

THE HOLY SPIRIT Chapter 26 The Spirit Interceding

by A.W. Pink

Transcript

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Chapter 26

The Spirit Interceding

If left to himself, the believer would never see (by faith) the all-wise hand of God in his afflictions, still less would his heart ever honestly say concerning them, "Thy will be done." If left to himself, he would never seek grace to patiently endure the trial, still less would he hope that afterwards it would produce the peaceable fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:11). If left to himself, he would continue to chafe and kick like "a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke" (Jer. 31:18) and would curse the day of his birth (Job 3:1). If left to himself, he would have no faith that his sufferings were among the "all things" working together for his ultimate good, still less would he "glory in his infirmity that the power of Christ might rest upon him" (2 Cor. 12:9). No, dear reader, such holy exercises of heart are not the product of poor fallen human nature; instead, they are nothing less than the immediate, gracious, and lovely fruits of the Holy Spirit—brought forth amid such uncongenial soil. What a marvel! "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought" (Rom. 8:26). At no one point is the Christian made more conscious of his "infirmities" than in connection with his prayer-life. The effects of indwelling corruption are such that often prayer becomes an irksome task, rather than the felt delight of a precious privilege; and strive as he may, he cannot always overcome this fearful spirit. Even when he endeavors to pray, he is handicapped by wanderings of mind, coldness of heart, the intrusion of carnal cares; while he is painfully conscious of the unreality of his petitions and unfelt confessions. How cold are the effusions of our hearts in secret devotions, how feeble our supplications, how little solemnity of mind, brokenness of heart. How often the prayer exercises of our souls seem a mass of confusion and contradiction. "But the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Rom. 8:26). It is particularly the help which the blessed Comforter gives the Christian in his prayer-life, in the counteracting of his "infirmities," which is now to engage our attention. In Zechariah 12:10 He is emphatically styled "The Spirit of grace and of supplications," for He is the Author of every spiritual desire, every holy aspiration, every outgoing of the heart after God. Prayer has rightly been termed "the breathing of the newborn soul," yet we must carefully bear in mind that its respiration is wholly determined by the stirrings of the Holy Spirit within us. As the Person, work and intercession of Christ are the foundation of all our confidence in approaching the Father, so every spiritual exercise in prayer is the fruit of the Spirit's operations and intercession. How the

Spirit Intercedes First, when the believer is most oppressed by outward trials and is most depressed by a sense of his inward vileness, when he is at his wit's end and ready to wring his hands in despair, or is most conscious of his spiritual deadness and inability to express the sinfulness of his case, the Spirit stirs him in the depths of his being: "The Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." There has been some difference of opinion as to whether this refers directly to groanings of the Spirit Himself, or indirectly to the spiritual groanings of the Christian, which are prompted and produced by Him. But surely there is no room for uncertainty: the words "cannot be uttered" could not apply to a Divine Person. That which He produces in and through the believer, is ascribed to the Spirit—the "fruit" of Galatians 5:22, and Galatians 4:6 compared with Romans 8:15! As it is the Spirit who illumines and gives us to see the exceeding sinfulness of sin and the depravity of our hearts, so He is the One who causes us to groan over the same. The conscience is pierced, the heart is searched, the soul is made to feel something of its fearful state. The conscious realization of "the plague of our hearts" (1 Kings 8:38) and its "putrefying sores" (Isa. 1:6), produces unutterable anguish. The painful realization of our remaining enmity against God, the rebellion of our wills, the woeful lack of heart-conformity to His holy Law, so casts down the soul that it is temporarily paralyzed. Then it is that the Spirit puts forth His quickening operations, and we "groan" so deeply that we cannot express our feelings, articulate our woe, or unburden our hearts. All that we can do is to sigh and sob inwardly. But such tears of the heart are precious in the sight of God (Ps. 56:8) because they are produced by His blessed Spirit. Second, when the soul is so sorely oppressed and deeply distressed, the Spirit reveals to the mind what should be prayed for. He it is who pours oil on the troubled waters, quiets in some measure the storm within, spiritualizes the mind, and enables us to perceive the nature of our particular need. It is the Spirit who makes us conscious of our lack of faith, submissiveness, obedience, courage, or whatever it may be. He it is who gives us to see and feel our spiritual wants, and then to make them known before the Throne of Grace. The Spirit helps our infirmities by subduing our fears, increasing our faith, strengthening our hope, and drawing out our hearts unto God. He grants us a renewed sense of the greatness of God's mercy, the changelessness of His love, and the infinite merits of Christ's sacrifice before Him on our behalf. Third, the Spirit reveals to cast-down saints that the supplies of grace for their varied needs are all expressed in the promises of God. It is those promises which are the measures of prayer, and contain the matter of it; for what God has promised, all that He has promised, but nothing else are we to ask for. "There is nothing that we really stand in need of, but God hath promised the supply of it, in such a way and under such limitations as may make it good and useful unto us. And there is nothing that God hath promised but we stand in need of it, or are some way or other concerned in it as members of the mystical body of Christ" (John Owen). But at this point also the help of the Spirit is imperative, "that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God" (1 Cor. 2:12). It is thus that the Spirit bears up the distressed minds of Christians: by directing their thoughts to those promises most suited to their present case, by impressing a sense of them upon their hearts, by giving them to discern that those precious promises contain in them the fruits of Christ's mediation, by renewing their faith so that they are enabled to lay hold of and plead them before God. Real prayer is in faith: faith necessarily respects God's promises: therefore if we understand not the spiritual import of the promises, the suitability of them to our varied cases, and reverently urge the actual fulfillment of them to us, then we have not prayed at all. But for that sight and sense of the promises, and the appropriation of them, we are entirely dependent upon the Holy Spirit. Fourth, the Spirit helps the Christian to direct his petitions unto right ends. Many prayers remain unanswered because of our failure at this point: "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (Jas. 4:3). The "ask amiss" in that passage means to ask for something with a wrong end in view, and were we left entirely to ourselves, this would always be the case with us. Only three ends are permissible: that God may be

glorified, that our spirituality may be promoted, that our brethren may be blessed. Now none but the Spirit can enable us to subordinate all our desires and petitions unto God's glory. None but the Spirit can bring us to make our advancement in holiness our end—the reason why we ask God to grant our requests. This He does by putting into our minds a high valuation of conformity to God, a deep longing in the heart that His image may be more manifestly stamped upon us, a strong inclination of will to diligently seek the same by the use of all appointed means. It is by the Spirit the sin-troubled Christian is helped to apprehend God as his Father, and his heart is emboldened to approach Him as such. It is by the Spirit we are granted a conscious access to the Throne of Grace. He it is who moves us to plead the infinite merits of Christ. He it is who strengthens us to pray in a holy manner, rather than from carnal motives and sentiments. He it is who imparts any measure of fervor to our hearts so that we "cry" unto God—which respects not the loudness of our voices, but the earnestness of our supplications. He it is who gives us a spirit of importunity, so that we are enabled (at times) to say with Jacob, "I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me" (Gen. 32:26). And He it is who prepares the heart to receive God's answer, so that what is bestowed is a real blessing to us and not a curse. In conclusion let it be pointed out that the motions of the Spirit in the saint are a "help" to prayer, but not the rule or reason of prayer. There are some who say that they never attempt to pray unless conscious that the Spirit moves them to do so. But this is wrong: the Spirit is given to help us in the performance of duty, and not in the neglect of it! God commands us to pray: that is our "rule"—"always to pray" (Luke 18:1), "in everything by prayer and supplication" (Phil. 4:6). For many years past, the editor had made it a practice of beginning his prayers by definitely and trustfully seeking the Spirit's aid: see Luke 11:13. Do not conclude that lack of words and suitable expressions is a proof that the Spirit is withholding His help. Finally, remember that He is Sovereign: "the wind bloweth where it listeth" (John 3:8). The Negative and the Positive God's Word is designed to have a twofold effect upon the Christian: a distressing and a comforting. As we appropriate the Scriptures to ourselves, pride will be abased and the old man cast down; on the other hand faith will be strengthened and the new man built up. Our poor hearts first need humbling, and then exalting; we must be made to mourn over our sins, and then be filled with praise at the realization of God's amazing grace. Now in Romans 8:26, 27 there is that which should produce both these effects upon us. First, we are reminded of "our infirmities" or weaknesses: note the plural number, for we are full of them—how our apprehension of this should "hide pride from us"! Yet, second, here is also real ground for comfort and hope: "The Spirit also helpeth our infirmities." The frail and erring believer is not left to himself: a gracious, all-powerful, ever-present Helper is given to support and assist him. How this blessed fact should rejoice our hearts! The tones of Scripture, then, fall upon the ear of God's children in ever alternating keys: the minor and the major. So it is in the passage before us, for next we read "we know not what we should pray for as we ought." What a pride-withering word is that! One which is in direct variance with what is commonly supposed. The general belief is that men do know well enough what they should pray for, but they are so careless and wicked they do not discharge this duty; but God says, they "know not." Nor can the godliest saint or wisest minister help the unregenerate at this point, by drawing up for them a form of words, which suitably expresses their needs, for it is one thing to have Scriptural words upon our lips, but it is quite another for the soul to feel his dire need of what he asks for; it is out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh in prayer, or God will not hear. But the words of our text are yet more searching and solemn: they refer not to the unregenerate (though of course it is of them), but to the regenerate: "we (Christians) know not what we should pray for as we ought." And again we say what a heart-humbling word is this. Now we are partakers of the Divine nature, now a way has been opened for us into the presence of God, now we have access to the Throne of Grace itself, now we are invited to "make known our requests." Yet so fearfully has sin darkened our judgment, so deceitful and wicked are our hearts, so blind are we as to what would truly promote the manifest glory of God and

what would really be for our highest good, that "we know not what we should pray for as we ought." Do you actually believe this, my reader? If you do, it must bring you into the dust before the One with whom we have to do. "We know not what we should pray for as we ought." No, we "know not" even with the Bible in our hands, in which are full instructions to direct praying souls; in which are so many inspired prayers for our guidance. No, we "know not" even after the Lord Himself has graciously supplied us with a pattern prayer, after which ours should be modeled. Sin has so perverted our judgments, self-love has so filmed our eyes, worldliness has so corrupted our affections, that even with a Divine manual of prayer in our hands, we are quite incapable (of ourselves) of discerning what we should ask for—supplies of Divine grace to minister to our spiritual needs—and are unable to present our suit in a spiritual manner, acceptable to God. How the recognition of this fact should empty our hearts of conceit! How the realization of it should fill us with shame! What need have we to cry, "Lord, teach us to pray!" But now on the other side: lest we should be utterly cast down by a sense of our excuseless and guilty ignorance, we are Divinely informed "the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us." Wondrous indeed, unspeakably blessed, is this! Instead of turning away from us in disgust because of our culpable ignorance, God has not only provided us with an Intercessor at His right hand (Heb. 7:25). But what is to the writer even more remarkable, God has given His needy people a Divine Intercessor at their right hand, even the Holy Spirit. How this glorious fact should raise our drooping souls, revolutionize our ideas of prayer, and fill our hearts with thanksgiving and praise for this unspeakable Gift. If it be asked, Why has God provided two Intercessors for His people, the answer is: to bridge the entire gulf between Him and us. One to represent God to us, the Other to represent us before God. The One to prompt our prayers, the Other to present them to the Father. The One to ask blessings for us, the Other to convey blessings unto us! Groanings It is indeed striking to observe this alternation between the minor and major keys running all through our passage, for next we are told, "the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." This, as we have seen, refers to the inward anguish which the Spirit produces in the believer. Here, then, is further ground for self-abasement: even when a sense of need has been communicated to us, so sottish are we that our poor hearts are overwhelmed, and all we can do is to sigh and groan. Even when the Spirit has convicted us of our corruptions and imparted a deep yearning for Divine grace, we are incapable of articulating our wants or expressing our longings: rather is our case then like the Psalmist's, "I was dumb with silence" (39:2). If left to ourselves, the distress occasioned by our felt sinfulness would quite disable us to pray. It may be objected, To what purpose is it that the Spirit should stir up such "groanings," which the Christian can neither understand nor express? Ah, this brings us to the brighter side again: "He that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit" (Rom. 8:27). God knows what those groanings mean, for He discerns the very thoughts and intents of our hearts. How comforting is this: to realize in prayer we are coming to One who thoroughly understands us! How blessed to be assured that God will rightly interpret every motion the Spirit prompts within us. God "knows" the "mind of the Spirit"—His intention in producing our anguish. God is able to distinguish between the moanings of mere nature and the "groanings" of which the Spirit is the Author. There is a fourfold "spirit" which works in prayer. First, the natural spirit of man, which seeks his own welfare and preservation. This is not sinful, as may be seen from the case of Christ in Gethsemane: the innocent desire of human nature to be delivered from the awful pressure upon Him; and then subjecting His will to the Father's. Second, a carnal and sinful spirit: "your brethren that hated you, that cast you out for My name's sake, said, Let the LORD be glorified" (Isa. 66:5), but God did not answer them in the way they meant. Third, the new nature in the believer, which has holy aspirations, but is powerless of itself to express them. Fourth, "praying in the Holy Spirit" (Jude 20)—by His prompting and power. Now God discerns between the motions of nature, the lustings of the flesh, the longings of grace, and the desires wrought by the Spirit. This it is which explains "The LORD

weigheth the spirits" (Prov. 16:2)—the fourfold "spirit" mentioned above. None but God is able to thus distinguish and interpret the "groanings" of the Spirit in the saint. A striking proof of this is found in, "Now Hannah, she spake in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard: therefore Eli thought she had been drunken" (1 Sam 1:13)—even the high priest of Israel was incapable of discerning the anguish of her heart and what the Spirit had prompted within her. "He that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit," (Rom. 8:27), signifies far more than that He understands: God approves and delights in—for this use of the word "know" see Psalm 1:6; Amos 3:2; John 10:14; 1 Corinthians 8:3. And why is it that God thus finds perfect complacency in the mind of our Helper? Because as the Father and the Son are One, so the Father and the Spirit are One—one in nature, in purpose, in glory. "Because He maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:27). Here is additional ground for our encouragement. The words "the will of" are in italics, which means they are not in the Greek, but have been supplied by our translators. They interpose a needless limitation. That which the Spirit produces in the saint is, first, in accord with God's nature—spiritual and holy. Second, it is according to God's Word, for the Spirit ever prompts us to ask for what has been revealed or promised. Third, it is according to God's purpose, for the Spirit is fully cognizant of all the Divine counsels. Fourth, it is according to God's glory, for the Spirit teaches us to make that our end in asking. O what encouragement is here: the Spirit creates within us holy desires, the Son presents them, the Father understands and approves them! Then let us "come boldly to the Throne of Grace."

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