**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ROMANS-022**. **THE INTERCEDING SPIRIT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."*

*Romans 8:26*

Pentecost was a transitory sign of a perpetual gift. The tongues of fire and the rushing mighty wind, which were at first the most conspicuous results of the gifts of the Spirit, tongues, and prophecies, and gifts of healing, which were to the early Church itself and to onlookers palpable demonstrations of an indwelling power, were little more lasting than the fire and the wind. Does anything remain? This whole great chapter is Paul's triumphant answer to such a question. The Spirit of God dwells in every believer as the source of his true life, is for him the Spirit of adoption and witnesses with his spirit that he is a child of God, and a joint-heir with Christ. Not only does that Spirit co-operate with the human spirit in this witness-bearing, but the verse, of which our text is a part, points to another form of co-operation: for the word rendered in the earlier part of the verse helpeth in the original suggests more distinctly that the Spirit of God in His intercession for us works in association with us.

First, then--

**I. The Spirit's intercession is not carried on apart from us.**

Much modern hymnology goes wrong in this point, that it represents the Spirit's intercession as presented in heaven rather than as taking place within the personal being of the believer. There is a broad distinction carefully observed throughout Scripture between the representations of the work of Christ and that of the Spirit of Christ. The former in its character and revelation and attainment was wrought upon earth, and in its character of intercession and bestowment of blessings is discharged at the right hand of God in heaven; the whole of the Spirit's work, on the other hand, is wrought in human spirits here. The context speaks of intercession expressed in groanings which cannot be uttered, and which, unexpressed though they are, are fully understood by Him who searches the heart. Plainly, therefore, these groanings come from human hearts, and as plainly are the Divine Spirit's voicing them.

**II. The Spirit's intercession in our spirits consists in our own divinely-inspired longings.**

The Apostle has just been speaking of another groaning within ourselves, which is the expression of the earnest expectation of the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body; and he says that that longing will be the more patient the more it is full of hope. This, then, is Paul's conception of the normal attitude of a Christian soul; but that attitude is hard to keep up in one's own strength, because of the distractions of time and sense which are ever tending to disturb the continuity and fixity of that onward look, and to lead us rather to be satisfied with the gross, dull present. That redemption of the body, with all which it implies and includes, ought to be the supreme object to which each Christian heart should ever be turning, and Christian prayers should be directed. But our own daily experience makes us only too sure that such elevation above, and remoteness from earthly thoughts, with all their pettinesses and limitations, is impossible for us in our own strength. As Paul puts it here, We know not what to pray for; nor can we fix and focus our desires, nor present them as we ought. It is to this weakness and incompleteness of our desires and prayers that the help of the Spirit is directed. He strengthens our longings by His own direct operation. The more vivid our anticipations and the more steadfast our hopes, and the more our spirits reach out to that future redemption, the more are we bound to discern something more than human imaginings in them, and to be sure that such visions are too good not to be true, too solid to be only the play of our own fancy. The more we are conscious of these experiences as our own, the more certain we shall be that in them it is not we that speak, but the Spirit of the Father that speaketh in us.

**III. These divinely-inspired longings are incapable of full expression.**

They are shallow feelings that can be spoken. Language breaks down in the attempt to express our deepest emotions and our truest love. For all the deepest things in man, inarticulate utterance is the most self-revealing. Grief can say more in a sob and a tear than in many weak words; love finds its tongue in the light of an eye and the clasp of a hand. The groanings which rise from the depths of the Christian soul cannot be forced into the narrow frame-work of human language; and just because they are unutterable are to be recognised as the voice of the Holy Spirit.

But where amidst the Christian experience of to-day shall we find anything in the least like these unutterable longings after the redemption of the body which Paul here takes it for granted are the experience of all Christians? There is no more startling condemnation of the average Christianity of our times than the calm certainty with which through all this epistle the Apostle takes it for granted that the experience of the Roman Christians will universally endorse his statements. Look for a moment at what these statements are. Listen to the briefest summary of them: We cry, Abba, Father; We are children of God; We suffer with Him that we may be glorified with Him; Glory shall be revealed to usward; We have the first-fruits of the Spirit; We ourselves groan within ourselves; By hope were we saved; We hope for that which we see not; Then do we with patience wait for it; We know that to them that love God all things work together for good; In all these things we are more than conquerors; Neither death nor life... nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God. He believed that in these rapturous and triumphant words he was gathering together the experience of every Roman Christian, and would evoke from their lips a confident Amen. Where are the communities to-day in whose hearing these words could be reiterated with the like assurance? How few among us there are who know anything of these groanings which cannot be uttered! How few among us there are whose spirits are stretching out eager desires towards the land of perpetual summer, like migratory birds in northern latitudes when the autumn days are shortening and the temperature is falling!

But, however we must feel that our poor experience falls far short of the ideal in our text, an ideal which was to some extent realised in the early Christian Church, we must beware of taking the imperfections of our experience as any evidence of the unreality of our Christianity. They are a proof that we have limited and impeded the operation of the Spirit within us. They teach us that He will not intercede with groanings which cannot be uttered unless we let Him speak through our voices. Therefore, if we find that in our own consciousness there is little to correspond to those unuttered groanings, we should take the warning: Quench not the Spirit. Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God in whom ye were sealed unto the day of redemption.

**IV. The unuttered longings are sure to be answered.**

He that searcheth the heart knows the meaning of the Spirit's unspoken prayers; and looking into the depths of the human spirit interprets its longings, discriminating between the mere human and partial expression and the divinely-inspired desire which may be unexpressed. If our prayers are weak, they are answered in the measure in which they embody in them, though perhaps mistaken by us, a divine longing. Apparent disappointment of our petitions may be real answers to our real prayer. It was because Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus that He abode still in the same place where He was, to let Lazarus die that He might be raised again. That was the true answer to the sisters hope of His immediate coming. God's way of giving to us is to breathe within us a desire, and then to answer the desire inbreathed. So, longing is the prophecy of fulfilment when it is longing according to the will of God. They who hunger and thirst after righteousness may ever be sure that their bread shall be given them, and their water will be made sure. The true object of our desires is often not clear to us, and so we err in translating it into words. Let us be thankful that we pray to a God who can discern the prayer within the prayer, and often gives the substance of our petitions in the very act of refusing their form.