

Praying in the Spirit

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

~ Romans 8:26 ~

I was in my mid-twenties when I first felt compelled to pray. At that time I was obsessed with climbing. It was early January and I was clinging to a frozen waterfall. Daylight was fading, my strength was failing, and on the final vertical sweep of ice, I became as frozen as the icy cascade itself. Exhausted, petrified, contemplating the horrific consequences of the bone-shattering plunge that now seemed inevitable, I began to pray. As I cried out to God for help, as I implored him to guide each swing of my ice axes, I picked and kicked my way up that final wall with flawless precision and assertive strength that I knew were beyond my own capacities to marshal. But how does that unique and personal incident relate to 'praying in the Spirit'? For many, the phrase 'praying in the Spirit' evokes imaginings of experiences reserved for the most pious and earnest of saints – a state of being attainable only through hours of intense application and focused exertion. However, the wonderful and releasing truth is that God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, longs to motivate, inspire and guide us in prayer. Prayer is not just a discipline, an exercise intended for strengthening spiritual muscle. It is first and foremost a gift of grace, an undeserved and sometimes unrequested gift of communication. When words will not come, when we have no idea how to pray, when we feel unable to muster God-ward thoughts, the Spirit 'intercedes',

intervenes on our behalf, becomes our intermediary, and does that which we are unable to do. While some have understood 'praying in the Spirit' as referring to the language used (i.e. a special prayer language or 'praying in tongues'), it also includes all prayer arising from the Spirit's presence and assistance. The Holy Spirit is, after all, our 'helper' or 'advocate', the One sent to teach us (John 14:26). It is the Spirit who stirs within us the desire to pray and encourages us to pray in certain ways. When we are tongue-tied or when adequate language eludes us, the Helper prays on our behalf.

While my experience on the frozen waterfall was of God's gracious intervention despite my lack of faith, it is clear from Paul's letters that 'prayer in the Spirit' is something to be consciously chosen and carefully cultivated. Indeed, it is to become so integral to our experience that we pray in the Spirit 'at all times' and 'in every prayer and supplication' (Ephesians 6:18). Now that is quite a state of affairs to aspire to: that all our prayers are prompted and animated by the Spirit. But Paul is never one to dilute the demands of Christian apprenticeship. Neither, however, is he in the habit of leading believers into discouragement by suggesting that Spirit-inspired prayer can be conjured up by individual effort. Rather, Paul encourages all to aspire to a more 'authentic' (i.e. of undisputed origin, genuine) experience of prayer by being awake to the Spirit's ever-willing-to-help presence. Having urged his readers to 'Pray in the Spirit at all times', he spells out the practical means: 'To that end keep alert' (Ephesians 6:18). Being alert begins with being awake to God's presence: 'The Lord is near to all who call on Him' (Psalm

145:18). It is one thing to accept God's omnipresence, another to allow it to transform our lives moment by moment. When we recognise that 'In Him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28), we realise that the presence of God's Spirit is the most fundamental and important aspect of every moment. That recognition transforms the here and now from mundane moment into 'holy ground'. To be alert is to be conscious of God's presence, to welcome it, to be open to the Spirit's working, deliberately unguarded.

For many people, acts of praise, worship and adoration are powerful means of fostering this awareness. The acrostic ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication) is useful in saving our praying from descent into a mere recitation of wish lists. Some of us are especially aware of God's presence when immersed in nature; others are prompted most readily by cerebral reflection or in confronting the needs of others or in a host of other ways. We are each different and the Lord speaks to us in our mother tongue, guiding, inspiring and encouraging us in ways that only our Creator knows are most helpful for us. Knowing us perfectly, longing for genuine and honest communication, we can be assured that our Helper delights to lead us into 'praying in the Spirit'.

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