

The Spirit of Prayer

by A.B. Simpson

The Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in prayer, helping us know what to pray for and how to pray, and encouraging us with God's Word and the fulness of Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 7:7-8, John 14:13-14, Romans 8:26, Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6-7, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Hebrews 4:16, James 4:3, 1 John 5:14-15, Jude 1:20

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Prayer", "Divine Intercession"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the profound mystery and power of prayer, highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit as our Advocate who intercedes for us when we are unsure of our needs or how to pray. He explains that the Holy Spirit reveals our true needs, awakens holy desires, and lays burdens on our hearts, guiding us in prayer and teaching us to pray in accordance with God's will. Simpson reassures us that through the Trinity's cooperation, our prayers are presented to God with divine understanding, and encourages believers to trust in the Spirit's guidance and to approach prayer with faith and expectation. He concludes by reminding us that prayer is not just about asking but also about listening, waiting, and responding to God's will.

Transcript

"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." Rom. viii: 26.

"Praying in the Holy Ghost." Jude, verse 20.

The mystery of prayer! There is nothing like it in the natural universe. A higher and a lower being in perfect communion. A familiar intercourse, yet both as widely distinct as the finite is from the infinite. More wonderful even than that we should be able to hold converse with the insect that crawls beneath our feet, or the bird that flutters on the branches at our window! Marvelous bond of prayer which can span the gulf between the Creator and the creature, the infinite God and the humblest and most illiterate child!

How has this been accomplished? The three Divine persons have all co-operated in opening the gates of prayer. The Father waits at the throne of grace as the hearer of prayer; the Son has come to reveal the Father, and has returned to be our Advocate in His presence. And the Holy Spirit has come still nearer, as the other Advocate in the heart, to teach us the heavenly secret of prayer, and send up our petitions in the true spirit to the hands of our heavenly Intercessor. It is to this ministry we are to speak now.

The very name given to the Holy Ghost, literally means the Advocate, and the chief business of the one Advocate is to prepare our cause in the office, and the other to plead it before the Judge. We have the whole Trinity in our behalf. The Holy Spirit prepares our case, the Lord Jesus presents it, and the Judge is our Father. What an infinite light, and what an unspeakable comfort this sheds on the subject of prayer!

Our need of this Advocate is referred to in our text very impressively: "We know not what to pray for as we ought." We are often ignorant of the subjects for which we ought to pray; and often, when we know our needs, we know not how rightly to present them. There is much expressed in these words. We are often deeply ignorant of our truest needs, and the things we wish most for are not the things we most require. Our minds are blinded by prejudice and passion; the things we would sometimes ask for we shall afterwards find would have been only an injury. Besides, we know not the future, and cannot, intelligently, anticipate the needs and dangers against which we should pray, while a thousand unseen elements of peril continually surround us and need a wiser forethought and insight than our own to guard against.

And often "we know not how to pray as we ought." Prayer is a high art, and must be divinely taught. We would not rashly send a crude and unprepared case before an earthly tribunal, and he is greatly mistaken who thinks that the thoughtless and random dashes of human impulse, or even sincere earthly desires, are all accepted as prayer. Many "receive not because they ask amiss." If we regard iniquity in our hearts the Lord will not hear us. We must ask in faith, nothing doubting. These and other qualities must be taught and impelled by the Holy Spirit. "We know not how to pray as we ought."

The right motive which seeks supremely the glory of God, the right spirit recognizing submissively and joyfully His sovereign will, the deep and sincere desire, the faith which dares to ask as largely as the measure of the Father's will and promise, the patience that tarries if it waits, knowing that it will surely come, and will not tarry too long, the obedience that steps out upon the promise all these elements of prayer are operations of the Holy Spirit, and we cannot too devoutly thank Him that He is willing thus to teach our ignorance and simplicity the heavenly secret of prayer. "The Spirit helpeth our infirmities, and maketh intercession within us, with groanings which cannot be uttered.

1. The Holy Spirit reveals to us our needs. This is always the first element in prayer, a painful consciousness of failure and necessity. The prophet's word to Jehoshaphat was, "Make the valley full of ditches," and then, the second, "The valley shall be full of water." The heart must be ploughed up into great channels of conscious need to hold the blessing when it comes; and this is often painful work, but, "Blessed are they which hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled."

When the Spirit of grace and supplication is poured out upon Jerusalem, the effect is a deep and universal sorrow. "They shall look upon Him they have pierced, and they shall mourn as one that mourneth for an only son, and be in bitterness as one is in bitterness for a first-born." The Spirit of prayer is the spirit of dependence, deep humility and conscious need.

2. The Holy Spirit next awakens in the soul holy desires for the blessings that God is about to give. Desire is an element in prayer. "Whatever things ye desire," our Lord says, "when ye pray believe that ye receive

them." These deep, spiritual longings are like the rootlets by which the plant draws the nourishment from the soil; like the absorbing vessels of the human system, which take in and assimilate nourishment and food. The desires give intensity and force to our prayer, and enlarge the heart to receive the blessing when it comes. God, therefore, often keeps His children waiting for the visible answer to their petitions, in order that they may the more ardently desire the blessing, and be thus enabled to receive it more fully and appreciate it more gratefully when it comes.

When we were traveling in Italy we were often serenaded by parties of native musicians, whose sweet strains were sometimes very delightful. But we noticed that whenever we paid them their little gratuity they always stopped the music and they went away, and when we wished to listen longer to their sweetest strains, we waited before handing them their charity. So God loves to hear His people's holy desires and earnest prayers, and often prolongs the petition because He delights to hear us pray, and then gives us the larger blessing in proportion to our waiting. Often has your heart longed for some special blessing until it seemed that it would break for desire. You almost thought that you never should possess the holiness you so longed for. But now, as you look back, you see that this deep hunger was just the beginning of your blessing. It was the shadow side, the Holy Ghost awakening all the receptive capacities of your being, to absorb it when it came.

Once we saw a party of children sending up a balloon of tissue paper. First, the balloon was carefully constructed of the lightest fabric, and then suspended with light cords a few feet above the ground. Its little beacon light was attached, and then they began to prepare the force that was to be used for its ascension. It was nothing more than simply building a little fire below the open mouth of the balloon and allowing the heated air to ascend until it filled the entire space within. The moment this was done the little vessel swelled and reached out for its ascension, pulling hard at the restraining cords, and pressing upwards. When it was thoroughly filled with the heated air it was only necessary to cut the cords, and instantly it sailed away to the upper air. So it seems the warm breath of holy desire and earnest purpose in prayer, when inspired by the Holy Ghost, bears up our petitions to the throne of grace, and makes the difference between the mere words of formalism, and the "effectual working prayer of the righteous man which availeth much."

3. The Holy Spirit lays upon the heart wherein He dwells the special burden of prayer. We often read in the old prophetic Scriptures of the burden of the Lord. And so still the Lord lays His burden on His consecrated messengers. This is the meaning of the strong language of our text, "The Spirit maketh intercession within us with groanings which cannot be uttered." Sometimes this burden is inarticulate and unintelligible even to the supplicant himself. Perhaps some heavy shadow rests upon the soul, some deep depression, some crushing weight under which we can only groan. With it there may come the definite thought of some personal need, some apprehended evil that overhangs us, or some dear one who is brought to our spirit as somehow connected with this pressure. As we pray for this especial person or thing, light seems to open upon the heart, and an assurance of having met the will of God in our prayer; or sometimes the burden is not understood; and yet, as it presses heavily upon us and we hold it up to Him who does understand, we are conscious that our prayer is not in vain; but that He who knows its meaning and prompts its cry, is granting what He sees to be best under the circumstances for us or others, as the burden may apply.

We may never know in this world just what it meant, and yet, often we will find that some great trial has been averted, some impending danger turned aside, some difficulty overcome, some sufferer relieved, some soul saved.

It is not necessary that we should always know; indeed, perhaps we should never fully know what any of our prayers wholly mean; God's answer is always larger than our petition, and even when our prayer is most definite and intelligent there is a wide margin which only the Holy Ghost can interpret, and God will fill it up in His infinite wisdom and love. That is what is meant by the significant language of the text, "He that searcheth the heart knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, for He maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God." The Father is always searching our hearts and listening, not to our wild and often mistaken outcries, but to the mind of the Holy Spirit in us, whom He recognizes as our true guardian and monitor, and He grants us according to His petitions and not merely our words. But if we walk in the Spirit and are trained to know and obey His voice, we shall not send up the wild and vain outcries of our mistaken impulses, but shall echo His will and His prayer, and thus shall ever pray in accordance with the will of God.

The sensitive spirit grows very quick to discern God's voice. That which would naturally be considered as simple depression of spirits comes to be instantly recognized as a hint that God has something to say to us, or something to ask in us for ourselves or others. Often our physical sensations come to be quick, instinctive interpreters of some inward call; for when we do not quickly listen to God's voice He knocks more loudly, until the very body feels the pain and warns us that the Lord hath need of us. If we were but more watchful we would find that nothing comes to us at any moment of our lives which has not some divine significance, and which does not lead us in some way to communion or service. He who thus walks with God soon learns the luxury of having no personal burdens or troubles, but recognizing everything as service for God or for others.

This makes the ministry of prayer a very solemn responsibility, for, if we are not obedient to His voice, some interest must suffer, some part of His will be neglected, some part of His purpose frustrated, so far, at least, as our co-operation is concerned, and, perhaps, someone very dear to us will lose a blessing through our neglect or disobedience; or we ourselves find that we are not prepared for the conflict or trial against which He was providing by the very burden that we would not understand nor carry.

Thus it was with the disciples and the Master in the garden of Gethsemane. That was for Him the anticipation of the cross; and, as He met the burden in advance, He was prepared for the awful hours that followed, and went through them in victory, and thus redeemed the world. But the disciples could not watch with Him one hour; they neglected the call to prayer, and slept when they should have hearkened and prayed, and the result was that the morning found them unprepared, and the trial ended in shameful failure, and only His previous intercession for him saved Peter from entire wreck, and perhaps a fate desperate as that of Judas.

God has placed within our breast a monitor who is always looking forward to our needs and anticipating our situations; let us, therefore, be quick to hearken and obey His voice, as He calls us to the ministry of prayer, and in so doing we shall not only save ourselves, but also many a heart that perhaps is not able to pray for itself.

4. The Spirit brings to our hearts, in the ministry of prayer, the encouragement of God's Word, the promises of His grace, and the fulness of Christ to meet our need. It is He who gives us such conceptions of Christ as awaken in us confidence of blessing. He opens to our vision the infinite resources of the grace of God, and shows us all the rich provision of our Father's house. He unfolds to us the grounds of faith in the gospel, and teaches us to understand our redemption rights, our filial claims, and our high calling in Christ Jesus. He breathes in our heart the Spirit of sonship, and He inspires the faith which is the essential

condition of effectual prayer. And so He leads us to present to the Father, in the name of the Lord Jesus, not only the right desires, but in the right spirit: "By one Spirit we have access unto the Father."

Thus He is in us the Spirit of faith, the Spirit of adoption, the Spirit of liberty in prayer, the Spirit of holy confidence and enlargement of heart, and the witnessing Spirit, who, when we pray in faith, seals upon our soul the divine assurance that our prayer is accepted before God, and that the answer will be surely given. We must first, however, believe God's promise in the exercise of simple faith, and, as we do, the Spirit witnesseth with our spirit and often fills the soul with joy and praise which anticipates the answer long before it is apparent. This is the highest triumph of prayer, to look within the veil, even before the curtains are parted, and know that our petition is granted; to hear the sound of the bells upon our High Priest's garment, even from the inmost chambers, and to rejoice in the anticipation of our blessing as fully as if we already saw its complete fulfillment.

Our Lord always requires this faith as the condition of answered prayer. "Whatsoever things ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them." "Let him ask in faith, nothing doubting. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed. Let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord." But this is the special work of the Holy Ghost. He is the Spirit of revelation and of faith, and as we pray in His fellowship, and according to His will, we shall be enabled through His grace to ask with humble and confident expectation of His blessing.

5. The Holy Spirit will also teach us when to cease from prayer, and turn our petition into thanksgiving, or go out in obedience to meet the answer as it waits before us, or comes to meet us. There is a place for silence as well as prayer, and when we truly believe, we shall cease to ask as we asked before, and henceforth our prayers shall simply be in the attitude of waiting for our answer, or holding up God's promise to him in the Spirit of praise and expectation.

This does not mean that we shall never think any more about that for which we asked, but we shall think no more of it in a doubtful manner; we shall think of it only with thanksgiving and restful expectation. We may often remind God of it, but it will always be in the spirit of trust and confidence. Therefore, the prophet speaks of those who are "the Lord's remembrancers," those that remind God of His promises and wait upon Him for His fulfillment of them. This is really a spirit of prayer, and yet it is not perhaps a spirit of petition so much as praise, which indeed is the true exhibition of the highest form of faith.

Sometimes, too, after our prayer, the Holy Spirit will have a subsequent ministry of obedience for us; there will be something for us perhaps to do in receiving the answer, and He will show us, interpreting to us God's Providences as they meet us, and enabling us to meet them in a spirit of co-operation and vigilance.

He also will be present to support our faith in its tests and painful trials, and enable us to rejoice and praise God, often amid the seeming contradictions of His Providence. For faith is always tested, and "we have need of patience, that having done the will of God we might receive the promise."

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