

THE HOLY SPIRIT Chapter 25 The Spirit Assisting

by A.W. Pink

Transcript

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Chapter 25

The Spirit Assisting

Role of Suffering A child of God oppressed, suffering sorely, often driven to his wit's end—what a strange thing! A joint-heir with Christ financially embarrassed, poor in this world's goods, wondering where his next meal is coming from—what an anomaly! An object of the Father's everlasting love and distinguishing favor tossed up and down upon a sea of trouble, with every apparent prospect of his frail boat capsizing—what a perplexity! One who has been regenerated and is now indwelt by the Holy Spirit daily harassed by Satan, and frequently overcome by indwelling sin—what an enigma! Loved by the Father, redeemed by the Son, his body made the temple of the Holy Spirit, yet left in this world year after year to suffer affliction and persecution, to mourn and groan over innumerable failures, to encounter one trial after another, often to be placed in far less favorable circumstances than the wicked; to sigh and cry for relief, yet for sorrow and suffering to increase—what a mystery! What Christian has not felt the force of it, and been baffled by its inscrutability. Now it was to cast light upon this pressing problem of the sorely tried believer that the eighth chapter of Romans was written. There the Apostle was moved to show that "the sufferings of the present time" (v. 18) are not inconsistent with the special favor and infinite love which God bears unto His people. First, because by those sufferings the Christian is brought into personal and experimental fellowship with the sufferings of Christ (v. 17 and cf. Phil. 3:10). Second, severe and protracted as our afflictions may be, yet there is an immeasurable disproportion between our present sufferings and the future Glory (vv. 18-23). Third, our very sufferings provide occasion for the exercise of hope and the development of patience (vv. 24, 25). Fourth, Divine aids and supports are furnished us under our afflictions (vv. 26, 27) and it is these we would now consider. Help amidst Suffering "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities" (Rom. 8:26). Not only does "hope" (a sure expectation of God's making good His promises) support and cheer the suffering saint, leading him to patiently wait for deliverance from his afflictions, but the blessed Comforter has also been given to him in order to supply help to this very end. By His gracious aid the believer is preserved from being totally submerged by his doubts and fears. By His renewing operations the spark of faith is maintained, despite all the fierce winds of Satan which assail. By His mighty enabling the sorely harassed and groaning Christian is kept from sinking into complete skepticism, abject despair, and infidelity. By His quickening power hope is still kept alive, and the voice of

prayer is still faintly heard. And how is the gracious help of the Spirit manifested? Thus: seeing the Christian bowed down by oppression and depression, His compassion is called forth, and He strengthens with His might in the inner man. Every Christian is a living witness to the truth of this, though he may not be conscious of the Divine process. Why is it, my afflicted brother, my distressed sister, that you have not made shipwreck of your profession long ere this? What has kept you from heeding that repeated temptation of Satan's to totally abandon the good fight of faith? Why has not your manifold "infirmities" annihilated your faith, extinguished your hope, and cast a pall of unrelieved gloom upon the future? The answer is because the blessed Spirit silently, invisibly, yet sympathetically and effectually helped you. Some precious promise was sealed to your heart, some comforting view of Christ was presented to your soul, some whisper of love was breathed into your ear, and the pressure upon your spirit was reduced, your grief was assuaged, and fresh courage possessed you. Here, then, is real light cast upon the problem of a suffering Christian—the most perplexing feature of that problem being how to harmonize sore sufferings with the love of God. But if God had ceased to care for His child, then He had deserted him, left him to himself. Very far from this, though, is the actual case: the Divine Comforter is given to help his infirmities. Here, too, is the sufficient answer to an objection which the carnal mind is ready to make against the inspired reasoning of the Apostle in the context: How can we who are so weak in ourselves, so inferior in power to the enemies confronting us, bear up under our trials which are so numerous, so protracted, so crushing? We could not, and therefore Divine grace has provided for us an all-sufficient Helper. Without His aid we had long since succumbed, mastered by our trials. Hope looks forward to the Glory to come; in the weary interval of waiting, the Spirit supports our poor hearts and keeps grace alive within us. "Our infirmities": note the plural number, for the Christian is full of them, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Frail and feeble are we in ourselves, for "all flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field" (Isa. 40:6). We are "compassed with infirmity" (Heb. 5:2) both within and without. When trials and troubles come we are often bewildered by them and faint beneath them. When opposition and persecution break out against us, because of our cleaving to the Truth and walking with Christ, we are staggered. When the chastening rod of our Father falls upon us, how we fret and fume. What a little thing it takes to disturb our peace, stifle the voice of praise, and cause us to complain and murmur. How easily is the soul cast down, the promises of God forgotten, the glorious future awaiting us lost sight of. How ready are we to say with Jacob, "All these things are against me," or with David, "I shall now perish one day at the hand of Saul." The "infirmities" of Christians are as numerous as they are varied. Some are weak in faith, and constantly questioning their interest in Christ. Some are imperfectly instructed in the Truth, and therefore ill-prepared to meet the lies of Satan. Some are slow travelers along the path of obedience, frequently lagging in the rear. Others groan under the burden of physical afflictions. Some are harassed with a nervous temperament which produces a state of perpetual pessimism, causing them to look only upon the dark side of the cloud. Others are weighed down with the cares of this life, so that they are constantly depressed. Others are maligned and slandered, persecuted and boycotted, which to those of a sensitive disposition is well-nigh unbearable. "Our infirmities" include all that cause us to groan and render us the objects of the Divine compassion. But "the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities." Here is a Divine revelation, for we had known nothing about it apart from the Scriptures. We are not left alone to endure our infirmities: we have a helper, a Divine Helper; One not far off, but with us; nay, in us. The Greek word here for "helpeth" is a striking one; it signifies to "take part with" or to "take hold with one." It occurs in only one other passage, namely, "bid Mary therefore that she help me" (Luke 10:40), where the obvious thought is that Martha was asking for her sister's assistance, to share the burden of the kitchen, that she might be eased. The Spirit "helpeth" the Christian's infirmities not only by a sympathetic regard, but by personal participation, supporting him beneath them, like a mother "helps" her child when learning to walk,

or a friend gives his arm to an aged person to lean upon. In his comments on this clause Calvin says, "The Spirit takes on Himself a part of the burden by which our weakness is oppressed, so that He not only succours us, but lifts us up, as though He went under the burden with us." Oh how this should endear the blessed Spirit of God to us. We worship the Father, whence every mercy has its rise; we adore the Son, through whom every blessing flows; but how often we overlook the Holy Spirit, by whom every blessing is actually communicated and applied. Think of His deep compassion, His manifold succourings, His tender love, His mighty power, His efficacious grace, His infinite forbearance; all these challenge our hearts and should awaken praises from us. They would if we meditated more upon them. The Spirit does not remove our "infirmities," any more than the Lord took away Paul's thorn in the flesh; but He enables us to bear them. Constrained by a love which no thought can conceive, moved by a tenderness no tongue can describe, He places His mighty arm beneath the pressure and sustains us. Though He has been slighted and grieved by us a thousand times, receiving at our hands the basest requital for His tenderness and grace, yet when a sword enters our soul or some fresh trouble bows us down to the ground, He again places beneath us the arms of His everlasting love and prevents our sinking into hopeless despair. Help in Intercessory Prayer It is a great infirmity or weakness for the Christian to faint in the day of adversity, yet such is often the case. It is a sad thing when, like Rachel of old weeping for her children, he "refuses to be comforted" (Jer. 31:15). It is most deplorable for all when he so gives way to unbelief that the Lord has to say to him, "How is it that ye have no faith?" (Mark 4:40). Terrible indeed would be his end if God were to leave him entirely to himself. This is clear from what is said in Mark 4:17, "when affliction or persecution ariseth for the Word's sake, immediately they are offended," or as Luke says, "Which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away" (8:13). And why does the stony-ground hearer apostatize? Because he is without the assistance of the Holy Spirit! Writer and reader would do the same if no Divine aid were forthcoming! But thank God, the feeble and fickle believer is not left to himself: "the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities" (Rom. 8:26). That "help" is as manifold as our varied needs; but the Apostle singles out one particular "infirmity" which besets all Christians, and which the blessed Spirit graciously helps: "for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us." How this Divine declaration should humble us into the dust: so depraved is the saint that in the hour of need he is incapable of asking God aright to minister unto him. Sin has so corrupted his heart and darkened his understanding that, left to himself, he cannot even discern what he should ask God for. Alas, that pride should so blind us to our real condition and our deep, deep need. In nothing do the saints more need the Spirit's presence and His gracious assistance than in their addresses of the Throne of Grace. They know that God in His Persons and perfections is the Object of their worship; they know that they cannot come unto the Father but by Christ, the alone Mediator; and they know that their access to Him must be by the Spirit (Eph. 2:18). Yet such are their varying circumstances, temptations, and wanderings, so often are they shut up in their frames and cold in their affections, such deadness of heart is there toward God and spiritual things, that at times they know not what to pray for as they ought. But it is here that the Spirit's love and grace is most Divinely displayed: He helps their infirmities and makes intercession for them! One had thought that if ever there were a time when the Christian would really pray, earnestly and perseveringly, and would know what to ask for, it should be when he is sorely tried and oppressed. Alas, how little we really know ourselves. Even a beast will cry out when suffering severe pain, and it is natural (not spiritual!) that we should do the same. Of degenerate Israel of old God said, "they have not cried unto Me with their heart, when they howled upon their beds" (Hosea 7:14): no, relief from their sufferings was all they thought about. And by nature our hearts are just the same! So long as we are left to ourselves (to try us and manifest what we are: 2 Chron. 32:31), when the pressure of sore trial comes upon us, we are concerned only with deliverance from it, and not that God may be glorified or that the trial may be

sanctified to our souls. Left for himself, man asks God for what would be curses rather than blessings, for what would prove to be snares rather than helps to him spiritually. Have we not read of Israel that, "They tempted God in their heart by asking meat for their lust" (Ps. 78:18); and again, "He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul" (Ps. 106:15)! Perhaps someone replies, But they were not regenerate souls. Then have we not read in James, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (4:3)? Ah, my reader, this is a truth which is very unpalatable to our proud hearts. Did not Moses "ask" the Lord that he might be permitted to enter Canaan (Deut. 3:26, 27)? Did not the Apostle Paul thrice beseech the Lord for the removal of his thorn in the flesh? What proofs are these that "we know not what we should pray for as we ought!" "The Spirit also helpeth our infirmities." This being so, surely the least that we can do is to seek His aid, to definitely ask Him to undertake for us. Alas, how rarely we do so. As intimated above, when the pressure of trouble first presses upon us, usually it is nature which cries out for relief. At other times the soul is so cast down that even the voice of natural "prayer" is stifled. Often there is so much rebellion at work in our hearts against the providential dispensations of God toward us that we feel it would be mockery to seek His face; yea, we are ashamed to do so. Such at least has been the experience of the writer more than once, and that not long ago, though he blushes to acknowledge it. O the infinite patience and forbearance of our gracious God! Why We Need Help "We know not what we should pray for as we ought." And why? First, because we are so blinded by self-love that we are unable to discern what will be most for God's glory, what will best promote the good of our brethren (through some of the dross being purged out of us), and what will advance our own spiritual growth. O what wretched "prayers" (?) we put up when we are guided and governed by self-interests, and what cause do we give the Lord to say "ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of" (Luke 9:55). Alas, how often we attempt to make God the Servant of our carnal desires. Shall we ask our heavenly Father for worldly success! Shall we come to Him who was born in a stable and ask Him for temporal luxuries or even comforts! Why is it that "we know not what we should pray for as we ought"? Second, because our minds are so discomposed by the trial and the suffering it brings, and then we have to say with one of old, "I am so troubled that I cannot speak" (Ps. 77:4): so you see, dear "brother, and companion in tribulation" (Rev. 1:9) that you are not the first to experience spiritual dumbness! But it is most blessed to link with this such a promise as, "For the Holy Spirit shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say" (Luke 12:12). Why is it that "we know not what we should pray for as we ought"? Third, because oftentimes our tongues are tied as the result of leanness of our souls. It is "out of the abundance of the heart" that "the mouth speaketh" (Matthew 12:34), and if the Word of Christ be not dwelling in us "richly" (Col. 3:16), how can we expect to have the right petition to present to God in the hour of our need! "The Spirit also helpeth our infirmities," but He does so silently and secretly, so that we are not conscious of His assistance at the time He renders it. That gracious and effectual help is manifested to us by the effects which it has produced in us; though so perverse are our hearts and so great is our pride, we often attribute those effects to our own will-power or resolution. Have we suddenly, or even gradually, emerged from the slough of despond? It was not because we had "come to our senses" or "regained our poise," rather was it solely due to the Spirit's renewing us in the inner man. Has the storm within us—which God's crossing of our will occasioned—been calmed? It was because the Spirit deigned to subdue our iniquities. Has the voice of true prayer again issued from us? It was because the Spirit had made intercession for us. Lord God the Spirit, to whom Divine honor and glory belongs, equally as to the Father and the Son, I desire to present unto Thee unfeigned praise and heartfelt thanksgiving. O how deeply am I indebted to Thee: how patiently hast Thou borne with me, how tenderly hast Thou dealt with me, how graciously hast Thou wrought in me. Thy love passeth knowledge, Thy forbearance is indeed Divine. O that I were more conscientious and diligent in seeking not to slight and grieve Thee.

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