



When We Are Weak And Without Words

In his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul makes this most amazing commentary on the process of prayer;

The Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness, for, when we do not know how to pray properly, then the Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words.¹

These words come from perhaps one of the greatest and most inspirational passages of the New Testament. When one reads through from the beginning of the chapter it is easy to trace Paul's thought processes, which lead into this proclamation about the true nature of prayer. In the previous chapter Paul has been wrestling with his humanity and the flaws and weaknesses that keep him from reaching the goal he has for his spiritual development – these weaknesses are common to all of us as finite human beings – at the peak of his frustration he declares;

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death?²

This comes after a long dialogue about his enslavement to what he describes as his *natural self* – his core human behaviour governed by his appetites and instincts at the most basic level. For one who is keen to transcend this basic level of behaviour he struggles with his natural tendencies and at the end of chapter 7 he cries out in frustration *who will rescue me?* He then goes on to write some of the most beautiful prose in answer to his own question regarding the life of the spirit in chapter 8 of Romans;

the Spirit looks forward to life and peace (8.6)

live not by your natural inclinations, but by the Spirit, since the Spirit of God has made a home in you (8.9)

we have no obligation to human nature to be dominated by it (8.12)

The Spirit himself joins with our spirit to bear witness that we are children of God (8.16)

He continues on from verse 18 to tell of how it is not only he who wrestles with his own human nature but all of nature as experienced throughout all of creation. The wrestling is accompanied by groans as if all of creation is experiencing the labour pains of a new birth. All of this is part of God's great cosmic intention to bring everything under a new order of life fuelled by grace and not law. Paul is almost at a loss for words as he continues the superlatives in his effort to express his amazement at the revelation of God's loving purpose for all of creation. It is in the midst of this that he acknowledges his own lack of words when it comes to expressing himself through prayer – *when we do not know how to pray properly, then the Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words.*

Paul is referring to an approach to prayer that acknowledges the weakness of words as a means of expression before an infinite and transcendent God. He is referring to his own mystical experience of silent prayer, wordless prayer, which in reality is far from wordless in as much as it allows for the very Spirit of God - who searches the hearts and minds of each of us - to articulate the depths of our human experience in sighs and groans. In this sense our very breathing becomes as prayer offered in the temple of our own hearts.³ In order for us to enter into this form of prayer – which is an ancient and often neglected form – we must learn how to be still and know God.⁴

Be Still And Know

This phrase comes from Psalm 46 and the word translated as *Be Still* is *raphah* better translated as *let go, relax*, and the word translated as *know* is *yada* the full translation being *know experientially*. So we could read this as;

Let go and relax in order that you might experience God

¹ Romans 8.26

² Romans 7.24

³ 1 Corinthians 6.19 - Do you not realise that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you and whom you received from God?

⁴ Psalm 46.10 - Be still and acknowledge that I am God

In one of the few passages where Jesus is recorded as instructing his disciples on how to pray he says,

*when you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray*⁵

The word used for *private room* is *tameion* the broader translation of which is *inner chamber, secret place*. Jesus is clearly speaking from his own experience of withdrawing to find stillness and peace. This would have been learned after many years of his withdrawing into the wilderness to find time to be alone, but not exclusively so. Jesus was also able to reach this place in the midst of the crowd and on the road as he journeyed with his disciples.⁶ One of the distinctive aspects of Jesus' spirituality is found in his ability to withdraw and yet also to engage – I call this social mysticism. He demonstrates that we can find stillness in the midst of our ordinary, everyday lives – the still centre in the business of our human experience. Wordless prayer is one of the most effective ways of reaching this place. Without the need to find words to articulate the prayers we seek to bring before God we are set free to simply open ourselves to the spirit of God interceding through us. In this way we can, like Jesus, *share the silence of eternity, interpreted by love*.⁷

The Still Small Voice

The Quaker tradition has a practice that they call *centering down* as they begin their worship. This enables them to enter into a silence and a stillness that opens their hearts and minds to the presence of the Holy Spirit. They seek not to find God in the *earthquake, wind or fire* but instead they open themselves to find God in the *still small voice*⁸ and it is only in silence that this can take place. This is a simple practical way of calming the heart, mind, body and spirit as an act of openness to the Spirit in a prayerful posture. It can be different for everybody but the fundamentals are as follows;

- 1) Decide to set aside a specific time for silent prayer (also known as centering down or contemplative prayer). This can be anything from simple five-minute exercise or a thirty-minute meditation. The most important thing is to set a realistic goal. It can be at the start of the day, in the middle or at the end.
- 2) Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit. Somewhere you are least likely to be disturbed or distracted. Sit up straight, with a straight back and both feet firmly on the floor and your palms on your lap (upturned or downward facing).
- 3) Slow your breathing down with simple breaths in through your mouth and out through your nose. Create a steady relaxing rhythm to your breathing and then forget about it.
- 4) You will find that your mind instantly fills up with what the mystics call 'monkey chatter'. These are thoughts and feelings that compete for our attention all of the time. Do not try to stop them since this will only serve to increase their intensity. Just let them be and gradually they will subside. To enable this it is sometimes helpful to have a piece of gentle music playing quietly – true silence is pretty much impossible and often an appropriate piece of music can create a silence within us that is not dependent on the absence of noise.
- 5) Choose a simple phrase such as, "This day, in this silence, I offer myself in wordless prayer", and repeat this over in your mind. Once again you need not focus on the words too much since they are only a means of creating a stillness and a silence within you. Eventually you will find this a natural thing to do and may not need to use the words consciously. Whilst this is *wordless* prayer it is paradoxically necessary to use some words in order to enter the secret place Jesus spoke of when we pray. The point is that the words are meant as a simple offering of ourselves and not an attempt at articulating all of our thoughts, feelings, needs and concerns (there will be opportunities enough for this at other times).
- 6) Try to do this regularly and when you fail to keep the appointment do not beat yourself up over it, move on and make a commitment to keep the next one.

⁵ Matthew 6.6

⁶ Luke 9.18; 11.1; 22.39-41 all examples of Jesus in a prayerful state in the presence of his disciples. The implication is that he is in silent prayer since he would not instruct them not to stand and pray vocally as the Pharisees did if he himself did so. He has learned to retreat into the inner chamber of his heart in order to pray. It was this state that the disciples longed to learn from him.

⁷ From the hymn, *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind*. The words of this hymn are actually taken from the long poem *The Brewing of Soma* by American Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier. In his poem he is making reference to the practice of pagan religions using artificial means to achieve states of altered consciousness. He likened this to the practice of ritual and excited worship in certain Christian circles as an attempt to create a pseudo spiritual state. He believed this was most authentically experienced through the discipline of silent prayer. The Quakers refer to this as Centering.

⁸ See 1 Kings 19.11-13

This is only one example of wordless prayer. In the coming weeks we will have opportunity to look at other methods as we explore prayer together.