

September 13, 2009 Romans 8:26-29 “Purposeful Prayer” by Richard Boatman

²⁶In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; ²⁷and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. ²⁹For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Vince Lombardi, the great Green Bay Packer coach, demanded excellence on the field of practice. He wanted complete attentiveness to the most routine drills. He once said, “Some people try to find things in this game that don't exist, but football is only two things—blocking and tackling.” He believed in purposeful practice. If the basics break down, everything falters.

James 5:16 says, “The effective prayer of a righteous person can accomplish much.” *Effective* prayer implies the possibility of *ineffective* prayer. Similarly, purposeful prayer implies the potential of prayer without purpose, prayer so devoid of the basics—the spiritual “blocking and tackling”—that the effort becomes an exercise in futility.

Today’s passage gives us both the context and impetus for purposeful prayer. Paul begins with: “In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should . . .” The great apostle has just finished explaining that the entire planet was impacted by the Fall—by sin entering the earth, and that all of creation “groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now” (verse 22). “In the same way”—in other words, just as creation is filled with what he calls in verse 19 “the anxious longing,” so we possess an inner angst reinforced by an inherent weakness, an inability to know how to pray regarding this very real sense of brokenness and yet longing for restoration. So “in the same way the Spirit helps our weakness,” our inability to know how to pray purposefully. How so? Verse 26 concludes, “the Spirit . . . intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”

The *Conybeare* translation says, “with groans [for deliverance] which words cannot utter. *Goodspeed* says, “[The Spirit] pleads for us with inexpressible yearnings.” The *Berkeley* version translates it, “with sighs too deep for words.” And the *New English Bible* renders it, “but through our inarticulate groans the Spirit himself is pleading for us.” And then verse 27 tells us that these intercessions

of the Holy Spirit on our behalf are “according to the will of God.”

After the August 9th hail storm that ravaged Eldora, we stayed nearly three weeks in Hubbard with Curt and Karyn Brinkmeyer. One day when bringing luggage up to the guest bedroom, we heard this distinct beeping sound. We’d stop and listen. Nothing. Then we’d move again and *beep...beep*. I said to Larae, “I think it’s in your suitcase.” But no *beeping* could be found. She set her suitcase on the floor and again we heard, *beep...beep*. So I took my bag and set it on the floor. Sure enough, *beep...beep*. But there was no *beep* in my bag either. I realized that every time Larae or I moved, we heard the beeping. I started following the sound. It was like playing the children’s “hot and cold” game. The *beep* was telling me, “You’re getting colder...cold...you’re getting warmer...warmer...hot...hot!” I finally found it. Under our bed balanced on a part of the framework sat a little motion box. You can put them on furniture to keep pets off; they beep when an animal jumps on the couch, its motion triggering the sound. Our hosts had planted this device in our bedroom. What a keen sense of humor the Brinkmeyers have.

Sort of like sonar to a submarine, we as Christians have within us a spiritual “beeping,” an inner navigation called the Holy Spirit who is praying through us and leading us into the will of God. We have to learn to listen to the “cold and hot” signals within. Purposeful prayer is aligned with and guided by this inner “beeping” or movement of the Spirit praying God’s will through us. This is then the context for verse 28: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

So, purposeful prayer is prayer that is within the context of God’s call and intention for us. Verse 29 defines this intention: “to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” Purposeful prayer—effective prayer—is always within God’s overarching movement towards restoration and formation. God is restoring the creation—“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”—and formation of our inner and outer beings is a part of this process.

When hearing instruction on prayer, I’ve often heard it said that “God is interested in whatever concerns us.” While the intent is positive, if the logic of this assertion is pushed very hard it could expose a good deal of selfishness in prayer. I think that prayer is not so much about God being interested in our concerns as it is about our being interested in God’s concerns and praying accordingly.

Can you imagine someone with no knowledge of construction, with no

comprehension of foundations or right angles or leveling or quality materials setting out to build a home based simply on how he *feels* it should be built? What would be the end result? It would be disastrous and perhaps even dangerous. Have we not done the same with prayer? For many, prayer has become a completely subjective exercise; whatever we feel, we pray about it in this way. The assumption is that our “feelings” are somehow authoritative. But like constructing a house, our feelings, if not informed by sound biblical “building” practices, can lead to destruction at the worst and ineffectiveness at the very least.

Purposeful prayer involves praying within God’s will, God’s movement towards restoration and formation, as prescribed in the blueprint of Scripture. Hear that? ...as prescribed in the blueprint of Scripture. There are foundational principles and methods of prayer as real as those of building a house.

In searching the Bible, I have discovered at least five categories of prayer that are instructive as they lay out for us a spiritual blueprint in cooperating with our Lord’s restoration of all creation and re-formation of our lives. These patterns of prayer help move our focus from “self and survival” as the ultimate reference point and towards a God-centered way of thinking and praying. Purposeful prayer moves us away from an obsession with material emphases or selfishness and towards a focus on the kingdom of God and redemption.

The five prayers that provide a spiritual framework for our praying are:

Confession, Surrender, Thanksgiving, Petition and Intercession. In Nehemiah 1 we find one of the many prayers of **confession**: “[Lord,] I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands... you gave your servant Moses” (6-7). Implicit if not explicit in all the prayers of confession is repentance from sin, naming our sins as an evil before God and turning towards the Lord and away from them. The prayer of **surrender** is witnessed in Isaiah 6 following the prophet’s encounter with the holy, conviction of sin and his subsequent forgiveness. He responds to the Lord’s “Whom shall I send?” with “Here I am. Send me!” (8). But the greatest example of surrender is epitomized at Gethsemane when Jesus prays: “Not my will but Your will be done.”

The prolific collection of **thanksgiving** prayers is found in Psalms. The same David who “danced before the Lord” as the Ark was returned, often wrote with thankfulness. “That I may proclaim with the voice of thanksgiving, and declare all your wonders” (26:7). “Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; let us shout joyfully to Him with a song of thanksgiving” (95:2). The book of Revelation

is not far behind: "...and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, 'Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen.'" (7:11-12).

The Old and New Testaments are replete with prayers of petition and intercession. Richard Foster writes: "When our asking is for ourselves it is called petition; when it is on behalf of others it is called intercession." 1 Samuel 1 gives a marvelous example of the prayer of **petition**. Unable to have children, Hannah beseeches God, even offering her firstborn to the Lord's service if she could conceive. (God answers her and chapter two then records her beautiful prayer of thanksgiving.) Paul petitions fellow believers to "pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel..." (Ephesians 6:19). But the foremost paradigm of petition is the Lord's Prayer, containing at least five requests.

And finally, we turn to **intercession**. We often pray for others in a pretty safe way: "Lord bless them and comfort them and help them get through school...or find a job...or get a different car." But biblical intercessions were intense matters, often life and death. Abraham interceded on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah; Moses cried out for God to spare Israel. Notice what Paul emphasizes in Ephesians: "I pray...that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe" (1:18-19). "I pray that...[God] may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power...to grasp...the love of Christ...that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to all the fullness of God" (3:16-19). And to the Philippians: "[I pray] that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ" (1:9-10).

Confession, surrender, thanksgiving, petition, intercession—these are the patterns of prayer that are to fill our upcoming prayer vigil. If you are uncertain how to pray, find one or more of these prayers and read them...read them aloud. We must allow the Word and Spirit to inform our prayers and to direct our motivations. In tomorrow's vigil, I believe our primary emphasis is beseeching God to pour out a spiritual hunger and thirst upon us, bringing both genuine conviction of sin and empowering of hearts for service. May God place within us anguish for sin and a yearning for God's heart, God's kingdom. Let us seek first the kingdom of God.