

When I can't pray

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When I can't pray I often turn to the end of Romans 8. Here Paul pulls back the velvet curtain of revelation. What we see is amazing: a never-ending festivity where there sounds a strained, melodious, mysterious prayer that all the suffering in this present world cannot drown out. At the heart of the festivity is the Triune God praying for us.

The Trinity is the grammar of prayer: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit praying in harmony on our behalf. Our prayer life is effective not because we are praying, but because God is listening to the prayers of Jesus through the witness of the Spirit. Think of it!

As a pastor there are days I don't have the words, and situations when the best I can offer is a sigh of disbelief. I am learning that's OK. Paul offers a vision of prayer that does not begin and end with me, but with the Triune God: with Jesus, through the Spirit, praying for us, according to the will of the Father.

This vision has been freeing for me. I used to think that my prayer life depended upon me. I was anxious about how to pray: Am I doing it right? Am I saying the right thing? Is my spirit aligned and attuned? My vision was self-centered. Prayer is what I did before God—it was fundamentally my activity. In theological language, this meant that I thought the only priesthood was my priesthood, the only offering my offering, the only intercession my intercessions. Nothing larger was going on. With this theology I got tired. I perpetually felt guilty that I wasn't praying enough. This kind of praying life is hard to sustain over the long haul—especially in those seasons when the words don't come easily. Paul offers an alternative vision—ultimately more freeing and more sustaining.

Paul teaches that at the center of my faith stands not my feelings, my experiences, not even my faith or lack of it, however important these are. At the center of Christian faith is a unique relationship between Jesus and the Father. This unique relationship is described as one of mutual love, mutual self-giving, mutual testifying and mutual glorifying. And the Holy Spirit, who searches our hearts and “groans with sighs too deep for words,” bonds this relationship between Jesus and the Father in love.

The early church described this unique relationship as a “perichorietic unity.” Perichoresis is the Greek word to describe God’s life of mutual indwelling. It is this indwelling we must understand if we are to understand the Christian life of prayer.

In prayer we are drawn into God’s own relationship of mutual indwelling—and find, that to our surprise, before we have even uttered a word, God has already started the prayer meeting. In other words, we don’t make prayer happen; it is already happening.

The first real step on the road to prayer is to recognize that none of us knows how to pray as we ought. Prayer isn’t rooted in a how but a who. There is no special kit we need buy. Prayer is a life of relationship we live into. As we bring our desires to God, we find the Spirit takes our prayers to Jesus who makes them his own. Our feeble, clumsy, inarticulate prayers are cleansed, and in a “wonderful exchange,” Christ makes his prayers our prayers and presents us to the Father as his children. Our prayers are his prayers; his prayers are our prayers. This is why we pray in “Jesus” name.

This Trinitarian prayer is happening right now. The only one who has the power to condemn us is the very one who is praying for us. This is why Paul’s wisdom is a true and trustworthy statement: “nothing will separate us from the love of Christ” (Rom. 8:39).