



“Praying for Prayer”

A Sermon By

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Psalm 139, Romans 8:26-30

The passage we just read from Romans is not written for those who feel competent and confident in their prayers, nor for those who can easily find words to lift up to God, nor for those who wax eloquent as they beseech God, nor even for those who walked away feeling satisfied after opening their hearts to God.

Rather this passage is written for those of us who speak quite haltingly with God, who stumble for the “right” words, who struggle with the limitations of language, whose pain defies any answers, who wonder about the goodness of a God who allows such pain to exist, who feel wholly inadequate in even knowing how to pray. This passage speaks to those who are speechless and feel forsaken, and gently yet boldly reminds us that the same Spirit of God that moved over the waters of creation is present in our lostness, interceding for us “with sighs too deep for words”.

We live in a three dimensional world and, particularly in a culture of reason and fact, grasping the reality of another dimension stretches our imagination to its farthest limits. Suffering has a way of confining us to and yet also shattering these three dimensions. Our lives feel trapped in the concrete world of here and now where pain is immediate and demanding, and yet the logic we turn normally to satisfy everyday problems no longer works, and at times we even might feel surrounded by an evil that seems beyond God’s power to transform. Paul was writing to a suffering Christian community who were caught in the three dimensions of a world where they were persecuted for their faith. The early Christian community was battered physically, politically, and emotionally as they sought to remain true to their belief in the resurrected Lord. There were no immediate concrete pay-offs for faith in Jesus as the Messiah. That is very hard for us in this culture to fully grasp, particularly here in the south where coming to church and affirming our faith in Jesus Christ is often socially applauded. It is much easier for us to stay mostly on a three-dimensional level with our faith, because it is supported emotionally, physically and socially by our three dimensional world. That is, it is easier for us until we truly suffer. For when we suffer, our three dimensional world at least in one dimension if not more, is blown apart, and the reality we have lived by no longer makes sense.

It is ironic that the Bible is often casually used to provide simplistic answers to suffering, since it provides no such casual answers. Most of us know how tempting it is to compulsively say something pithy in a situation where we want to provide comfort and care. Those of us who have been on the receiving end of such a quote may have winced internally and perhaps even externally at how it seems to trivialize our situation. And so we come across this verse from Paul’s letter to the Romans that we read this morning, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” What an incredibly powerful affirmation of faith in God’s providence and sovereignty that Paul as a suffering Christian is making in this verse. How much we want to convince others of the truth of Paul’s words when we see them suffering. How much we want to believe this truth when we ourselves are suffering. And yet this verse from Paul has been casually imposed on suffering individuals at times in a way that overlooks the depth of their suffering by seeking to provide a pat, concrete answer to a situation that defies such answers. The problem is that to quickly fling this verse at someone whose world has fallen apart is really to attempt to sidestep the total inadequacy of words or answers when one comes face to face with true suffering. Paul did not casually write this verse to make things feel better for the Romans. Rather he

wrote it as one who himself suffered and felt the inadequacy of words to reach God. It comes on the heels of him speaking of not knowing how to pray. And that passage comes on the heels of his defining hope as not having to do with what is seen, but what is unseen. Paul is not writing about our three dimensional world here and not throwing out words to fix suffering or pain in a three dimensional way. He writes about weakness and waiting and not seeing and not being able to pray. And in the context of writing about this lostness he points to another dimension of life – one in which the Spirit – the creative breath of God – in the midst of our lostness sighs with and for us.

What is this “good” that Paul points to all things working toward? He does not even attempt to define it in words that fit our three dimensional world. The closest he comes to defining it is through speaking of us being “glorified”. He writes,

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose... For those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

In the Old Testament we read about the Glory of the Lord leading the people through the wilderness, that dry, empty place where they wandered lost for years. The glory of the Lord came in a pillar of cloud and sometimes in fire. The glory of the Lord is that hovering Spirit of God, the presence of God, who sometimes is so clearly visible to us and leading us, and sometimes not seen but interceding for even when we are too weak to know. When Paul promises we will be glorified, Paul is promising that we will be exalted - lifted up - into God’s presence and glory.

Most of you are familiar with Joe Martin, who has been a leader in our community and an individual instrumental in the transition and transformation of NCNB, now Bank of America, from a regional to a national bank. He especially led the bank in the area of public policy and community relations, having a huge impact in our community in the area of affordable housing. The new Imaginon center is named after his wife, Joan and him. In 1994, Joe received the devastating diagnoses of having Lou Gehrig’s disease, also known as ALS, a neuro-muscular disease that leads to progressive, total-body muscular paralysis over time. In his book *On Any Given Day*, Joe chronicles his experience upon receiving that diagnosis and learning how to live each day forward with this disease. I am going to quote a fairly extensive passage from this book, and as I do, notice how Joe’s experience moves from one of not knowing, to feeling the depth of God’s spirit interceding for him, to a brand new understanding of being glorified through and in God’s sovereignty.

Joe has been a faithful member of Covenant Presbyterian Church for years. He writes about how his experience of going to church drastically changed after he received his diagnosis:

Going to church should have been the easiest part of every week, and the most comforting. But it was actually the hardest and most challenging. There, I could not even pretend to be thinking of something else. What is happening to me? What am I supposed to be doing about it? There, where I expected to find answers, I had to face the fact that I didn’t have any. I found it fairly easy to control my emotions as I cheered up other people who were saddened by my diagnosis. But try as I might, I had no control in church. My emotions were blown back and forth by constant surprises. Normally, the number of surprises in a Presbyterian worship service is somewhere between a few and none. Ditto for

emotional outbursts, which are even rarer. So I was unprepared for the degree to which this turn of events in my life made once familiar and comfortable things in corporate worship seem suddenly very personal and very unsettling.

...the hymn that really threw me for a loop was the one our minister chose to reinforce his nearly constant theme of the sovereignty of God. To match the sturdy music of a Welsh hymn tune, the writer had pulled out all the rhetorical stops. “Immortal, Invisible, God only wise,” we sang, “In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.” And then came the line, “We wither and perish, but nought changeth Thee.” Wither and perish? That was the answer to question number one, What is happening to me? Under even the best-case scenario, a person with Lou Gehrig’s disease will wither and perish... I stopped singing while “wither and perish” still echoed, and I stuck a handkerchief in my mouth to muffle any other sound.

So what about question number two: What am I supposed to do about it? Joe goes on to tell how he was invited by two friends to join them at the weekly “service of prayer for healing” at Christ Episcopal Church. Wanting to be nice to his friends, he writes that “I folded my Calvinist cloak, shoved it with some difficulty into the closet, and went over to Christ Episcopal Church on Wednesday at ten in the morning. I did not tell anyone I was going.” Finding himself surprisingly moved by the beauty the Episcopalian prayers, Joe went forward to kneel at the altar rail next to his two friends, Terri and Kay, for the prayers of healing. He recounts:

I heard Terri tell [the rector] Henry that she wanted him “to pray for my friend Joe,” and he did. It was then my turn, and I had no idea about protocol. Should I ask for reciprocal prayer for Terri? What about Kay? Or would I then be obligating Kay to pray for me, too? I settled on a good Presbyterian category, “All those with ALS,” I whispered as Henry bent down to me. What I then heard from gentle Henry was an earnest and heartfelt prayer for “all those with Alice.” With Alice? I looked up in a panic, but Henry’s eyes were closed and he plowed ahead. “And for Alice,” he said. “May they and she know the healing power of God’s love.” I relaxed. Whoever Alice might be, she and her friends should be feeling better.

Henry took a bit of oil and made a warm cross on my forehead. Then, with his hands on my shoulders, he prayed: “Joe, I lay my hands upon you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, beseeching our Lord Jesus Christ to sustain you with his presence, to drive away all sickness of body and spirit, and to give you that victory of life and peace which will enable you to serve him, both now and forevermore. Amen.”

For a gentle man, Henry had power in his hands. This time, there was no question that he was praying for me, by name and by touch. The strength of his hands reached from my shoulders to my knees. And I felt a peace I had not known.

As I sat again in the more familiar setting of our own Covenant Presbyterian Church, listening to John Rogers explain the sovereignty of God for the umpteenth time, I finally got it. The point of the hymn was not so much “we wither and perish” as “nought changeth thee”. The certain power and presence of a sovereign God will transcend any triumph and any tragedy we may encounter. “And when you fall,” John was saying, “you can fall no farther than the arms of a loving God.” I felt a call settling into my soul as he concluded with a recitation of his favorite text from Isaiah: “Thus says the Lord, ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine.’”

So that’s what the sovereignty of God was all about. And that’s what hope was all about – not wishing that something could happen, but knowing that whatever happens, we are God’s.¹

In suffering, our faith actually forces us to face the limitations of our words and ability to find answers. Going to worship, Joe was confronted with his lack of answers and his helplessness to find answers in the face of the reality of the disease he had. And we see a process where through the words of hymns he had sung all his life, through the prayers of healing said on his behalf, through the power of the Spirit moving through the rector’s hands into Joe’s body and soul, and through hearing for the “umpteenth” time the Word of God’s sovereignty preached from the pulpit – we see through this process the action of God’s creative all-encompassing Word undergirding and sustaining Joe in the depths of his confusion and fear. It was a dimension of reality that came not from a miracle drug nor from someone explaining to him exactly what God’s will was in him having this disease. The ALS was not taken away nor was he provided any answers about the future, except for this one: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine.” As his three dimensional world was shattered, the Spirit interceding for him in sighs to deep for words introduced him to a new dimension of living and peace.

What is so important for us to know and remember is that we do not have to feel this Spirit for it to be active. Our effort does not cause it to be. Our prayers do not cause it to be. Furthermore, as we read in Psalm 139 even when we feel like we are “covered in darkness..., even the darkness is as light to God.”

O Lord you have searched me and known me,
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
And lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is so high that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from your spirit?

¹ Joe Martin and Ross Yackey, On Any Given Day, Winston-Salem: John F. Blair Publisher, pp. 56-62.

Or where can I flee from your presence?

Prayer is an invitation to step into the stream of God's spirit that knows our hearts and our needs, and yearns for us to bring these into relationship with God. Prayer is a mystery – how it works does not fit into our three-dimensional world of explanations. Indeed, in our three dimensional world of knowing sometimes it seems like prayer doesn't work. Many of us have known of prayers clearly answered and many of us have known of prayers that seem unanswered. Most of us have had an experience of both. I cannot nor have I run into anyone else who can really tell you why this is so. And yet as C.S. Lewis said when asked about praying after the death of his wife, "I don't pray to change God; I pray so that God will change me." Michael Casey writes, "Prayer is not controlled. We are the ones controlled, called upon to submit to a mysterious inward process, to be carried beyond ourselves without ever knowing clearly what carries us or where we are going... Prayer is larger than any of us. It is less a question of bringing prayer into our hearts than of bringing our hearts into prayer; not drawing water from the sea to fill a bath, but being immersed in an immense ocean and becoming one with it."

When we bring all of ourselves into prayer – our needs, our intercessions for others, our anger, our fear, our hope, our joy – we are carrying all these things into the stream of God's amazing grace and spirit, so that we and others may be transformed and healed.

The title of the Spring issue of *HungryHearts* – a periodical published by the Office of Spiritual Formation of the Presbyterian Church – is "Short prayers that Pierce the Gates of Heaven". This title is taken from the medieval mystic author of the classic "The Cloud of Unknowing". God does not need our lengthy prayers – as the author of "The Cloud of Unknowing" states just crying out "Help" is sufficient and plenty. Or praying for prayer when we are at a loss, for a way to feel reconnected to the stream of God's spirit. Steve Shussett, the editor of *Hungryhearts*, recalls that "in his movement of faith from a man of prosperity to a man of faith", Francis of Assisi cried out, "God... God... God at the foot of his bed, hour after hour, night after night." Shussett reflects that:

What we say changes what we believe, what we believe changes how we act, and how we act changes who we are. God alone can change us with lightening speed, 'in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye', and on rare occasion that does happen. But for most of us, most of the time, it is the slow wash of baptismal waters and the steady repetition by baptismal fire that day by day wears away the hard stone with which we have armored ourselves. In truth, it is this slow repetition of faithful lives in faithful prayer that truly does move mountains, one small pebble at a time.²

How many times had Joe Martin heard the words of the hymn, "Immortal, Invisible"? And, as he jokes, how many times had he heard John Rogers preach about the sovereignty of God? These words were really planted in his heart and at the right time through the power of God's spirit, they took on entirely new meaning and hope for him.

When we pray, we are not alone. Even if in our three-dimensional, limited experience, we feel like we are alone, even if we cannot even find words, the stream of

² Steve Shussett, ed., *Hungryhearts*, Vol. XIV, Number 2, Summer, 2005, p. 2.

God's spirit runs below and above us, hemming us in behind and before, mysteriously sighing and interceding on our behalf. Thus, Paul can conclude the chapter from which the passage we read this morning came, with these amazing words of reassurance:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?...
For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.