

Praying in the Spirit 1

Romans 8:26-27 Read: Zechariah 12 and Ephesians 6¹⁰⁻²⁰

The one word that best captures what it is to pray *in* the Spirit, or pray *with* or *by* the Spirit, is the word “power”. The Spirit is the engine, the dynamic, of all the purposes of God throughout all his works.

Is it *Creation*? The Spirit is the closest, at-hand Person, brooding over the depths in the second verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:2. Is it *Providence*? The Holy Spirit is synonymous with the omnipresence of God in Psalm 139 – ‘where can I flee from your presence? Where can I go from your Spirit?’ The same goes for *redemption*, for *salvation* – all the works of God are done by this Person, the Executor of God. The Father *gives* the promise, the Son *is* the Promise, but the Spirit *brings* the promise, giving the Word and illumining you to receive the Savior. The Father gives the Son, the Son is the Gift of gifts, the Gift of God, but it is the Spirit who wraps that gift and brings him to us. He it was who oversaw the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and exaltation of the Christ. So it is in the *redemption* of a soul, the *redemption* of the whole church. The Father predestines, the Son sums all things up in himself, and the Spirit makes it so. He regenerates, He abides, He indwells, He brings faith and repentance to the dead soul, He applies the blood of the covenant, He comes with your adoption papers and cries out, Abba! He sanctifies – having united you to Christ, and He perseveres in you and assures you are that you are His. All the gifts are of the Spirit; all the graces are of the Spirit; all the fruit of love is of the Spirit; all the armor of God is of the Spirit!

And man, apart from the Holy Spirit, is dead! All worship, devotion, praise, thanksgiving, communion with God, to the glory of God, is nothing apart from the Spirit of grace and supplication. To pray in the Spirit is a redundancy; it is like saying, “it is raining outside” – you don’t need the outside part. If you are not praying in the Spirit, you are not praying! Man lost all access, all communion, all true fellowship with God in Genesis 3 – but that does not stop the natural man in Adam, from lining up, to offer his vegetables like Cain. But without Jesus, without faith, without the Spirit, there is no pleasing God!

And no prayer! No prayer is received by millions of Hindus shooting up vain repetitions every day! No prayer among the millions of Muslims who bow the knee to Mecca five times a day! No prayer from the Buddhists bowing before their incense in the temple. No prayer among the millions of Roman Catholics worshipping saints and Mary and saying their rosaries every day! No prayer from the millions of liberal Protestants offering their own good deeds as their Savior every day. They may have a work of the Holy Spirit in them, but it is not that of prayer. The Spirit is hardening them in their sins, not leading them to the only throne of grace, where Jesus lives to intercede for sinners.

Who are you, then so bold as to say, ‘I pray – I am heard – I have access to God. That when Psalm 15 asks, ‘who may ascend the holy hill of God’ – you dare reply, I do, by the Holy Spirit!?’

The Holy Spirit is our helper to intercede for us and apply God’s will and purpose in Romans 8.26-27. This passage presents more of the *macrocosm* of the Spirit’s intercession with unuttered groans. The text does not teach us about our praying in the Spirit as much as the Spirit

praying in and for us. He is the mighty glue between where you are now by grace in your weakness and ignorance to know even what to pray, and what you are to be upon your glorification. The Spirit intercedes for you in this tension of imperfection and hope.

Every Christian has two interceders – Christ in heaven, and the Spirit on earth; one outside and over you, and the other inside, indwelling you.

As Kuyper put it, Christ the High Priest over the family of God, is *fatherly* in His intercession; He is the Head of His body, his bride, his members, his children, his church. The Holy Spirit, dove-like comforter, intercedes for you too, but as a *mother* praying over a helpless and dreadfully sick child, who scarcely can pray for itself.

He prays for us – that is what we have seen so far in this passage. But the Spirit is also **the author of prayer**, and is the prime mover of every true prayer by the weak, imperfect but redeemed saint. Again, Kuyper says:

“The saint is saint because he received the Holy Spirit, who took up his abode with him and inwardly married himself to the soul. Every vital utterance proceeding from him, apart from the Spirit in him, is foreign to his sonship, and is sin. Only in as far as he is moved and operated upon by the indwelling Spirit are his thoughts, words and deeds the utterances of the child of God.”

If this is true of all of life, how much more of the life of prayer? After our conversion we often pray for ourselves apart from the Holy Spirit. But that is prayer, not of God’s child, but of the old sinner. But when the communion of the Holy Spirit is in the heart, and works in us, then

it is truly prayer of the child of God, because worked by the Holy Spirit.

There are so many rich connections here. And what I want us to do today is to consider five areas in which the Spirit's leading in our prayers is so important. This is like taking out the map and understanding first the landscape, the lay of the land, before getting down what it is to pray in the Spirit.

The first thing to grasp is how the Holy Spirit is the **nexus** or **link**, the **neck**, between the Head praying in heaven and the body praying on earth. There is a sweet correspondence in the lower court of our hearts and the higher court above.

How do we know we have the Spirit and true prayer? It is not the length, intensity, eloquence, emotion, but the communion with Christ by the Spirit. Two souls can pray the same words, the same things, but the two are not the same.

Along the same lines then, understand that prayer is a "**mixture**"; there is part us and part God. Thomas Boston says it better than I: "the act of praying in the heart and expression is ours, done by us; but the grace, the frame of mind for prayer, and the exciting and bringing forth into exercise that grace and ability, is from the Spirit." It must be God who wills and works in us for his own good pleasure.

The Spirit comes first as perfect in his authoring prayer, but his clean, pure water passes through very weak and dirty hearts in us, like a muddy ditch! It cannot be accepted at a holy throne except by Jesus. So what comes from us and our old flesh is unacceptable – something

rather to be rejected. But mercy intervenes. As one puts it: “the smoke of the incense arises to heaven; but the ash remains on earth.”

Third, then, see the **free** and **gracious nature** of the Spirit’s work in our prayers. The love of God is always to be exalted. And that love is differently displayed in each Person of the Trinity. Think of it – the same love that led the Father to give you His Son, and the same love that brought Jesus to stoop so low to the depths of cross for you, is the love that abides in you in the Spirit. Thomas Charles writes: “He comes into the heart, when it is nothing but filth, a hellish scene of all abominations and iniquities, a horrid darkness, a miserable confusion, like the world in its chaotic state.” *p. 45* The Spirit never ever deals with us as we deserve! If he did, even for a moment, he would leave us immediately! But praise be to God, our unworthiness never has any influence on him as to what he does for us. Prayer, then, is purely a gospel work, a gracious work, not just at the beginning but in the middle and at the end.

Then **fourth**, the great and grave **challenges** and **obstacles** to prayer come into light, that only the Lord can cause such heavy lead to float! The spirituality of communion is far above us. The weakness of our present saved condition, having only foretastes not yet perfected; the enemy who still stands against you, and accuses you; and the corruptions still within, like an army ready to carry you away into fields of sin!

How helpless are we before such enemies within, without and above, to bring us low! Thank God that greater is he that is in us, than he that is in the world! But the strength is not you! Without Christ, without his Spirit, you can do nothing!

Fifth and **last** then is the **mystery** and **secrecy** of how the Spirit moves at some times and not others. The Spirit's authorship of prayer is not controlled by us. Wouldn't that place us over the Holy Spirit, and would be idolatry, manipulative, putting us in the driver's seat? In fact, there are few things so offensive to God as having an independent spirit.

True prayer seems to be best known by its effects, its fruits, than being able to discover its roots, or the precise point of connection with the Spirit of grace. Says Edward Bickersteth, much of the work of the Spirit is "secret... We know it rather by its effects than by its mode of operation. 'The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it came from and where it goes; so is everyone born of the Spirit.' We experience its power and that is sufficient."

Does that mean we just let go and let God? Do we wait for the Spirit before we try to pray? No – that would be wrong! We are to get into step with the Spirit, with what we do know his work is in bringing us to heaven. We need Him and His power to do so! Certainly asking God to be able to ask well is the first step.

How now, having seen the lay of the land in this map, do we proceed?

The Spirit is the link with God through the Lord Jesus. He is to be honored as the Spirit of prayer. Prayer is a mixed effort – partly of us, and therefore even our prayers need to be forgiven! Thank God that the Spirit is called God's free Spirit – he does not deal with us as we deserve, or we would have thrown him out, and he us a long time ago. There are great obstacles to prayer in us, around us and in the wicked one. One of the pieces of armor, or better, that which puts on all the

armor, is all-prayer. How weak you are without it! And prayer is a mystery – why is at times we feel very close to God and prayer is a joy; but other time, we feel distant, cold, and prayer is hard, difficult – it seems all work rather than flying to the heights of glory, where we belong?

We need help from the Spirit; we need power, and power is another synonym with the Spirit, like presence is.

We look forward to our next message then to understand and practice better our reliance on him for that power.