

Sighing Language

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

This passage from Romans is a widely quoted Biblical passage on prayer. This image of the Holy Spirit being able to take our tongue-tied attempts at prayer and translate our words into an effective spiritual communication with God is one of Paul's most poetic flourishes.

This role of the Spirit as a translator who is fluent in speaking the language of God seems to dovetail with the Gospel of John's description of the Spirit as the Advocate.

This follows what I call the Cyrano De Bergerac version of the Holy Spirit. *Cyrano de Bergerac* was a play written in 1897 that has been performed and updated many times since. The original plot concerns an exceptionally gifted nobleman who excels as a soldier, musician, and poet.

Cyrano has no confidence in his ability with the ladies, however, because he feels his exceptionally huge nose makes him repulsive in their sight. Nonetheless, he falls in love with Roxanne. But just as he gets up the guts to declare his love for her, she confides in him that she is in love with his dashing, handsome friend, Christian.

Christian is not very bright and has neither charm nor social graces. His shallowness and inability to engage in any meaningful dialogue leads to a quarrel with Roxanne. Cyrano gallantly patches everything up for Christian by coaching him on what to say, whispering to him from the shadows.

When the two men leave the city and ride off to war, Roxanne asks Christian to write her every day. Christian, as you might expect, is not a letter-writer, and Cyrano takes on the task of ghostwriting those letters for him.

His beautiful letters so touch Roxanne's heart that she declares to Cyrano that she has grown to love Christian for his soul alone, and would love him even if he were hideously ugly. This creates complications that drive the rest of the play.

I have seen many commentaries that interpret the Romans passage as describing a divine version of *Cyrano De Bergerac*, with the Holy Spirit in the title role. As Christian, I know that God loves me, and I try to pray in a way that pleases God, but I am so inept

that I can do little but offend. Fortunately, I have an intermediary, an Advocate, waiting in the wings to put my feeble attempts at prayer into a form that will please God.

Viewed in this way, the Romans verse offers valuable assurance that we need not feel inadequate about our unpolished and sometimes bumbling attempts to pray. The Holy Spirit discerns what we are trying to say, or want to say, and conveys that message to God.

Certainly, there is great value in knowing that our prayers are effective even if we lack proper rhetorical skills, or just feel too inadequate to offer a decent prayer. If that is what results from the Cyrano version of the Holy Spirit, then I guess it serves a good purpose.

Unfortunately, as I sifted through the commentaries on this prayer intercession thing, I got more and more uncomfortable with it, which led me to believe there is a more accurate and profound explanation of what the passage means.

What stoked my discomfort was the explanation by one pastor that the Holy Spirit “translates our prayers into a language God understands.”

Does it really make sense that I could speak a language that God does not understand and needs interpreted? Is it possible that I have knowledge that God has not yet mastered? Or that the Holy Spirit is the only other person besides the Creator who speaks God language, and therefore bridges the gulf between God and humans?

If that were true then it would be the Spirit and not Jesus who is the agent of our salvation. This sounds suspiciously like a Middle Ages thing, where the church felt the need to set up all kinds of intermediaries between humans and God’s grace—prayer to saints and all that.

But doesn’t our Gospel of John reading affirm that interpretation? Doesn’t it name the Holy Spirit as the Advocate whom Jesus sends to act on our behalf in dealing with God, sort of like a public defender, who pleads for us in the courts of the Almighty?

I thought so and was wondering how to make sense of that, when I reread John 15, and found that it says just the opposite:

Jesus said, *“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.”*

Wait a minute! On whose behalf? The verse does not say the Spirit is coming to testify *to* God on *our* behalf; the Spirit will be sent by God to testify to us on Jesus' behalf. Jesus reinforces that statement a few verses later by saying, "When the Spirit comes he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment."

The Spirit will prove us wrong. For whom is this Holy Spirit advocating? Reading through the entire passage, I cannot find any evidence that it says the Spirit is sent to argue our case before God. Rather, the Spirit's role is to argue God's case to us.

What do we do, then, with the passage in Romans that says, "*The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought.*" Doesn't that sound like a Cyrano Spirit?

Only if you think that verse means we do not know the right form to use when we pray, or the proper vocabulary or protocol. But I don't think that's what it is saying.

If we feel inadequate about praying, or are self-conscious about the vocabulary, or unsure of the protocol, then we do not understand how prayer works. As my old professor Alan Padgett says, praying to God is simply the act of a child crawling into a loving parent's lap.

How do you do that incorrectly? A child does not need an advocate or a translator to do that. God does not need an advocate or a translator to accept our crawling into God's lap.

When Romans says that we do not know how to pray as we ought, it means that, left to our own devices, we do not know how to pray for the things we ought to pray for. Our tendency is to do what advances our self-interest, and that includes prayer.

It is no secret that we pray most often and most fervently when our own interests are at stake. God help me! There's even a term for it—Foxhole Christianity.

There is nothing wrong with praying for ourselves; crawling into God's lap means feeling free to tell God all our wants, and desires, fears, and sorrows. When we are scared or in despair or feel threatened, we can tell God that, ask for help, and accept God's response.

But if that is all that prayer is, then what Paul said applies--we don't know how to pray. That is why Jesus gave his disciples the Lord's Prayer—as an example of what

prayer is meant to be. It includes asking for daily bread, the stuff we need in order to be healthy and productive in this world. But that is only a part of that prayer.

According to Jesus' example, prayer works best when we focus on making sure that God's kingdom comes to our part of the world;

when we actively align ourselves with God's will;

when we ask for forgiveness and promise to forgive others.

When we ask for strength in times of trial, and for deliverance from the power of evil.

Those are things that it is crucial to pray for, because those are things that prayer can accomplish most effectively. The Holy Spirit is God's advocate for this kind of prayer. God's Spirit works among us to persuade us to pray for these things.

When we fully open our hearts and listen to the Advocate's arguments, that is when we are most in tune with God's mission.

The problem is that we are all susceptible to human weakness. Intentions are good but the flesh is weak. That is what we have to fight against.

Paul says that the Holy Spirit is our main ally in that fight and that it helps us in our weakness. That seems to indicate that if we do not acknowledge our weaknesses, we have little use for the Holy Spirit. That's why confession of our weakness is an important part of our worship. It opens us up to the work of the Spirit.

Today is Pentecost, the one Sunday of the year when Lutherans crawl out of the safety of our theological trenches and actually try to struggle with the baffling concept of the Holy Spirit.

Traditionally we have tried to gain understanding of the Holy Spirit through the symbols of Pentecost: wind, fire, and the dove.

The rushing wind of Pentecost represents the breath of fresh air by which God's Spirit blows away the stodgy, complacent, go-through-the-motions of routine and ritual so that we are filled with new life, new visions, and new understandings. We pray "*Spirit of the Living God, Fall Fresh on Me.*"

The fire of Pentecost is the spark that ignites our hearts, giving us the energy and passion to live lives for God. We pray, *“This Little Light of Mine, I’m Going to Let it Shine.”*

The dove represents the peace that passes all understanding. The sense of quiet conviction that erases fear and replaces it with hope and trust. We pray *“Come, Gracious Spirit, Heavenly Dove, with light and comfort from above.”*

Today we are introduced to another symbol of Pentecost—the sigh. If I’m reading these Bible passages correctly, the *sighs too deep for words* that Paul writes about does not refer to the Holy Spirit translating our thoughts into a language God can understand.

Rather *sighs too deep for words* is a metaphor for how the Spirit translates God into language we can understand—into something that breaks through the surface of everyday existence and reaches down into our core being.

Sighs too deep for words are the Holy Spirit’s emojis that capture the knowledge and wisdom of God in an unspoken form that touches our hearts, not our heads. That goes deeper than our thoughts and opens our hearts so that we can experience it and be shaped by it.

There are times when I work hard to polish a prayer so that it conveys as concisely and eloquently as possible what I want to say to God, who is holy beyond my understanding. There are times when I just wing it, without any preparation, just crawling into God’s lap and saying whatever comes into my head.

Both are legitimate prayer forms. In each, I can sense God’s presence, and that is true whether the prayer is clear or aesthetically pleasing, or muddled or poorly worded. In neither case do I believe the Holy Spirit is involved in editing or ghostwriting, or giving me the prompts from the shadows.

But that does not mean the Holy Spirit is not helping in the prayer. The Spirit is working always to show me how to pray. I believe that if I listen to sighs of the Spirit in my life, I have a better chance of praying as I ought.

Abraham Lincoln was not highly thought of as an orator throughout much of his career. Although he had a folksy charm and common sense that appealed to people, many made fun of his lack of polish and rhetorical limitations.

When, as president, he traveled to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to dedicate a new cemetery to those who had given their lives on that battlefield in service of their country, he was assigned to speak immediately after Edward Everett.

Everett was widely regarded as the foremost orator of his time. At the Gettysburg dedication, he spoke for two hours, without notes, using every rhetorical flourish he knew. It was a stunning display of how to give a speech.

When he finished, Lincoln stood up, put on his reading glasses, and pulled a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. He spoke for only four minutes. Compared to Everett's masterful speech, Lincoln's words were little more than a sigh.

But in that deep sigh of a speech, Lincoln touched the crowd in a way that Everett could not. Everett's speech was quickly forgotten, while Lincoln's Gettysburg Address has gone down in history as one of the greatest ever delivered.

I believe the Holy Spirit helped Lincoln give that speech. Not by writing or editing Lincoln's speech for him. Not by lingering in the shadows, giving Lincoln the words to say.

The Spirit helped him by advocating for God. By relentlessly working throughout Lincoln's life to persuade him that honesty, humility, compassion, and good will are the languages God speaks and desires us to speak.

Lincoln took this message so to heart that when he offered this prayer for this country and for human kind, he could do so in the deep sighing language God speaks.

The Holy Spirit is constantly advocating for God in our lives, persuading us of the truth of Jesus' mission on earth, and of God's command to love one another. If we take that to heart in our lives, our prayers, however ungainly or eloquent the words, or however poorly or skillfully delivered will resonate beautifully in God's heart.

When we listen to the deep sighs of the Spirit (**Slide #16**) urging us to join our wills with God's, our prayer will do what it is meant to do, and our lives will do what they were meant to do.

Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me.