of prayer, especially in difficult times.

First, the Spirit gives assistance in prayer. Note the word *helpeth*. In the original it is comprised of three ideas signifying “to take hold with,” “at the side,” and “for assistance.” The word essentially denotes sharing in, or helping with, a burden—someone aiding another by helping to carry the weight laid on him. Hence, the picture is of the believer carrying a heavy burden, but the Spirit comes to help.

This word is used only twice in the New Testament, here and in Luke 10:40, where a clear picture of the meaning of the word is given: Martha pleads that Christ would direct Mary to come and give a helping hand, to share the burden with her. Christians carry heavy burdens—one result of which is the infirmity of not knowing how to pray aright. But the Spirit intervenes and gives assistance in prayer.

It must be noted that the Spirit *helps* us. He does not take the whole load. Paul is not teaching the practice of passivity, that the believer ceases to pray and the Spirit does all. The sense is that the Spirit works with the believer. The believer labours in prayer with the assistance of the Spirit. Scripture teaches the partnership of the Spirit with the believer in ministry. The Spirit was a witness to the gospel, corroborating the preaching of the apostles (Acts 5:32), and this is still the case: The truth is preached by the servant of God, and the Spirit bears witness to its authenticity by applying it with power to hearts. The same is true regarding prayer: The Spirit works in partnership with the believer (Jude 20).

Second, the Spirit is our advocate in prayer. The Holy Spirit is said to make intercession for us. He is an advocate for the saints, as we see from John 14: 16–17, where the title *Comforter* also means “advocate.” It must be noted that the Spirit is not an advocate in a redemptive sense as Christ is. Christ alone is the advocate at the throne, so the Spirit’s intercession is not to be understood in that sense. Moreover, Romans 8:27 makes it clear that the intercession of the Spirit takes place in the hearts of believers, while the high priestly intercession of Christ occurs in heaven (verse 34).

What is this advocacy of the Spirit? Consider the word *intercession*. The original signifies the idea of coming upon someone in trouble and acting on that person’s behalf. But note that an advocate’s help is two-fold. He not only pleads on behalf of his client, he also tells the client what to say. Christ is the advocate who pleads for us; but the Spirit is the advocate who instructs us as to how we should plead ourselves. When we do not know what to pray in the time of trial, we have the great promise that the Spirit will teach us. He is the Spirit of supplication (Zechariah 12:10). He therefore produces prayer, guiding us as to what to say, when we know not what to plead.

Finally, the Spirit expresses our agony in prayer. He makes intercession “with groanings that cannot be uttered.” The final part of this clause literally means “without words”—wordless groaning. It is groaning that is not given any expression in words. Sometimes believers are in such perplexity that there is merely wordless groaning. Mark 7:34 and 8:12 depict Christ Himself groaning. In Mark 7:34, before Christ healed the man, He looked up to heaven, a posture associated with prayer (cf. Mark 6:41; John 17: 1). But it is said that when Christ looked up to heaven, “He sighed.” The original word is

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the verb from which is derived the noun in Romans 8:26.

So the Spirit comes upon us in our trouble and provokes even the wordless groan. Now it is not the Spirit who groans, for groaning belongs to a state of humiliation. Just as in Galatians 4:6 it is not the Spirit who cries, for He is not the Son of the Father, but as Romans 8:15 makes clear, it is the saints who cry, “Abba.” And it is the saints then who agonise with the wordless groanings as prompted by the Spirit.

So words are not always necessary in prayer and especially in the case of private prayer (cf. 1 Samuel 1:13; Psalm 77:4; Isaiah 38:14). When the repentant harlot was at Jesus’ feet, she wept (Luke 7:38). Peter also, when broken over his denial of the Lord, went out and “wept bitterly.” His bitter weeping had all the ingredients of what might be expressed by the words of a penitent. These were tears of confession, contrition, and remorse. And no doubt they were recognised as such in heaven, “For the Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping” (Psalm 6:8).

What a sweet duty prayer becomes when we are assisted in it by the ministry of the Holy Spirit Himself. How gracious is our God, who has promised to meet our every need in answer to prayer and who has even provided all we require in order to be able to pray effectively in the times of our greatest need. ■



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