

## ROM 8.26-27; LIVING WITH THE HELP OF THE SPIRIT

[Chelmsford, Pentecost Sunday 27 May 2012]

### 1. THE INDISPENSABLE SPIRIT

The graveyards of this world are full of people who thought they were indispensable! But the fact is that nobody is indispensable. Life can go on without each one of us! That's a sobering thought – but a true thought too.

In preparing this sermon I came across the so-called 'ode' to The Indispensable Man

*Some time when you're feeling important;  
Some time when your ego's in bloom;  
Some time when you take it for granted,  
You're the best qualified in the room;  
Some time when you think that your going,  
would leave an unfillable hole;  
Just follow this simple instruction  
And see how it humbles your soul.*

*Take a bucket and fill it with water;  
Put your hands in it up to your wrists;  
Pull them out - and the hole that remains;  
Is the measure of how much you'll be missed.  
You may splash as you please when you enter;  
You may stir up the water galore;  
But stop - and you'll find in a second,  
That it looks just the same as before.*

*The moral of this is quite simple;  
Do just the best that you can,  
and be proud of yourself - but remember;  
There is no indispensable man*

BUT today of all days I want to declare there is one exception to this rule. There is one person who is truly indispensable and without whom life cannot go on. Needless to say, this is no ordinary person – rather he is the Spirit of God. To state the obvious: without the Spirit there is no life in the Spirit

On this Pentecost Sunday let me state loud and clear: the Holy Spirit is no optional extra in the Christian life. Without him, there is no Christian life. As Paul says in Rom 8.9-10: **“Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ lives in you, the Spirit is life for you”**  
The Spirit is absolutely essential to the Christian life.

Indeed, a clue to his indispensability is found in the word Paul uses for the Spirit, which is actually a metaphor at the same time. Paul uses the Greek word *pneuma* – the word from which we get the adjective ‘pneumatic’: e.g. pneumatic tyre. *Pneuma* means ‘breath’, ‘air’.

The Spirit is the breath of God’s life in our lives.

Just as you can’t live without breathing, so you cannot live the Christian life without the aid of God’s Spirit.

Some Christians have given the impression that receiving the Spirit is a ‘second-stage’ experience – as if you can be a Christian without God’s Spirit.

But this is an impossibility.

Listen to Paul in Rom 8.15: “**The Spirit makes you God’s children, and by the Spirit’s power we cry out to God, ‘Father, my Father!’**” (8.15).

I.e. the Spirit is the divine catalyst. He makes God become real in our lives.

When we put our trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord, the Spirit is the means by which we are born again into God’s family.

So to return to my basic point: the Spirit is indispensable in the Christian life.

Christians by definition are Trinitarians, not binitarians.

As Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “**You believed in Christ, and God put his stamp of ownership on you giving you the Holy Spirit**” (1.13).

God has given his Spirit to each and everyone of his children.

We never reach a stage when we can do without God’s Spirit.

He is truly indispensable.

## 2. WE NEED GOD’S SPIRIT TO HELP US TO LIVE

The Spirit is of the essence of the Christian life.

Without his aid we could not cross even the starting line.

But Paul goes on to say more: without the Spirit’s help we could not live the Christian life.

He is there to help us. Listen to Paul here in Rom 8.26: “**The Spirit comes to help us, weak as we are.**” Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in his paraphrase, *The Message*: “*God’s Spirit is right alongside helping us along*”.

The Spirit comes alongside us to **help** us

The particular word Paul uses to describe the way in which the Spirit helps us is found twice in the Greek OT

- It is found in Ex 18.22 where 70 elders were appointed to help Moses – literally, they were appointed to help Moses ‘**share the burden**’ of responsibility
- It is also found in Psalm 89.21, where God says of David: “**My hand shall always remain with him; my arm will always strengthen him**” God promises David that when he feels weak, he will be there helping, strengthening, enabling him to cope with the challenges of life.

With these two verses in mind let's return to Rom 8: when Paul writes "**The Spirit comes to help us, weak as we are**", we can expand the thought by saying that God through his Spirit helps by 'sharing our burden'; he helps by 'enabling us to cope with the challenges of life'. The Spirit is the Helper

I find it highly significant that Jesus spoke about the Holy Spirit in similar terms. According to John in his Gospel, on the night before he died, four times Jesus described the Holy Spirit as the Helper. "**Do not be worried and upset... I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, who will stay with you forever**" (John 14.1,25).

True Jesus uses a different word from Paul to describe the help the Spirit offers. But the meaning is exactly the same. The Spirit "*draws alongside*" with a view to helping. It is the word you might use of a parent who comes alongside their child who is stuck with their homework – not just to say 'there, there', but to offer actual help.

To return to Rom 8 again: "**The Spirit helps us, weak as we are**"  
Let me emphasize that final phrase: "**weak as we are**"  
Sometimes the impression is given that the Spirit is the preserve of 'zapped-up turbo-charged' super-Christians; as if there are ordinary Christians who believe in Jesus, and super-Christians who live in the Spirit.  
The fact is that the Spirit is for weak Christians who know their need of God's help in their lives  
In the words of one commentator the Spirit is "*God's gift to the spiritually feeble*", and not just the spiritually strong (Tim Chester).  
The Spirit is given to help those of us who struggle.  
I find that a comforting thought.

### 3. WE NEED GOD'S SPIRIT TO HELP US TO PRAY

From the general Paul moves to the particular.  
The Spirit is given to those who struggle with prayer..  
Hey, do your ears pick up at that thought? Who doesn't struggle with prayer?

**"The Spirit also comes to help us, weak as we are. For we do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express. And God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the thought of the Spirit is; because the Spirit pleads with God on behalf of his people and in accordance with his will"** (Rom 8.26-27)

Or to quote from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase: "*If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans*"  
Wow – I find that wonderfully reassuring.

There are, of course, times when we do know how to pray. For example, on a Sunday morning when we see our children go out to their Light Factory classes, we don't have to ask God for special wisdom as to what to pray for them – almost without thinking we pray that God will bless them, that he will protect them from harm, that they will discover God loves for them etc.

But there are other times when quite frankly we just don't know "*what it is right to pray for*" (NEB mg) - there is a situation at home or at work or in the wider world, and we really don't know what to ask of God.

For instance my mind goes to situations when I have visited desperately sick people - and sometimes I don't know whether to pray for healing, or whether to pray that God will take them to himself. All I can do is to entrust such people to God's loving care – I hold them, as it were, before God - and in so doing leave the outcome to him.

Yet even these examples do not exactly reflect what Paul is saying in the first place.

The situation envisaged is not so much praying for others, as praying for ourselves.

The Spirit "**pleads with God for us**"

The fact is that sometimes we do not know really how to pray for ourselves.

I find it significant that Paul describes God as the one "**who sees into our hearts**".

This description of God reminds me that frequently we do not really know our own minds - or, if we know our minds, we do not know our hearts.

The heart, in Biblical thinking, has been defined as "*the seat of the inner life, the centre (hidden from human eyes) where ambitions & values & motives are hidden*" (James Dunn).

The fact is that sometimes our ambitions, values, and motives are even hidden from us.

We can be so mixed-up and so un-self-aware that it is not always easy knowing what it is right to pray for ourselves, let alone praying for others.

We really do not know what is God's best for us.

And so we lift before God the situation that faces us at work, at home, or even in the church - and let the Spirit do the praying.

Lord, we want to live for your glory, but how we do not know.

Praying for ourselves – let alone for others - can be difficult.

But be encouraged - the Spirit is there to help us in our praying.

Not that we will suddenly be blessed with remarkable fluency of speech.

Rather he is at work in our "**groans**". Richard Foster, a great spiritual writer, says in his book on Prayer 103: "*The Spirit reshapes, refines and reinterprets our feeble, ego-driven prayers*".

*"When we stumble over our words the Spirit straightens out the syntax. When we pray with muddy motives, the Spirit purifies the stream. When we see through a glass darkly, the Spirit adjusts and focuses what we are asking until it corresponds to the will of God"*.

Yes "**The Spirit helps us in our weakness**" – he help us in our struggles, not least when we struggle to pray.

BUT does he? How true is all this in your experience?

What kind of a week have you had?

Have you been living in the power of the Holy Spirit - or have you just been limping along?  
Have you been conscious of the Spirit empowering your prayer-life?  
Or has there been no prayer-life at all?

I suspect that this morning a number of us are feeling somewhat defeated.  
Spiritually we are not growing as we ought; morally we are not living as we ought; devotionally we are not praying as we ought.

But the good news is that we don't have to remain where we are.

God's Spirit can help us if we are prepared to take the following three steps:

1. Step 1 is the easiest and takes no effort - all it requires is honesty  
The first step in going forward with God is recognizing our weakness  
**"Happy are those who know that they are spiritually poor"**, said Jesus (Matt 5.3)  
Just as there is no hope for alcoholics if they do not recognize they have a drink problem, so similarly we have no hope of making progress in the spiritual life unless we admit our spiritual poverty, our need of God in our lives.  
The Spirit cannot help us unless we face up to our weakness
2. Step 2: open up your life afresh to God, and saying "Come Holy Spirit, come" – come and help me. In the words of the old chorus: "*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me*". This is sometimes easier said than done. The fact is that if God is to work afresh in our lives, then there are perhaps things in our lives to put right - maybe there are relationships to sort out - God's Spirit cannot work where there is bitter or angry or critical spirit. My mind goes to our upstairs bathroom-shower: I called in the plumber last week because it is not as powerful as it should be. The plumber told me there is nothing wrong with the shower – what's wrong is we have allowed the hard water to clog up the showerhead - the hardness needs to be removed.  
What's true of my shower, can be true of our lives: if we are to now God's power, then some moral de-scaling needs to take place in our lives.  
Let me remind you that the old chorus continues "*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me, break me, melt me, mould me, fill me*". If we are to know God's Spirit working in our lives, then we may have to allow him to break us, melt us, mould us
3. Step 3: resolve to live your life every day dependent upon the Spirit.  
What we need is not a one-off filling of the Spirit, but a daily filling of the Spirit.  
As I often say at a wedding, if a couple want to know God's blessing on their lives, then it is not enough just to ask his blessing on their wedding day – rather they need to constantly invite his blessing on their life together.  
What's true of marriage, is true of life generally. Every day we need to turn to God and ask for the help of his Spirit. Only so will we be empowered, so that we will grow spiritually, live fruitful lives, pray more meaningfully

**The Spirit helps us, weak as we are:**

Let's turn this doctrinal truth into experiential reality. 'Come HS come!