



The Prayer of the Spirit

Psalm 143

Grace Church | 4.30.23

The first symptom of a Spirit-less church is a lack of prayer. In his book *A Praying Church*, Paul Miller gives what he calls a “modern parable” about the dangers of a prayerless church. We are asked to imagine a large, successful, corporation that was built by an enigmatic, visionary, and kind-hearted CEO. The CEO’s identity is so tied up in the company that it bears his name. The CEO has written a book outlining the fundamental vision of the company, and the company’s leaders study it regularly and use it at every meeting. But something is wrong—the company’s market share is falling and profits are down. They struggle to recruit younger people, they seem outdated. The leaders gather around—what should they do? They read the Book, and it is full of stories of people who had a real relationship with the CEO, not just a working one. It even makes sure to note that the company will only thrive if the leaders talk personally to the CEO regularly. One person suggests that they meet with the CEO more regularly, to hear his wisdom, to talk to him. Maybe they should have invited him to this meeting! Others dismiss that idea: although a great leader, he listens well but never seems to answer right away or give quick solutions. He is also busy, of course. It seems like a waste of time to talk to him, since they have so much to *do* for the CEO. Instead, the leaders end their meeting with a renewed commitment for all of them to write their own books on how to run the company.¹

You could say this sums up a prayerless church. Jesus is not just our CEO, he is our very life. We can’t do anything without him. But the real problem of a prayerless church, according to Miller, is not simply that we are bad at talking to Jesus, it’s that we feel we don’t need to. A lack of prayer shows that we have bought the lie of self-sufficiency.

This is our third week in our sermon series on the Holy Spirit of God, the third person of the Trinity. When we introduced this series, perhaps you thought it was going to get real weird, real fast, like we would spend several weeks on those niche spiritual encounters of gifts, maybe make some of us uncomfortable. We will preach on the spiritual gifts in a few weeks, so don’t worry. But what I really hope you see from this series is that the Holy Spirit is not just the power-source for unexplainable wonders, but He is also the power-source for the entirety of the Christian life.

But the powerful Christian life starts with prayer—prayer is the engine that starts the power-train of spiritual living. To try to live as a Christian without the indwelling of the power of the Spirit is like trying to breathe without any air, but to try to live in the Spirit without the act of prayer is like

¹ Paul Miller, *A Praying Church*



trying to get air without using your lungs. Two weeks ago Dave reminded us that by God's Spirit we "live and move and have our being", and prayer is *how* we live and move and have our being. What is Christian prayer? **Simply put, praying in the spirit is our spirit reaching out to God's Spirit for life.**

Since it is true that prayer is so important, there are many places we can go in Scripture to talk about prayer and the Spirit. Jesus himself teaches us to pray, and prays for us. But I want to look at Psalm 143 because I think it uniquely gives us a picture of praying in a way that is spirit to Spirit with God. **Verse 4**, David's spirit is "fainting", and in **verse 6** it "thirsts". **Verse 7**, David actively calls for quick and expedient help from God because his spirit "fails". And in **verse 11** David prays directly to God's Spirit, which he calls "good", to wrap up his own soul and lead him to the flat, level, unshaking ground. Psalm 143 is a spiritual prayer, and it shows us how to pray in the Spirit, for our spirit to reach out to God's Spirit for life.

Let's then examine two aspects of praying in the Spirit through this text: 1) When to pray in the Spirit; 2) How to pray in the Spirit.

When to Pray in the Spirit

David was king of Israel, but he was also king of finding himself in compromising situations. Time and time again his Psalms speak of his "enemies", like in **verse 9** of this psalm. David lived life on the run before he became king, so he knew what it was like to be pursued relentlessly by his enemies. The Psalm before this, Psalm 142, was written while he was hiding in a cave, and has many of the same themes. So when do we pray in the Spirit? First, **when we feel surrounded**. When it feels like we have enemies all around, like life and everyone is against us, we need God to be our *refuge*. There is something about feeling attacked that helps us to recognize our need for God's Spirit.

But parts of this Psalm are slightly different from other ones that pray for help. In **verse 1**, the first thing we notice is that David's prayer is for *mercy*. This is different from the deliverance he prays for in **verse 9**. So the second time we pray in the Spirit is **when we are guilty**.

We get a better understanding of David's prayer in **verse 2**. He desires mercy, because he feels his guilt before God. He knows that he is not righteous, he knows of his sin, and so this prayer is filled with a petition that David would be spared, that he would escape the judgment of God, not his enemies. And look at **verse 3**, *the* enemy, not just *an* enemy, has pursued his soul. David feels as if his spirit, his soul, is being attacked by Satan, our great enemy.

Notice how intense his language is. It's far worse than physically dwelling in a cave or in hiding. The great enemy has pursued his soul, not his body. He feels crushed—not physically, but spiritually. David's sin is weighing on him, his unholiness is being brought to light by the great accuser, so much so that he feels what we might call "a dark night of the soul". In **verse 3**, he compares himself to one who is buried alive, entombed like the dead in constant, inescapable darkness. His spirit is fainting, or falling, because, **verse 4**, his heart is appalled. That Hebrew word there has the root of



“to turn aside”, meaning David’s heart is hiding, ashamed, turned inward. He is feeling the weight of his unrighteousness, only extenuated by an attack of Satan, and he is drowning in shame.

So often the Psalms feel foreign to us, because we live a quiet, sheltered life with few enemies. But regardless of how smooth your own life has gone so far, all of us, children to adults, students to retirees, share a common enemy. We have a great accuser, Satan, who loves to throw the sin that Jesus paid for back into our face. And we all share the experience of feeling entirely crushed by the weight of our inadequacy. From the earliest age, we understand guilt. Where do we go in those moments? We cry to God for mercy. We go to the Spirit for help.

David also knows something about himself that is hard to realize. He knows, in **verse 6**, that his soul is “parched”. Which shows us that we are to pray in the Spirit **when we are spiritually thirsty**. In high school I took a trip to Haiti to help a church with evangelism and also with some construction they were doing after the earthquake there. Our team went in late July and worked for 6-8 hour days with few breaks and no shade. I’ve never been so thirsty in my life—I remember sweating through every single piece of clothing, not a drop dry. I drank several gallons of water a day, carrying it always with me on a camelbak pack, and never felt water-logged—it just ran through my body. I thought I was staying hydrated and healthy, but I never stopped working. So when I got back from the trip, I realized I had lost several pounds. And I was preparing for basketball season, and I remember being so tired: my body had been getting water, but it had never recovered from losing so much electrolytes. I went from hours a day in the hot sun doing manual labor to hours a day in the gym. I was tired. Although I wasn’t thirsty, although I never had a dry mouth, my body was telling me—you are dry inside. I had to start drinking jars of pickle juice at halftime of games to bounce back. Sometimes, you may feel like you are working very hard for God, and even drinking lots of spiritual water—reading your Bible, gathering with other Christians, checking your boxes—but you wonder why you are so tired. Prayer is a way we slow down: we stop being Martha for a moment and start being Mary, and we receive not just water, but living water. We sit with Jesus at the well and get real electrolytes. Part of receiving that from God is knowing when that is you—and stretching out your hands like in **verse 6**. David is not concerned with what he can accomplish from God. Right now, he knows that he needs to sit and feast with God, to recover his strength.

We also pray in the Spirit **when we need wisdom**. In **verse 7**, David expresses his urgency to God. He is worried that without the Spirit’s help, the steps he is taking are taking him directly to the pit. He wants, as **verse 8** says, to *know* the way he should go. In **verse 10**, his prayer is that God would teach him to *do* his will, or literally, teach me to *do your good pleasure*. So we see it’s not always obvious to know how to act in a way that pleases God, we must be taught. This kind of language from David is wisdom language, he wants knowledge and teaching. In Proverbs, we are taught that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. And where does the fear of the Lord begin? Where does true reverence and awe for God begin? It begins with prayer: an acknowledgement in our spirit that we are foolish, needy, and fundamentally *not God*, and a crying out for his Spirit to give us life. Everytime in the Scripture someone is truly met with the presence of God, they



tremble, bow, and worship. They bend the knee and pray. True wisdom begins with a cry to God that he would, by his Spirit, be your teacher.

Lastly, we are reminded in this prayer that we not only pray in the Spirit when things are dark and difficult, but we pray in the Spirit **when we are full of hope**. If in **verse 3** David paints the picture of being laid into a dark tomb with the dead, in **verse 8** his image is one of resurrection.² He prays that God's steadfast love, his covenant keeping love, would be the first thing he hears in the morning: when he wakes from sleep and when he wakes from the dark night of his soul. It may feel harder to hear God's love when your soul is downcast, but often it is easier to pray. David's prayer is that after his emotions revert back to the mean, he would not forget God's love. Mornings are full of potential, so they must also be full of prayer.

If you know my preaching style, you may be a bit surprised right now. When was the last time I had so many sub points? Well, I think you are catching the drift. When are we to pray in the Spirit? At all times. We need real, physical, measurable times of prayer in our life. But before prayer is a physical exercise of speaking and thinking, kneeling and listening, it is a spiritual exercise. How else can the Scripture call us to "pray without ceasing" or "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

Prayer is Holy Spirit 101. The reason is very simple: prayer roots us in our dependence on God. It reminds us that we are not self-sufficient. It draws us into the life of the Spirit. The apostle Paul understood this, which is why in Ephesians 3, he models for the church how to be strengthened with power and in faith:

For this reason *I bow my knees before the Father*, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.³

Faith in Christ, being a Christian, starts with prayer that we would receive power through the Spirit. This concept will come up again in Ephesians, when talking about the armor of God. The protection and firepower of the Christian life comes by: "praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication." Praying "in the Spirit" is not praying in a new language or through ecstatic, unintelligible utterances, nor is it receiving dreams or visions—although all of those things *could* happen in prayer—praying in the Spirit is how we pray at all times, praying in the Spirit **is our spirit reaching out to God's Spirit for life**. And we are always in need of life.

² Jim Hamilton, *Psalms*

³ Paul Miller likewise brings up this passage in his book *A Praying Church* and talks about how prayer is the "engine" that starts spiritual livelihood.



How to Pray in the Spirit

I vaguely remember as a kid, probably 10 or so, a time when we were sent off at summer camp to pray on our own for thirty whole minutes, which to me felt like years. I had no idea where to start. Even though I was genuinely a believer and full of the Spirit, and even though I had listened to hundreds of prayers in my home and in church and prayed before, even in front of people, I have this memory of being frozen by duty. Although no one was watching, it felt as if I had been called to the principal's office. Here I was, sent to talk with the boss upstairs. Who knows what we would talk about? I had to make sure to cover all my bullet points, to present myself well. This, I felt, was my duty in prayer.

Now, up to this point I have not done much preaching of the gospel, which is my primary goal this morning. The gospel is *good news*: what I have told you so far is *good advice*: namely that you need to pray in the Spirit, and you need to do it at all times. But let me share with you gospel news in the how.

Prayer, at its fundamental core, is not a duty, but a delight. It's not a business meeting with Jesus the CEO, it's a seat at the table with Jesus our friend. As a kid, and as an adult now, I must understand that praying by the Spirit is praying in the Spirit of freedom. It's not a burden, it's not a chore, and really it's not work. Praying by the Spirit, in our text, is fundamentally about two actions, and neither of them could be less like work.

Crying Out for God's Help

The heart of our Psalm, and the heart of prayer, is found in **verse 1**: a desperate plea for God's ear. Jesus teaches us to be like a child before our Father. Young children cannot stop asking why, cannot stop crying out for help, but too often we are timid.

I'd like to remind you that God isn't limited to English, or to any other language. His language is not earthly, but heavenly. He knows and holds all things. The most eloquent poetry and music and art and word-smithing cannot hold a candle to the one who spoke and time and space came into existence from nothing. This means that Prayer is nothing short of baby talk—babbling to our Father, crying out for help.

But here is the good news. There are professional speakers, but there are no professional cryers. No babies are receiving awards for their screaming for help. So that means that we are all on level ground. There are no professional prayers. And not only that, but because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God is tuning our prayers, by his Spirit, so that when God hears us he doesn't hear the annoying cries of an infant but the heartfelt cries of his children. From Romans 8:



For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God... Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

In other words, Jesus, the Son of God, was separated from his Father, giving up his life so that he could give you his very Spirit, and now, you can be adopted into God’s family. Your cries are music to the ears of God, because by the Spirit you can cry not just in frustration or annoyance or anger or doubt but you can cry out “Abba! Father!” to the Father who loves you and is for you in Christ. Not only that, but if your cries for help feel so raw and painful that they are not really words at all, the Spirit helps you, intercedes for you, prays for you, and perfects your prayers on the way to God! This is the first way to pray in the Spirit: being wholly unafraid to cry out, like a child, to your Father for help.

Calling on God’s Character

The great thing about being God’s children is that we get to brag on him. And this is exactly part of David’s prayer practice in **verse 5**. The “days of old” are not the “good old days” when he was free from sorrow or pain—they are all the days of the past where God has been faithful. To “meditate” on God’s past faithful work is not to empty our mind, but to fill it with remembrance of all God has done. In this way, he calls to mind God’s great character, which is ultimately what this Psalm is all about.

I want to take us back to the beginning of this Psalm to again notice something we left behind. Remember we said that David was feeling *guilty* in **verses 2-4**. He knows that this guilt isn’t necessarily from God, which is why he says it comes from “the enemy”. And yet, at the same time, he knows that he is not righteous before God, deserves judgment, and needs mercy. How then does David know, how does he trust that he will receive mercy? Because when we turn to the end of the Psalm, **verse 12**, he seems very confident.

The answer lies in **verse 11**. David knows that if it were up to him, he would succumb to the guilt he feels, stay down in the pit of despair, and never get out. The truth is, because he is unrighteous, that is what he deserves. But he also knows something else—he knows that God is a God of mercy, that God is a God of lovingkindness, that God does not repay evil for evil. This, David knows, is what it means to be God—that is his “name”, his character, proven by David’s mediation on his past faithfulness. When God passes by Moses on Sinai, he reveals himself as “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6). This is why in **verse 1**, David asks that God answer him “in his faithfulness and righteousness”. David is crying out for God to be God. His prayer is in his unrighteousness, that God’s Spirit would lead him to the “level ground”, that is the “ground of uprightness”.



What does it mean to pray in the Spirit? It means to pray, trusting that God will be who he is: merciful to sinners, leading them to righteousness. It requires laying yourself low, like David, and pleading with God. David, like he iterates in **verse 12**, is God's servant. And God does not allow his servants, full of the Holy Spirit, to go down into the pit forever.

See, there is another one who felt like David. Jesus Christ, in the garden of Gethsemane, prayed a prayer similar to this. He was crushed, his spirit fainted within him, his enemies circled him, and although he was not guilty he was about to endure the guilt of all of mankind on his back. So he prayed for the Father's will to be done. He prayed for strength, by the Spirit, to endure. And he went up to the cross, the servant of God, trusting that God would be true to his character and not abandon him to death but raise him from the dead victorious.

So friends, how do we know that God will give us mercy? Because he has given us it already in Jesus. As David prays, no one is righteous—but Jesus is, and on the cross he took your unrighteousness on him and gave you his righteousness, and in his resurrection the adversaries of your soul were defeated. Praying in the Spirit is praying in faith in Jesus, knowing that no matter how dark it gets and how low we must go, God is still on our side, he cannot deny himself, and he is a God of mercy. The Spirit gives witness to Jesus' work, and now the Spirit draws us, calls us, beckons us, to meet again with the living Jesus. **Prayer is our spirit reaching out to God's Spirit for life.** Let us call on God's spirit for help again now in prayer.

