

THE HELP OF THE SPIRIT IN OUR  
INFIRMITIES.

"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.

WE were speaking to you this afternoon of the internal operations of the Holy Spirit in making known that great fundamental truth, God's eternal election. And those souls who have been enabled, by the ministry of this holy Person, to read their titles, in any degree, to those blessed things which are in the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, will have to live a life here below by faith and not by sight. And faith will be manifested in your waiting upon and waiting for God. Hence, the throne of grace will be an important place for you to consider while you are travelling through your militant journey. There will be many things to drive you there from time to time; there will be many things to meet that would keep you from thence.

This word "likewise" is a very important one; it immediately suggests to us the truth that the Holy Spirit, who is in covenant with the Father and the Son to make known the great and glorious blessings of eternal life in God, puts into operation those means that shall be for the believer's blessing and entrance into those realities. God, who designs the end, designs the means. Prayer is not left to the creature. All true prayer is under the superintendence of this infallible Guide.

"Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought." Now I will not detain you by a lengthy introduction this evening, but will at once enter into the subject, by reminding you

I. First, That you cannot pray without the Holy Spirit.

II. In the second place, That our infirmities bar our progress to the throne of grace.

III. In the third place we must notice, The manner of the Spirit's gracious intercession for the saints at the throne of grace.

IV. And in the fourth place that very important truth, That this work of the Holy Spirit in the believer is in perfect unison with the intercession of Christ before the throne of God, and therefore every man drawn to the throne of grace *must* succeed.

I. First of all, you cannot pray at all without the Holy Spirit. And after you have the Holy Spirit in your heart, the most prevalent prayers you utter will never be expressed in words, they will be "groanings which cannot be uttered." I am very glad to read

this. If you were to ask me sometimes, according to man's summing up of things, how much I had prayed during the day, I should have to tell you I had not prayed at all. Yes; I find my poor mind sometimes is so feeble, my thoughts so scattered, my mind so wandering, that desires formed in my mind cannot be told; before I have tried to express them they seem to fade. I do not tell you I do not try to pray. Then when one has to retreat from the throne of grace, beaten, and foiled because one's effort to come near to God is altogether unavailing, how comforting to feel there may be prayer in the heart that can never be uttered by the tongue! How blessed to realise this, that it may be the "upward glancing of my eye, when none but God is near;" that it may be a moan or a groan in my spirit, going straight to God who formed it there.

Ah! Job had more religion than many when he said: "Oh that I knew where I might find *Him*." Some people would say, "Well, that is a poor, low state of experience, is it not?" But then, you see, a man cannot find God in the dark. "Oh that I knew where I might find *Him*," he says, "that I might come even to His seat." That is God's way of making creatures pray; and it is real prayer, too. A man will not rest in his prayers if they are real. What is real prayer? The sighing out of the soul's need. It is hungering and thirsting. What hungry man can be satisfied with his own hunger? What thirsty, fainting man, in the hot desert with the sand beneath his feet, can find satisfaction in that painful thirst? And what real Christian can rest in his own prayers? The thing is impossible. We have sometimes said of the earth on a parched day in August, The cracks are so visible we do not need a voice from that dried land to tell us it is thirsty, do we? The very cracks proclaim the need. And so the needy soul's wounds and sores and groanings and sighings are not very pretty looking things in religion, I grant you; but they are the things that proclaim before the God of heaven the soul's need for none less than Himself.

Now, that is the Holy Spirit's humbling work in a man's soul. No man will ever bring himself there; no man by nature will ever be willing to be brought there; but it is the Holy Spirit's work. What an instance of it we have in Saul of Tarsus. If you had heard some of his eloquent prayers when about to persecute the saints—I dare say he asked the Lord to make his mission to Damascus very successful, and he thought he was doing God service; perhaps thanking Him with all his heart for the opportunity of rooting out this dreadful thing that was so contrary to the religion of his fathers. He was satisfied enough with it all; but O, when one look from God's all-searching eye penetrated that soul, where was he? Why, confessing he was entirely ignorant of the Lord; he says, "Who art Thou, Lord?" Compelled to use the name of Jehovah, the Jesus Christ of the cross, and yet did not know to whom he was speaking. There is grace overcoming the lofty man, constraining him to give honour by saying, "Lord," and yet the next thing he says is, "Who art Thou?" That is being brought down, with a witness. And then, when the Lord proceeds to tell him who He is

it is, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" There is prayer; the bringing down of the spirit, the debasing of proud human nature, the degrading of human wisdom in a man's breast.

And the same humbling process goes on in believers' hearts all through the journey. I have known what it is—and I am not above confessing it to you. Sometimes I have thought I have got on a little at this sacred business of prayer. I remember once being at the throne of grace some years ago, in secret, finding very sweet access, praying for my people, for God to bless them and bless me, and bless my ministry, and felt such freedom and happiness in it, and hoped I was like Epaphras, who laboured fervently in prayers, that they might stand perfect and complete in the will of God (Col. iv. 12). I hope He answered my prayers, but it was in His own way; I did not find next morning the flame of love was burning in my breast, or as days went on that the thing became more and more a delight unto me, and there was no longer any need of being pressed and driven to bring me down; no, I found it had to be the old beaten path, carrying about with me the weight of a body of sin and death. And to this hour I am among those people who have to confess they cannot pray—when I say pray, I mean, to be enabled to find myself in the Spirit at the throne of divine mercy, apprehending a precious God of grace, who is above the mercy-seat, and bringing my cares and laying them at His feet. I can do that only by the inbreathing and the special visitations of the Holy Spirit of God; that is as far as I can go in the matter. All true prayer is by the ministry of the Holy Ghost—in fact it is "the breath of God in man, returning whence it came."

I like to meet people who honestly and sincerely tell me they cannot pray. I am encouraged to ask them to pray for me. It is the people who cannot pray I have most faith in. Of course I must clear myself, lest I should be misunderstood. The people that cannot pray; I mean by this the people who realise, every time they bow their knee, the feeling of real sincerity which prompted the disciples of old to say, "Lord, teach us to pray." Wrestling is hard work. Have you ever watched it? If you see two mighty wrestlers close in combat, they exert every muscle and sinew to overcome. And when God's people have to wrestle they find it wearying work, and their strength soon fails them. Ah! the Psalmist meant much when he said, "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord." Another poor man said: "Out of the belly of hell cried I, and Thou heardest my voice."

II. Now I want to come a little farther, and describe to you some of those infirmities which bar our progress to the throne of the heavenly grace. There are some of us present who, through God's rich mercy, hope we are helped of the Spirit of God. This hope is an anchor to our souls, sure and steadfast. We lose our comforts; we lose the bright inshinings of God's presence; our sins cause Him to hide His face from us, and trouble us; we have to call into question our own sincerity, many a time; but, after all, we have a hope that the Spirit of God has begun to do something for us by making Christ precious to us, and grace infinitely desirable.

and prayer a thing we can sometimes rejoice in, blessed be God, and we feel we would rather spend one five-minutes in sacred intercourse with the Majesty of heaven than have all the delights of time and sense. But how often our progress to the throne of grace is barred by reason of our infirmities. And what are these?

1. One is, ignorance and darkness. O how little we are when God shines upon us to teach us what we are by nature! We then can soon join hands with the poor Psalmist, and say, "So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before Thee" (lxxiii. 22). You read of some in days of old who should come "with weeping and supplication." Who are they? The blind, and the lame, and the woman with child, they shall come together. It may be a little, insignificant lot; the blind cannot see their way, and they need guidance; and these are the people that come with weeping and with supplications. And they weep over their ignorance and their darkness: they groan because of their blindness; none so dark, so unworthy as they. And this bars our progress. Do you know what to say to the Lord always when you shut your closet door? Do not you know what it is sometimes to kneel down and then say, "How shall I begin? how shall I attempt to address the Mighty One of Israel? My very lips seem sin-stained, and my heart is a very nest of uncleanness, how shall I come before the great and mighty One of Jacob, that high and lofty Being who inhabiteth eternity? How can I approach Him?" Now, this is not a mere exaggeration, but a thing God's people have to wade through from time to time; and the Apostle says, "We know not what we should pray for as we ought." Of course those people who think they can pray and manage things for themselves won't have these difficulties; of course they will say their prayers. But merely saying prayers is of no use to the living child of grace, in fact, it only adds to his burden; he wants something from heaven dropped into his own immortal soul; and until he can get that something he is dissatisfied; his ignorance and darkness stare him in the face.

2. Then, unbelief and forgetfulness of God's kind dealings bar our progress to the throne of grace. Oh, if we could only remember the many kind things a gracious God has done for us in the past, we should have something to praise Him for when we get there. How wonderful it is to us sometimes that all the kind interpositions of His goodness can be completely out of sight, and we look around, and try to see if we can remember any—no, all hidden. As I have said recently in preaching to others, and I repeat it to-night: An effort of the memory is one thing, the kind visitation of God the Holy Spirit is quite another thing. And that is what we must have, divine reviving, that we may be enabled to rejoice in God our kind Deliverer.

Unbelief! what a subtle foe! how it darkens the things of God within us! how it distorts His kind actions in our view! how it gives a false representation of Himself, His own character to us! It is a bitter root of wormwood within us, and continually putting forth its branches which darken the things which God has done for us. And so we are ignorant, desolate, helpless, faint, and some-

times we need the Lord to speak to us just as distinctly and really as the promise of old to Jacob: "Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God? Hast thou not known, hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of His understanding" (Isa. xl. 27, 28). But we judge Him according to our own poor little thoughts and conceptions. Truly the poet was right:

"Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan His work in vain;  
God is His own interpreter,  
And He will make it plain." (Cowper.)

This unbelief is continually thwarting us; this forgetfulness of God is continually discouraging our poor spirits; and sometimes we have to come to the throne of grace in this way: "Lord, I cannot see satisfactorily any mark of grace in my soul. O have mercy on me, and if I have been an utterly deceived man begin to do something for me immediately." Ah! that is prayer, my friends, that is glorifying to God your Maker, that will endear a precious Christ to you presently, when the Lord comes with His own interpretations. That is seed-sowing in the dark, and when it has taken root it will presently grow up to perfection. All fruit-bearing God has the glory of in the experience of those He has deigned to teach.

3. But again, our carnality hinders us. O what an obstruction this is! Not a mere sinless infirmity, but a very sinful one. Carnality, slothfulness, lethargy. Why, it is like an intoxication upon our spirits sometimes. You have said to the Lord in moments of favour, "What is this poor vain world to me, what are its joys to me now? Nothing; they are weighed in the balances and are lighter than vanity. Lord, what I want is Thyself;" and you have meant it with all your heart. What of your running after bubbles, then? Have not you sometimes been just as bad as a child running after a bubble because it is pretty? and have not you been stopped and found you had to exclaim, "I am carnal, sold under sin"? Carnality bars our progress. We need to be spiritually minded to pray,—I mean, to find sweet access to God's throne of grace. Communion with God, you know, is a sacred reality; a man cannot jump out of a worldly thing into a spiritual element in a moment; oh, no. Therefore we need to be careful as we walk through this earth lest we become entangled; for "to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace." When the man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho he soon fell among thieves, but did not get back quite so quickly. We can soon get away from the Lord, but don't find it such an easy matter to get back to Him; as the poet says,

"We may let idols in, but cannot turn them out."

The poor man was as if dead, he was sore wounded, and had it not been for the good Samaritan, who came down where he was and poured in oil and wine into his sores, lifted him up and put him on

his own beast, found shelter and protection for him, he must have died by the way. Ah! the dear apostle Paul, with all his devotion to God, and earnestness in the gospel of Christ, with all his self-denying labours, had to tell us that he was "carnal, sold under sin:" that he "found another law in his members, warring against the law of his mind," &c. That is a very different conclusion to the majority of religious persons. Some people think that carnality can be just pushed aside by a simple effort of the will, that they can raise themselves above it; but God's toiling children know a stubborn will cannot be so easily managed, it needs almighty power.

4. But another thing that bars one's progress at the throne of grace is haste, rashness. If we are set upon a thing of course we want it at once, like poor little fretful, petulant children with their minds set on an object—"Oh, I must have it now." "I will let you have it next week or next month, or at a suitable time," answers the parent. "But I want it *now*." "Of course you do." But God's purpose is to give blessings in His own time, that the glory may be His, and the benefit of them known by the recipients. "Well, but I have waited a long time." Yes, but your "long time" is not much compared with eternity and the God of eternity. The Lord Jesus would say thus to disciples to-day, as He did in the days of His flesh: "My time is not yet come: but your time is always ready" (John vii. 6). And because we cannot immediately obtain what we desire when we ask for it, how soon we begin to call into question the whole thing because we have to wait a little for it. I am very glad that God has kindly left on record the failure of his dear Abraham of old: not that I want to read any of these failures to give any licence to my flesh or my unbelief, the Lord knoweth; but I am glad He has in His pity, compassion and kindness, left on record that those who were noted for their waiting upon God failed in that very particular. And so poor Abraham waited and waited, and presently his voice is heard saying to God, "O that Ishmael might live before Thee" (Gen. xvii. 18), as much as to say, "Lord, there seems to be no prospect whatever of that promise given me being fulfilled in the way it was spoken, couldst Thou not make it manifest by putting the blessing on Ishmael? I can see how that could be, but not the other." That is just what God is going to spoil, viz., your sight. We get so mixed and involved on that point; we may admit doctrinally we walk by faith and not by sight, but how about the experience of it? Poor Abraham presently fails and sets to work on scheming; and it brought trouble, and did not hasten God's promise one iota; the thing was accomplished as the Lord had purposed it and as He had promised it, and Abraham must own that it is so.

O what entanglements, what perplexities this hasty spirit has brought some of us into at times! and what a mercy it is that, when haste causes a child of grace to go on out of God's way for a time, that the Lord soon bars up that path of fleshly scheming, that the poor child has to come back again with weeping and supplication, and own his folly before the Most High.

Well now, these are specimens of the various infirmities that

encompass us at the throne of the heavenly grace; and they bring us to this conclusion, that "We know not what to pray for as we ought." When we think of God's greatness, and our meanness and littleness; of His holiness, and our uncleanness and misery; of His faithfulness, and our miserable fickleness, O how can we pray as we ought? And we need the Spirit to help our infirmities, to come right down to this place of need.

III. And how does He do it? How does He intercede? Three ways this text suggests to me.

1. First, He acts in perfect *sovereignty*. "The Spirit *itself*." You see, there is no mingling of the creature here. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (John iii. 8). "The Spirit *itself* maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." What is the Holy Spirit to you, my hearers? Is He merely an influence, or a Divine Person? If we are under His teaching, we shall know He is a Divine Person, one with the Father and with the Son; and we shall wait upon Him for His kind help, and we shall tell Him many times that we can do absolutely nothing without Him. He does it sovereignly, independently.

2. In the second place, He does it *secretly*. There are some things in a believer's heart which can never be uttered, they never are uttered. You can never tell out, even to the Lord, some of the things that take place in your heart; but they are registered in heaven, every one of them; God never forgets, never overlooks the work of His own hands. But it is very sweet sometimes to be able to tell the Lord what we can never tell to creatures; it gives a little strength and comfort to the soul, when you close your closet door sometimes, and make sure no human ear is near, and then breathe out dark things, painful things, before the throne of heaven, and feel sometimes you can tell the Lord, "Lord, I cannot tell this to another, but to Thyself; I must tell *Thee*." There is something very strengthening in this, and the devil cannot taunt you about hypocrisy and doublemindedness when that favour is yours. But even then you cannot tell it all out, so you are glad to rest in this: "Lord, Thou knowest." O what a secret thing religion is, after all! Here we are gathered together, having a little fellowship in the things of God and grace, and in a very short time we shall be scattered, one here and another yonder; you go back to your various positions in society, and where will your hearts be? Does our religion merely consist in a collective exercise in singing hymns together in chorus? or in secret apprehensions of Divine mercy and grace in our own souls? Are our best things between God and us? Solemn questions, but very weighty and important ones. I say, some of these internal operations of the Holy Spirit will never be known down here, cannot be fully expressed, but they are registered in heaven. "My record," saith Job, "is on high."

3. Then, in the next place, the mode of the Spirit's intercession is an *intense* thing. Groanings denote intensity. What a pressure, when the burden of sin lies on your heart, and you cannot confess

it; does it not seem like a weight bearing you down to the very dust? "Oh, if I could but get to the throne! If I could but breathe it out before God! Here it is like a pent up thing; like a stone in my breast, and I cannot dissolve it; hardness, contraction, bondage; nothing can move it but the visitation of God upon my spirit." Oh, what a burden it is! To feel your own helplessness when you have to enter into the service of God, it may be. "Oh, I want to get to God: my helplessness brings me to the dust." There is an intensity about it, friends; it is something more than the talk of the lip, something more than an expression of opinion or a passing feeling. Do not think prayer is a thing to make us go on cheery all the time with a light and glad heart. Prayer is the burden of a sigh; prayer in the soul is that groan which betokens pressure upon the very heart. And the Spirit goes on with this work of intercession.

IV. Now, I said this work in the believer of the Holy Spirit helping the infirmities, even sometimes with these groanings which can never be uttered, is in complete and blessed unison with the work of Christ in heaven. Jesus prayed before He left this world, "I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever" (John xiv. 16). Now upon what ground did the Comforter come down? When Jesus was glorified, when the Victor had gone right up again to glory and the heavens had received Him, then down came the blessed Spirit to attest the glorious reality of the accomplished and finished work on Calvary's cross. And so, if the Holy Spirit convinces you of sin, of your need of Christ, His blood and His righteousness; of your need of Him as your Burden-bearer, your kind Guide and Deliverer; draws you, in your helplessness and feebleness, to the throne of grace, even if you are not able to articulate one sound, if you are brought there in your helplessness and faintness, if so be there may be hope concerning such a wretch as you, you cannot fail while Jesus Christ lives in heaven.

May the Lord enable us, then, to find ourselves under this heavenly guidance and tuition; and may this sacred Person come down upon our hearts like rain upon the new mown grass and showers that water the earth. For wherever He comes He makes the Saviour precious: that is His great and sovereign prerogative, to reveal the beauty, the suitability and the glory of a precious Redeemer.

Where are our hopes to-night? Upon whom are we living day by day? Whose kind arm is helping us along through the difficulties of our way? Has He not granted to some of you the unseen hand and lent a secret prop? And your eye is still directed to the same source; you cannot get away from it.

May the Lord grant us the witness of these things in our own souls, for His Name's sake. Amen.

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