

Conversation or Contrivance?

“So also the Spirit shares with us in our weakness; for we do not know what we should pray for according as is proper, but the Spirit Himself meets [God] on our behalf with inexpressible sighs” (Romans 8:26)
(Author’s Translation).

Prayer is talking with God. It is not a religious ritual or exercise. It is not a contrived or carefully crafted presentation for “getting things from God.” It is not a test of our faith or piety or perseverance. It is not a privilege granted only to the pious. It is the vital communicative link between ourselves and God. It is no more dependent on our behavior patterns than communication with our children is based on their behavior patterns. (If it were we would never talk). The truth of the matter is that communication with God takes place on a “Spirit to spirit” basis apart from our own religious inclinations or exercises. It is this Spirit to spirit communication that draws us to Christ in the first place; that inclines us to engage in worship; that inclines us to prayer at all. The conscious prayers that we offer are really what we perceive to be our human needs and desires as indicated by our intellect and emotions—certainly not the only communication we have with God.

And certainly not based upon our worthiness. As well would the communication link between the deep sea diver and the support systems on the surface be based upon the proper performance of the diver below. It would be absurd, for example, to inform the diver that since his last remark was offensive he would now be cut off from his support systems. Similarly, communication between parent and child is based upon parental responsibilities and obligations, and not upon the emotional response of the child.

David catches the spirit of this in Psalm 103—*“Like as a father pitieth [has compassion on] his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him”* (13). In the New Testament, the epistle to the Hebrews captures the same spirit—*“For we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need”* (4:15,16). Christ, of course, did not sin because He was born with the nature of Adam before the Fall. But He nevertheless understood the force of temptation. It is like the seaworthy vessel—totally able to withstand the raging sea, but certainly feeling the force of it against the hull. Jesus was born without the sin nature and could, Himself, withstand the forces of Satan, but “remembers that we are dust.” Paul was concerned about his weaknesses in the flesh and prayed for the removal of them, but was assured that God’s strength “is made perfect in weakness.” So we are always welcome to come before the Lord—weak and wandering; incapable of helping ourselves in the flesh; making mistakes and stumbling along the path—since that is the only way we will ever get help. If there are offenses, He will let us know and give us the grace to deal with them. But the very fact that one wants to come before the Lord is the guarantee that the Spirit is working within. Repentance is a gift of God. If you are concerned about your offenses it is the Holy Spirit, breathing His “sighs” within you.

It might be pointed out here that God did cut off communication with Israel

because of her iniquities, but that was rather the result of their abandoning Him for false gods rather than a problem of misconduct. If there were offenses, there was a sacrificial system for handling them, but they did not separate the people from God. For Israel, prayer was a totally different process than for the New Testament believers. The children of Israel did not function individually in the prayer process, but always came through the priests and the temple and the sacrificial system.

Actually, the New Testament believer is himself the temple of the Holy Spirit. There is an altar of worship within each believer. Paul gives the essence of this truth in an address to the Athenians—“*God does not dwell in temples made with hands*” (Acts 17:24). And again to the church in Corinth he says, “*Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?*” (I Corinthians 3:16). For the New Testament believer, then, communing with God is not a matter of reaching up to Him in the heaven, but addressing Him within our spirits within us. In that respect, we are never really out of touch with God. We address the Spirit of God within us as easily and naturally as a breath or a sigh. In the words of Tennyson, “*Speak to Him then for He heareth and Spirit with spirit doth meet. Closer is He than breathing, nearer than hands or feet.*”

Prayer then is talking with God. In the great plethora of manuals and handbooks and discussions on prayer, one is left with the impression that prayer is a highly specialized exercise, with many governing regulations, and that it is a very spiritual exercise, reserved as a privilege for the pious and perfect. One is led to believe that if there are any flaws in one’s life, one will not be well received in the presence of the Deity. Prayer is often neglected because of the assumption on the part of many that they will never really be worthy or effective in their prayers. Probably ninety percent of Christendom believes that they are not really worthy to have their prayers answered. And so prayer, for them, becomes a ritual of hope. If things do not go as one hopes, it is assumed that one has not met all the requirements or satisfied all the regulations for effective praying. This is the sense in which the word “contrivance” applies. A contrivance is a plan or procedure or stratagem. It would be like a carefully planned speech that a salesman would give or a politician or even a child seeking some special favor from the parents. Following the five steps or ten steps to “getting things from God,” is in the nature of such a contrivance. Just the right phrases must be used and just the right content and just the right attitudes and sensitivities. The very existence of such manuals and handbooks, to say nothing of the books of prayers themselves, leave the believer with false assumption that prayer is something the average person cannot engage in easily and successfully without a considerable amount of piety or expertise. The very existence of “prayer books” would suggest that language must be specially contrived to favor the Deity and to gain His ear or His ready response.

The New Testament gives no such indication and no such guidelines. Even the models, such as those we find in the book of Acts, were brief and uncontrived. There are no special sections on “how to pray.” Jesus’ instruction to the disciples in the so-called “Lord’s Prayer” was not so much a model for the Spirit-filled believer after Pentecost, but basic guidelines for Jewish believers who had not as yet, as we have shown, engaged in such personal prayers. They had always, of course, had the priest as their intermediary with God. Many of

the instructions of the books on prayer come from Old Testament passages. It is not that the prayers of the Old Testament, such as the Psalms, or Jesus' prayer in the gospels, are not valid for us, but rather that the simple communications of the ordinary believer are equally valid. Even the lisping prattle of the child is acceptable to God—maybe more so in its uncontrived innocence.

So prayer is not a contrived stratagem for “getting things from God.” It is not a carefully regulated technology. It is our lifeline to God, simple as breathing and as valid and vital as the desire to engage in it. In fact, the very desire to pray is the guarantee that the Spirit of Christ has initiated such a prayer.

But if the Spirit has initiated prayer within us, why is it not always effective? Effectiveness is a matter of perspective. Usually we think a prayer is effective if it brings about the results we have ourselves perceived. But prayer in the New Testament sense is participation with God in the processes of life around us. The Spirit bids us pray and we join in with whatever it is that God has in mind in the given situation. The sick may not be healed, for example, but in our prayers, initiated by the Spirit, we have participated with Him in sharing the trials of the infirm.

The passage quoted above, from Romans 8, brings out this vital interaction. In the King James version, the passage is translated—“**Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities . . .**” The word, “help,” is better translated by “shared.” The Greek word, *sunantilambanetai*, could be freely translated—“takes the load in our stead and shares it with us.” (There is really no exact English equivalent). When the Spirit initiates prayer within us, He means for us to participate with Him in the execution of the Divine plan in the matter. If the Spirit did not initiate the prayer in us, we would not pray. The desire to pray is the guarantee that the Spirit is working in us. The circumstances, whatever they are, may bring to light matters within us that are important for our personal growth, or may be an enriching experience to us, or may, as a matter of fact, bring about the solution to the situation. In any case, the prayer is not ineffective, but rather has results that we may not have anticipated. The text that many people stumble over in this matter of the positive participation in prayer without focus on the result, is in James 5:16 which should be translated—“**The prayer of the justified [saved] is energized [by the Spirit] . . .**” To be sure, there are lessons to be learned and sins confessed and humbling to take place, but all these will normally accompany the prayer that is initiated by the Spirit.

In this process, the Holy Spirit intercedes with us, or as the Greek word *entugchano*—“meets [God] on our behalf.” We join with God through the agency of the Holy Spirit. And the word “sighs” is the correct translation of the Greek word *stenagmos* rather than the word “groanings” as in the King James. So prayer, for the New Testament believer is really as easy and as constant as breathing. The unvoiced sigh is as much a prayer as the outward cry.

But what is the guarantee that He is there? The guarantee is that you care that He is there. You would not come to Christ at all if the Spirit did not put it in your heart to do so. The guarantee of forgiveness is that you want to be forgiven. You would not even ask for forgiveness if the Holy Spirit had not put it in your heart to do so. If one were cut off from God, there would be no

interest in coming to Him or in repenting, or in seeking His help.

So then prayer is not a contrived effort to “get things from God.” It is not a carefully formulated communication with God. It is not based on conditions and regulations. It is not reaching up to heaven to hopefully get the ear of God. It is not a special privilege for the pious. It is a vital, continuous process within us, initiated and sustained by the Holy Spirit and constitutes rather a participation with God in His earthly purposes than an effort to get God to change His mind in conformity with individual wants and desires. It requires no special preparations or postures or phraseologies. It is a constant flow between ourselves and the Spirit of God within us as our breathing is a constant part of our life processes. Sighs and whispers; shouts and pleadings; chats and musings; tears and groanings—all are a part of the daily communion with Christ. No cry goes unheeded; no tear goes unseen. All are part of the innermost oneness that we share with God.

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