

The Spirit of Prayer

Let's pray...

I want to begin this morning with a story – an experience in my life that sparked **a shift** – ***in me***... in my prayers and my life with God.

It happened when I was a student in University.

I was in my second year – must have been about 20.

And I was in the midst of a season of asking a lot of questions about the Holy Spirit – about His presence and work in our world and in me. Wherever I could, I studied what the Bible taught about the Spirit, and sought the wisdom and insight of godly Christians around me.

And, not surprisingly, in and through it all, **I prayed.** A lot.

I say – **not surprisingly** – because, as we've talked about over the last while, the Holy Spirit is fundamentally not a doctrine to be grasped, or a power to be accessed – but ***a Person to be known***... A Divine Person who makes the Father and the Son known to us.

And so if the Spirit is the Personal presence of God – who comes to make God known to us – it makes sense that we'd pray... that we would approach God in a personal way – speaking, sharing, relating, even listening – to know God and be known...

So, as I said, in that season, I found myself praying a lot – alone on my knees in the prayer chapel at school and at home in my room; as I drove to and from school, as I traversed the campus or navigated

the trails in, what's known as, the "back forty". And, wherever possible, I prayed with friends and mentors.

And somewhere in that season, I got invited to join some friends who would gather and pray together every Saturday night in the old chapel building – where the band classes now met. They'd gather mid-evening and pray together late into the night.

So I came along – for a season. And found myself being drawn into something I'd never experienced before, at least not so intensely. Because there wasn't any agenda, no plan, no prayer list, no going around asking for and inviting prayer requests. Just this simple and expectant invitation for God, by His Spirit, to lead us... to lead us in prayer for the things on **God's** heart... to inspire us... to speak to us and among us...

And, at first, I felt a little at a loss. I didn't know what to do, or how I was supposed to enter into this.

But slowly, **as** I prayed with these friends and acquaintances, **as** I heard and recognized God leading us, stirring us, speaking among us, my understanding and posture toward prayer began to change... As I began *to grasp – to understand – to know by experience* – that prayer isn't just something **we do** to seek God, but it's a way for us to be drawn into **what God is doing**, to **join *with* God** in seeking what He is seeking – on earth as it is in heaven.

Which often isn't how we view or approach prayer, is it?

Think about the last time you stopped to really seek God in prayer. Maybe you were alone. Maybe you were with others.

***How did you approach God in prayer?
How did you view your role in prayer, and God's role?***

So often, we tend to view prayer and approach prayer as though **we're** the initiators. As though we're the ones doing the work. As though we're the **active** one's in prayer.

We pray. And God responds (hopefully).

We pray. And God answers (hopefully).

But in truth, that's not how it works, or happens.

Because, according to scripture, prayer is itself the fruit of the Spirit. **It is the result of *the Spirit's doing*.**

Prayer isn't what makes the Spirit **come**. It's what happens because the Spirit **has come** and **is** at hand, at work, stirring our hearts with a hunger for God and for the things of the God.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul, inspired by the Spirit, wrote to the Christians in Galatia.

Galatians 4:4f

"When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God

sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'"

And in **Romans 8:15**, Paul says the same thing, and adds these words: "*And **by him we cry**, 'Abba, Father.'"*

By **what**? By **Him**. By the Spirit. By the presence, ministry and grace of the Spirit.

In response to the Spirit...

In response to the Spirit... we pray.

Prayer isn't what **we** do to get God's attention. Prayer is what **God** inspires us to do **to get our attention** – to get us attending to and involved in what He is up to and seeking... to draw us into what He is doing...

By the Spirit... The Spirit calls out "*Abba, Father*" – and because the Spirit is in us, **we do too**.

Which tells us: we're never the initiators of prayer. The Spirit is... The Spirit doesn't come because we pray. But we pray **because the Spirit has come**. Because the Spirit is calling and drawing us close. Because the Spirit is stirring us...

With hunger for Him, yes. For his intimacy and presence and power and will, yes. But all because He is already at hand and at work... in us. in grace... stirring and inspiring us to pray...

Which should give us **pause** and **hope** as we come to pray – whether on our own or with others...

It should give us **pause** in the sense of causing us to **not** view or treat God as *the Uninformed One*, or as the *Inactive* and *Disinterested* One... Cause He's not. He never is.

We are, at times. But **God isn't – ever...**

Truth is, God – the One we address in prayer – is the One who **knows** better than we do (*about everything*)... The One who **cares** more than we do (*about everything*), and He is already at hand and at work.

And so in prayer, it's not as though we need to inform God as much as we are invited to participate with God... to join God in seeking His will to be done... on earth as it is in heaven...

Understanding the Spirit's primacy in prayer should give us **pause** as we come to pray...

And hope... hope that the God who has inspired us to pray will meet and lead us as we pray. Hope that the God who is already at work – inspiring us to pray – will be at work in our praying...

I love how Gordon Fee has put it. He writes, "Prayer is not simply our cry of desperation or our grocery list of requests that we bring before our heavenly *Abba*; prayer is an activity inspired by God Himself, through his Holy Spirit."

Or put another way: Prayer is not simply our cry of desperation or our grocery list of requests that we bring before our heavenly *Abba*; *prayer is the Spirit's invitation for us to join Him in seeking the Father.*

Which isn't to say that our prayers at times are not desperate cries – they are. Nor is this to say that we don't and can't, at times, come to God with much to seek Him for. We do and will.

But if that's all we think prayer is, then we've missed so much. Because prayer is not just something **we** do **to** God (i.e. we pray **to** God). But prayer – **Christian** prayer – is **always** *in the Spirit* – a participation with the Spirit... As Fee writes, it is "*an activity inspired by God Himself, through His Holy Spirit.*"

Which means that as we come to pray, with our desperate cries and our grocery lists, we're invited to come with hope and thankfulness that God doesn't just want to **hear** our prayers, but to **meet us** in prayer... to lead us in prayer – that we might join Him in what He is doing...

Which, I don't know about you, but for me, is a freeing gift. Cause prayer – understood and approached as primarily **my** work, **my** job – **is exhausting.**

Cause there's just so much to pray for. Too much. It's endless.

But prayer understood and experienced as an invitation to participate with the Spirit in what God is doing... That's different.

As one of my professors used to say: **That alone is worth the price of admission.**

Not that praying in the Spirit isn't still, at times, **hard work**, but it's not **solitary** work. It's **shared** – **with God...**

Which is something I need to continually be reminded of...

I remember a season a few years back when I was **aching** for this – tired of prayer as speaking laundry-lists **at** God – longing to participate with others in **drawing near** to God to seek what's on His heart...

And one day – in the midst of this season – I was invited to go with a few others to pray for one of our friends – Charlotte – who'd been in a car accident the day before.

On the way over, one of my friends – Mike – asked whether I'd like to lead the time of prayer or have him lead. And I invited him to – because he knew Charlotte more than I did, at that point.

And so after some catching up with Charlotte, hearing the story of what happened and how she was doing, we went to pray, and instead of just diving into our "**Oh God, would you's**", Mike began by offering our time and one another to God, **and inviting God to lead us**, and expressing our desire and intent to simply pray as He would lead... to join with Him in seeking what He would want...

And it was such a gift.

A gift to Charlotte, for sure.

But it was also **a gift to me** – to find myself with others **drawing near to God** in prayer. Not just praying our lists and our needs - **speaking at God**. But turning **to God** in prayer – **bowing** to God in prayer – **meeting** with God in prayer – **and following God in prayer** – joining with God in seeking what He was seeking...

This is one of the reasons why I love participating in our early prayer on Wednesday morning (*come join us sometime*) – because, amidst the many needs we do name – we aren't **just** listing needs to God, but are **drawing near** to the God.

And I know this, because **so often** when it's done, I don't want to leave – because we've experienced God in prayer.

OK, but what about the times when we don't experience God's leading? The times when, we come to pray, or feel a deep need to pray, an ache to pray... but we can't. We just don't know what to say... or what to pray for... We can't make sense of what's going on, what's needed, or what God wants...

Like many of you, I have known **many** days like this – and long seasons when this was exactly how I felt every day. Needing God so deeply – but not being able to make sense of the mess of motives in me, or what God's will was – for me, or for others...

And yet even here, in the grace of God, we experience the Spirit. We may not grasp it, but we need to know and trust this – to trust the Spirit in these times.

For in the mystery of God's grace, not only does the Spirit call us to prayer and inspire us to pray, but ***the Spirit Himself prays – in us, and with us, and for us...*** and particularly when we find ourselves weak and unable to pray...

Listen to what the apostle Paul says in **Romans 8:26f**.

Having named the way in which all of creation groans in eager longing for the day of redemption... And that this groaning is something that everyone who is in Christ lives with – this ache, this longing, this groaning for the fullness of God's redeeming work in us and in all... **Paul writes** (Romans 8:26f).

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

Do you hear that? **The Spirit intercedes for us!**

What an incredible mystery and grace – that though **we** don't always know what we need... though we don't always know what to pray for... though we don't always know what God wants... **The Spirit does.**

He knows our hearts – better than we ever could.

He know what we need – better than we ever could.

And **He** knows the will of the Father – better than we ever could.

And in grace, **He** – the Spirit of the Living God – who knows us, who knows our needs, and who knows the will of the Father – **prays for us. For you. For me.**

Do you know this? That **right now** – though you may not understand all that you need... though you may not understand what God wants for you – the Spirit does, and He is praying – interceding **for you.**

Paul says, "*The Spirit Himself intercedes for us – through wordless groans.*"

What a gift – on so many levels.

First of all, just to know that weakness, feeling our incompleteness, not understanding God's will are all to be expected as we walk in the Spirit. They are not the evidence that we've misstepped, but just a part of the journey this side of the cross.

That's a gift – that we all need to be reminded of at times... that allows room for us all.

But more than that, what an incredible gift to know that in our weakness and confusion, when we don't know what to pray for, when we can't make sense of our own hearts or God's heart and will, when

we can't form our prayers, **the Spirit does for us...** *The Spirit*

Himself intercedes for us...

With wordless groans...

I love that we're told that the Spirit **groans**.

I know I hardly understand what that means and looks like, but the one thing that seems clear is that Paul is saying that the Spirit enters into our experience. He groans with us – **for us**.

And yet also **goes beyond it** – *interceding for us in* accordance with the will of God.

There's so much mystery and grace here. That somehow God the Spirit seeks God the Father, through God the Son, for us.

Why would we ever be afraid? What a mystery of grace.

Not **just** that we are invited to pray in the Spirit, by the Spirit, in cooperation with the Spirit, but that ***the Spirit Himself prays for us...***

Michael Green, a wonderful British evangelical Anglican, describes this grace of the Spirit so well... **He writes:**

"The Holy Spirit understands not only the mind of the Lord... but the mind of struggling Christians... He knows we find it hard to pray. He knows there are times when we feel so deeply and yet so confusedly that we cannot frame petitions, but simply come in silent pleading to the Lord. He knows that we are often very unsure what is the will of God, and therefore cannot pray with clarity and confidence about it. He knows the varied and perplexing circumstances in which we are placed. And he helps – the very word in Greek is highly suggestive. It means he grasps the situation *for us* and *with us*. He

frames the petition in our lips; and he prays within us to the Father, with sighs too deep for words..." (123)

What an incredible gift of grace – to celebrate and trust and find hope in...

A number of years ago, I signed up for a silent prayer retreat. I was living and pastoring in Saskatoon – the Paris of the Prairies – at the time. And I'd recently discovered this wonderful catholic retreat center in the heart of the city – about 10 minutes from my home.

I was in a season of wrestling with so much, at a loss in many ways, wrestling to make sense of my own heart and, even more, *of God's heart* – God's **leading** for me...

But also, I was just wrestling to know God's presence in it all.

And so I signed up for this retreat – as a way to set other things aside and hopefully receive God's direction.

The other major draw was that throughout the retreat I would have the opportunity to meet with a spiritual director who would be there to help me attend to God's presence and voice in my life. And that felt like something I needed – to have someone listen to me and with me – for God...

[That's what a spiritual director does – they help you listen to God's voice in your own life...]

And on the second day, after hours of silence and prayer, reading **and groaning**, I came to my second meeting with my director. She asked me what I was longing for, and I shared that I was longing to know God's direction as to whether I should stay where I was, or be open to something else... But deeper than this, I just longed **for God** – for whatever God would want for me. I longed **to know God** in that season of my wrestling...

And in the stillness of her office, she invited me to close my eyes and, in my imagination, come to God.

And **instantly I could see** myself at the beach in White Rock— where I grew up and had prayed so many times – and I was sitting on a log... I could see myself sitting there with my **head hung heavy** and my **hands out open** to God...

And then I saw Jesus – sitting beside me – with His head bowed and his arms out and hands open to God...

And then He was standing behind me – with one hand on my back and the other lifted high – praying for me.

Which wasn't what I was wanting. I had wanted Jesus to be standing in front of me – taking my hand to lead me...

But that's not where He was...

But it didn't matter. It didn't matter anymore, because I knew that I wasn't alone or lost or adrift – **but Jesus was praying with me and for me...**

And my heaviness lifted so undeniably.

I still didn't know where it was all going, and I didn't know what God's will was in the decisions before me, but it didn't matter – cause I knew that Jesus was waiting with me, and praying with me and for me... and that was enough for me. Enough to fill me with rest and peace and hope... in the midst of big questions and uncertainties...

And though this could sound like just my personal experience, **this is exactly what Paul says the Holy Spirit does... is doing** for you... and for me... in our weakness... in our confusion... in our groaning and ache for the redemption of *our bodies and lives and all of creation...*

"The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God."

... in us, and with us, **and for us.**

Thank God...

*Father, thank you for the gift of your Spirit, who calls to pray,
who inspires us in prayer, and who prays for us when we cannot pray
ourselves...*

Communion – invitation to the Table