

# *Learning to Pray with Dependence*

## *Part 3—Beyond Words*

Romans 8:18-30

Rev. Brett Shoemaker ~ March 19, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. 26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. 28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:18-30, NRSV)

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

Someone from amongst us posted this this week: Four thousand years, and we are back to the same language. 2017 BCE on the top, and today on the bottom. Somewhere after hieroglyphics, the written word became really important, and now it comes back around to emoji's. Most of us might be inclined to say that Emoji's—these little pictures of faces or animals or just about anything—have hurt our ability to communicate effectively with one another. One writer changed her mind when thinking further about this. In response, she writes: "In many ways [emojis are] a return to emblematic literature of the Renaissance, where images were used to connect with the reader, while at the same time representing concepts such as an allegory. Emojis equally aim to provide a natural, human presence that is sometimes lost in written texts."<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Bisson, Claire-Marie. The New Hieroglyphs—Emojis as Language. Wordpress.com.

She goes on to argue that language itself is layered with misunderstandings, because up to 80% of communication when you talk to someone face to face has nothing to do with words. It's body language, tone, facial expressions. And these are something that emojis are putting back into texting and posting on the internet.

Now, some of us would say that our internet language has evolved in a good way, and many would say it has destroyed our communication. But I think most of us would agree that words are simply limited and that it would be dangerous to rely on words alone in connecting with others.

This morning we continue our conversation about prayer. This year one of our goals as a leadership team, as perhaps you've heard us mention before, is to pray dependently. What does that mean? It means to learn to pray together the kind of prayers that as soon as the words are out of our mouth, we know that it really will take God's action for those prayers to be answered. These are prayers of faith. But they are scary prayers, because we don't know if and how they will be answered. And this may leave us with big questions of faith to work out.

I don't know where you are in your walk with the Lord, but I believe that every one of us can benefit from learning through God's word about how to deepen our lives of prayer. There is perhaps nothing else we do in our lives that will impact our relationship with God more than learning how to pray.

The disciples knew that from the beginning. We began this series two weeks ago with a question from the disciples. They asked Jesus, "Lord, will you teach us how to pray?" Now, I found myself asking, "Why would they ask this question?" In the tradition in which they came, there certainly had to be memorized prayers or prayers for special occasions, or ceremonial prayers. My guess is that they were very aware of a certain rhythm of Jesus' life. It's a line that pops up just a few times throughout the gospels, but had to happen much more frequently: "Jesus went up on a mountainside...why?...to pray. I will bet that Jesus wasn't always as alone as he thought. His disciples were watching. They would have noticed in Jesus a much more personal way of being with God than perhaps they had previously been taught. And they wanted that.

Don't we all?

Isn't there something stirring inside each of us if we're honest? Do we not all want a closeness with God that we haven't yet achieved? The disciples voiced it. And during this series together, we will learn together how to pray. We are learning together how to be persistent when we pray. We will remind one another through our discussions about prayer that we have an incredible gift to be able to share communion with our Father who loves us at any moment throughout our lives.

You may be wondering what these boards are up front. These are prayer boards that will go on the wall of the Youth Room, a way for the young people to think about praying dependently together. There are two sets of boards that open like books, and that will be decorated a bit by our youth at some point. On one side we have our prayers to God in which we will offer our prayers and remember them as a group each week. On the other side—and this is the dependent part—we have God's answers. If a prayer is answered, we remember that together and tie a string between the two and hopefully, we begin to witness and celebrate together, even while some remain unanswered and we have to wrestle with those together, too.

Words are important. Words give us language to be able to express our requests to God, and to be able to articulate what God has done. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that in each one of our homes, or journals, or smart phones we have some way of putting our prayers into words we can remember to offer, and some way or recording the ways that God shows up. It could be two separate jars on your counter, two columns in a journal, or two different colored note pages in your phone, but find a way to put your prayers into words.

So far, through the Lord's prayer, through nagging prayer of persistence, we have learned about the importance of words—of gratitude, confession, adoration—and repetition. Because, for the most part, isn't this the way we think? We say our prayers, we wait for answers, we draw lines between. We think in such a linear way, it's helpful for us to connect with God through our words.

However.

You knew from today's Scripture that a *however* was coming, right? Today, *we move away from words*. Why? Even Jesus realizes—words our limited. Words, though necessary, are still our own way of controlling what it is we think about God, what we want God to do, of trying to sum up how we feel about something. Jesus himself, right before he taught the Lord's prayer, said:

“Do not heap up empty phrases like some people, thinking they will be heard because of their many words”

Even the Lord's prayer was an attempt to keep things simple and true between his followers and God.

And so, we come to Romans chapter 8. Paul is writing to new believers that he had likely never met about prayer. It is wrapped in a discussion about suffering and weakness and groaning. Why would he do this? Rome as we know was the center of control at this time. People living in Rome would be surrounded by people that would be using words to control everything in their lives, people that had or were seeking confidence, control, and security. Paul wrote about a different way of communicating because a life of faith is in contrast to these. A new life in Christ entails losing one's life in order to find it, it is to be familiar, especially at this time with the promise of Jesus to his followers that: *In this world you will have trouble.*<sup>2</sup> Christians in this time would have been all too familiar with a huge life change from one of seeking comforts in this world to falling on their knees for God's help every day, suffering.

Many of us in our world, by and large, have not been faced with that choice to give up the quest for comfort and security. And many of us, because of life's circumstances, are all too familiar with the feeling of falling on our knees with desperate and dependent prayers.

And so Paul writes: *The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.*<sup>3</sup> What in the world does this mean? The words themselves seem to be getting in the way.

In the very simplest meaning here, we can't miss this: *At the end of the day, connecting with God or with other people is about something beyond words, and sometimes words themselves can get in the way.*

I love to play golf. That's no secret. But in these last few years, one of the biggest joys of the game is going out alone or with one other and getting paired up with someone you have never met. I've met some wonderful people. But one of my favorites was a man I met the last time I played. It was an older gentleman who walked up onto the tee, and as usual I extended my hand, I said, “My name is Brett,” and I waited for his response, which never came verbally. Instead he pulled out a scorecard, and pointed to a word written there: BYRON. This was his name I assumed, then he pointed to his ears and mouth and shook his head. He was deaf.

Well, what followed was a very quiet game. Several times on the front nine I would accidently call across the fairway, “Nice Shot!” then I'd catch myself and embarrassed a bit I would give two thumbs up. There was one time the shot was so well-hit, I had to run out of the trees (where my ball was), pat him on the back, and point with a smile at what he had just done. I've never done that before with a person that could hear me!

By the time the round was over, I was compelled to write him as long a note as I could squish on a small scorecard telling him how much I appreciated the round. I've never done that before with a person that could talk to me!

It struck me, when you take words out of the equation in connecting with another person, something else is bound to take it's place. Words don't always deepen things, sometimes the lack of words deepen a relationship.

So Paul is encouraging these new Christians that there will be times when you don't know what to say. A phrase some people use when they can't get a phrase out quite right: Words are hard. Words are hard because life is hard. Life is hard is half of the message of the entire Book of Psalms. But Paul and the Psalms agree on the other half of the message. Life is hard. But God is good. Is God good only sometimes? No, God is good.... (ALL THE TIME).

---

<sup>2</sup> John 16:33

<sup>3</sup> Verse 26

Verse 28: *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*

This is how this very same paragraph ends. It's one paragraph about suffering, and weakness, and difficulty in praying, and sighs.....and the incredible goodness of God.

Now, I know that this passage may be familiar to you already. It was familiar to me. But I have learned a lot about prayer this week in taking a closer look and trying to hear what God through Paul might be saying to us today. And I will admit to you that I had until now operated on some misunderstandings about this passage. There are probably more, but I want to share three of those misunderstandings.

First, I used to think this passage relieved us of the need to pray. My reasoning went something like this:

- I'm not sure what to pray, or I'm not in the mood, or I don't have time, but it doesn't matter, because the Spirit is praying for me, and knows better than I do what's on my heart because He's God!

The problem is, by doing this, I've missed the most important part. This isn't a relief from praying, this is an invitation to pray more, but to realize that it is less about how we form the words and more about connecting more deeply with God.

Even Ghandi, from within his own tradition, understood this when he said:

“Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.”<sup>4</sup>

Because we think from A to B about prayer, are task-oriented in a linear way, any excuse to not just sit in silence is welcome.

This isn't a call to pray less, but more, but not with more words. This is a call to sit in prayer long enough that we run out of words and begin to see and connect with this *God who searches the heart, and knows what is the mind of the Spirit* (verse 27). The God who knows the number of hairs on our head and knit us together in our mothers' wombs.

In order for the Spirit to help us in our weakness, we have to try to pray long enough to realize that we can't do it on our own, that we are completely dependent on God.

Second, not only did I think I was relieved from praying, I somehow thought that the Spirit would come up with the right words while I was not praying, like a magic spell out of a book if said just right would work. Somehow, I had walked away from this passage thinking that the Holy Spirit was “interceding” with eloquent words to God, like a calm and well-spoken messenger to a King upon his throne. I am surprised at what I missed:

It's not ME that can't put my prayers into words. I can try. But it's the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, that when he goes before God can only sigh, too deep for words!

Wait! Since when is God at a loss for words? When does the Creator of the Universe not know how to form sentences? There is only one time, and it's so well spelled out in the whole paragraph before this piece about prayer that we really can't miss it.

God is speechless when God suffers with us. This is not because God lacks power, but because God contains such great love.

By misunderstanding prayer in this way, we miss one of the most important characteristics about God. God not only wants to take away the pain and suffering, not only promises to do so eventually, but in the meantime, God feels what we feel, only more deeply, because he feels the longings and groanings of all of creation within at that moment when we are at a loss for words. At that moment, God desires that we not only look to future answers, but notices that He is fully

---

<sup>4</sup> Ghandi, Mahatma.

and passionately with us in our present suffering. He even experiences the suffering of his only Son upon the cross at that very moment as well.

So I am not relieved of prayer, and the Holy Spirit does not know just what to say when I don't. Both of these misunderstandings are helpful in knowing God himself more deeply as is my third misunderstanding:

I thought this passage taught us to overcome difficulty in prayer. I thought we were supposed to get past our problems with prayer.

I think if we can correct this one misunderstanding today, we will walk away knowing God better:

*God wants us to fall face down before him desperately **more** often than we do, **not less**.*

Once again, we want to fix our prayer life, learn what words to say, be eloquent, consistent, and elaborate.

But, God just wants us. As we are. Our honest selves.

Jerry Sittser who visited us recently in a book about prayer, talks about his experience serving the poor in a downtown mission site called City Gate. He was unsure where to begin, being new to this ministry, so he struck up a conversation with a man that was there. He asked questions like "What do you do for a living? Where are you living? And do you have family here?" He received hard answers that you would expect until the conversation got awkward.

Jerry said, "I had done it again, broken one of the cardinal rules of the ministry. You don't ask stupid middle-class questions at The City Gate."

He continues later:

Then Kevin looked at me and, as if to pardon my stupidity through an act of pure generosity, said, "I was a heroin addict for seventeen years. I lost everything—my job, my family, my health. I just got out of treatment. Jesus helped me kick the habit. I don't know what I would do without Jesus."

Jerry writes:

Suddenly everything had changed. I was no longer the heroic outsider who visits The City Gate once a week to serve the "less fortunate" as we like to call them. I was standing in the presence of a saint who knew that without Jesus he would probably be dead.<sup>5</sup>

Falling on our knees or face, not knowing how we should pray as we ought is not about hopelessness. Being at the end of our rope realizes that the rope still came from somewhere, and that the story is never over. It's about being without words in the midst of our great suffering and having God come alongside and say, "Lo, I am with you....always, to the end of the age."

Falling on our knees before God is to remember how this passage starts and how it ends.

It starts with the reminder, no, the promise, that our present sufferings are not worth the glory that's coming, and it ends with remembering that God is good all the time.

We talked recently in youth group about Jeremiah 29:10.

We all love Jeremiah 29:11, and many probably know it: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

But Jeremiah 29:10 doesn't usually show up on the same poster, and for good reason.

---

<sup>5</sup> Sittser, Jerry. When God Doesn't Answer Your Prayer. 2001.

The verse that comes right before the great plans God has reads: “For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon’s seventy years are completed will I visit you, only then will I fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.”

70 years?

God’s promises are for all of us for all generations. We are a part of God’s purposes that far exceed our own limited thinking. We are a part of something much bigger. This gives us great opportunity to know God in a deeper way through suffering. But it’s a suffering with hope, not hopelessness, because we know that the present sufferings don’t compare with the glory God has planned.

God is good?

All the time.

All the time?

God is good.

Let us continue in prayer together.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

## The Next Step

### A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Take another look at Romans 8:18-30. What thoughts from the first several verses of this passage help us to understand verses 26 and 27?
2. In the context of this passage, why do you think it might be important for Paul to communicate this aspect of prayer to these people?
3. When in your own life, if ever, have you needed to pray beyond words? Or, perhaps, when have your circumstances driven you into a different physical posture of prayer that is more desperate?
4. In verse 22, Paul connects our life of prayer to the groanings of all creation. How do you experience or witness the groaning of creation currently in broad or specific ways?
5. How might verses 26-27 be misinterpreted to mean that we do not need to pray? How can these verses be interpreted more correctly to signal why it is vital that we pray?
6. Is Paul saying here that our goal is to pray deeper than words? Or is there a theme present in this passage that helps point to when it may be necessary to rely on the Spirit?
7. Can you think of other passages that give a name, a face, or a story to this kind of prayer? How do those passages remind us of rightful attitudes in our times of prayer?
8. As a church community, how might we pray (with words!) that we can connect more with the groanings of creation and with one another? Or how can our dependent prayer draw us nearer to the heart of God?



### Table to Table Question

#### *A question for kids and adults to answer together*

With your family, sit down together with a piece of paper and spend some time drawing your prayers without using words. Which of these prayers are the same as prayers you pray with words, and which are different?