

Intercessory Prayer

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] I want you to imagine, I want you to imagine that you wake up tomorrow morning and something really quite amazing is going to happen to you. I want you just to think for a few moments, it could be anything at all, and don't worry by the way, this is not one of those moments where I'm going to ask you then to turn to the person next to you and tell them, all right, this is just between you and your imagination. It could be anything. For example, perhaps you might wake up tomorrow morning and whatever aches or pains you might have, perhaps for a long time, they've just completely gone. You're completely restored. Perhaps you wake up tomorrow morning and you can suddenly do something that you've always wanted to do.

You've suddenly acquired a set of skills or an ability. Perhaps you could suddenly speak loads of languages that you've always wanted to speak, or you're suddenly really good at a certain sport, or you can fly an aeroplane and play a musical instrument, whatever. Perhaps you wake up tomorrow morning and you suddenly discover you've come into a vast, vast sum of money. Or perhaps you've inherited a stately home and fully kitted out with all the servants that you need. You never have to do anything for yourself again. Just spend a few moments in that place of imagination and just think for a few moments that something really, really is going to happen tomorrow.

Now, imagining that this isn't just hypothetical, but it's reality, I want to ask you the question. If you knew, you knew that actually that was going to take place tomorrow morning, how would it change your life today, on Sunday the 7th of August 2022?

I want to suggest that it would probably impact, it would probably shape the way you live your life today. Whatever frustrations you have on this very day right now, whatever it is that you might be anxious about, afraid of, worried about, whatever's on your heart or mind, somehow you'd probably cope with it a bit differently. You'd see it differently. You'd engage with it differently. Why? Well, at the risk of oversimplifying things, simply put, you would live today in the light of tomorrow.

And I want to suggest that it's that theme of living today in the light of tomorrow, as tomorrow meaning eternity, living today in the light of our eternal tomorrow.

[2 : 56] That was the very thing that was going on in Paul's mind as he wrote Romans chapter 8. He said that, you know, when we think about, I consider our present sufferings, and remember, Paul had lots of them. He was in prison, he was beaten up, he was tortured, eventually paid the ultimate sacrifice for his faith. And he knew what it was to go without, he knew what it was like to be slandered, he knew what it was like to face injustice, he had a tough time of it. But Paul writes this, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

And so he goes on to unpack that, and he talks about prayer in a very practical way.

Now, when it comes to prayer, we've said this lots of times before, prayer is not just an activity that you do. Like, I'm going to go off now and just do my prayers. Now, there's a sense in which it does become a focus in our lives. But in Christian discipleship, if you're a follower of Jesus, it's not a case that God's just interested in different compartments. You know, the bits that you do on a Sunday in church, if you go to a home group, perhaps, or perhaps when you then sit down and read your Bible. As important as those activities are, prayer means something far bigger and deeper, because Christian faith is about a whole-of-life engagement in communion with the risen Jesus. That means there is not a single moment of your life, waking or sleeping, that is not connected with him. So when we think about prayer, we're not just talking about going off and saying your prayers or doing prayers, although there are times when that focus and that concentration needs to happen. But rather, we're talking about that broader thing, that everything we do, everything we experience, we do for better or for worse, it's all caught up in our relationship with God. It's a lifelong conversation, a lifelong communion with God the Father. So when we think about praying, interceding, intercession,

praying for situations of suffering in the world, Paul is talking not just about an isolated activity when our concentration is specifically focused, but our whole lives and what that means to carry that in relationship with Jesus. And he gives us a really helpful, I think, set of images in this passage. He talks about groaning.

He talks about the groaning that's going on. Groaning there is kind of a shorthand for suffering of any kind in the widest sense. Whether that is personal, individual suffering that you are experiencing, whatever that may look like for you right now. Or whether it's a sense of carrying that sense of pain of the whole world as we think of situations such as Ukraine, Yemen. We think of situations in Afghanistan. We think of situations of torture or crime or hunger or sickness or disease. Whatever it may be, either in the widest sense or the very focused sense, it all comes down to this same thing, groaning.

And Paul gives us this image that there is this groaning that pervades literally everything. But as a Christian believer, when you pray, that groaning takes on a new dimension.

[6 : 37] You are connected spiritually to the living eternal God. And therefore that groaning means something quite different. So what is it? You see, that groaning is not just for us as Christians, it's not just an outward expression into a sense of emptiness. But rather it is something that connects us to our eternal tomorrow, in which we are to live in the light of now. Paul talks about three types of groaning here.

The first type of groaning he talks about is the groaning of the whole creation. In verse 22, he writes this. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

When you experience groaning, when we experience groaning, remember, a shorthand for suffering here, in the widest and broadest sense, is part of the human condition. It's not something that's wrong or weird about you. It is something that is wrong with the whole creation. But what it means is that according to the vision that Paul is setting before us, is that the whole of the cosmos is part of this. We're in this together. Things are not right. We live in that place of tension and contrast and contradiction between the way things are and the way things God wants them to be and ultimately will be.

We are not there yet, but for now we live in that place of tension and that place of groaning. And I want to suggest that there's a sense in which when we understand it that way, it can actually be quite helpful and empowering.

Because it means that next time you're experiencing that groaning, whatever that means, you may know that you're not on your own in it. It's to be expected. Every human being ever is part of it. And it's not just human beings as individuals. It's in the broadest sense. Even after two world wars, war still rages.

[8 : 58] We live in a war-torn, violent and unjust world. And it goes far beyond humanity, or should I say inhumanity. We see the ravage, the destruction we do to the environment. Nature itself, the creation, is groaning under this strain of the way in which we as a race have abused it.

But if in that sense of groaning, sometimes we feel bad about that sense of groaning, we're actually told by Paul here that that is in fact for a Christian to be part of our prayer, or is to be our prayer of intercession.

Very often, when we're in a low place, it can be because our focus has become on the things that are making us groan. Because we meditate on things, we contemplate, we find things going around in our heads all the time, whatever it is that's going wrong, it consumes us.

It absorbs us. I've said before, if you know how to worry, you know how to pray. Think about it. It's about meditation and focus and contemplation and mulling over things. Paul gives us this image of when that groaning is happening in us, we can see things in a different light. Yes, we can mull things over, we can contemplate, but we don't do so with that emptiness.

[10 : 22] But rather, our groaning is with that sense of Godward yearning, which is the second type of groaning that Paul mentions. If the first one is that the whole of creation is groaning, the second thing is that Paul mentions that not only is everyone and everything groaning, but the believer groans in a very specific way.

He writes this in verse 23. In other words, Paul says that when you know Jesus, when you do this groaning, not just in isolation from God, but in connection with God, it's a different type of groaning. It is a type of yearning, a Godward yearning, that our focus is on that tomorrow in which we live in the light of, that future that is eternal.

But we live in that place of tension between that eternal future and the present suffering. And we are to understand our prayers, our groaning in that light.

And he gives us a very specific focus here, because Paul says that our focus is to be on the God who lies at our future and therefore is to be experienced in the present.

[11 : 45] And he says that we will wait for our redemption, for our adoption. We await our adoption as children of God. That's a really important word that comes up several times in the New Testament, as Paul uses that word adoption to describe the relationship that we have with God.

That God is our Father and adopts us even though we are broken and even though we've messed up. He adopts us into his family. And having the right image of God in our minds is really important here.

A few years ago, I remember going with Tamara to, first time, I've been to a couple of these now, but first time went to a court, what they call a celebration hearing for the adoption of a child.

And it was a wonderful experience. I really didn't quite know what to expect, but everyone went in, we were smartly dressed, we were there with a few other friends and family, of the family of the people that were adopting this child.

And when we went in, the judge came out and dealt with all of the formalities that had to be dealt with for the adoption. Then it came to basically what was the celebration part of the occasion.

[13 : 08] And I'll never forget, he got out of his judge's chair and the child came up to him and he took his wig off and he let her wear his wig, handed over the documents and allowed her to actually seal the seal on the document.

Photographs were taken and this judge said to this child in front of the whole of the courtroom, you know, sometimes people ask me, what does adoption mean?

And he said, very often people will find themselves in that place having come through a whole story of brokenness and a sense of rejection.

He says, adoption, to me, he said, means one thing. Adoption means forever. I've never forgotten that image and I think it's so important because when we think of God, very often people think of God as the judge, as a judge, as an image that is distant, it may be an unfair image, but an image of a God who is just about executing justice in a very cold and detached way.

Now whilst justice and judgment is a theme within scripture, it's not the first theme. It's certainly not a theme that exists in detachment from the theme of love and mercy and grace.

[14 : 44] When we think about this theme of adoption, it says to us that whatever our human experience has been in this life, God reaches out to us in Christ and says, you are my child and you are my child forever.

Now that's something we can know now. It's not realised in full reality just yet because we are in that place of tension. We still live in a world of suffering.

But as we groan in that world of suffering and with that world of suffering, we look to that eternal God whose promises to us are forever.

So the whole creation groans, says Paul, and the believer groans, but he goes even further and says that the spirit of God himself groans.

Verse 26, Paul writes this, We do not know what to pray for, but the spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words can't express.

[15 : 57] You know, we find ourselves in positions, places of situations of suffering, don't we, where we ask that question, where is God, and we just can't find the right words. You know, we should never attempt to give pat answers to deep searching questions such as that.

But, you know, we do, when we talk about suffering and we experience suffering, we point to the cross and we see on the cross that there is God in the midst of suffering, groaning on the cross, that God knows what it is to suffer.

Why? Because he is there on the cross of Jesus with us. But, of course, the cross is not the end of the story because Jesus is risen and so we talk of the risen Jesus.

But we also talk, of course, of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus returned to his Father in heaven but came as his Holy Spirit and is present with us. So, as a believer in Jesus, you can talk not only of God being with you but God being inside you.

God dwells in you by his Spirit. He's here right now. And he'll be with you tomorrow morning and the next day and the next day whether you are conscious of it or not.

[17 : 19] But, you know, we can become conscious of it and that's the thing. That when we're groaning, we're not just groaning with the rest of creation and we're not just groaning with a sense of hope but we're actually groaning with the presence of God within us.

Such, says Paul, that it is God himself who groans. His Spirit groans inside you. When you sense that groaning, whatever it is that is driving it, know that it is God's Spirit himself that is groaning within you.

That means that when we suffer, when we groan, when we worry, when we pray, it's not just praying as a human activity but the living presence of the living God inside you is actually groaning inside you.

And sometimes when we, situations happen and we can't find the right words, this reminds us that it doesn't matter what words we use in prayer.

You can't be misunderstood because God sees far deeper than just words. You know, sometimes people will say, you know, please don't ever ask me to say prayers in public or in a group or anything because I'm so worried I'm going to say the wrong words.

[18 : 39] I'm going to mess it up. Well, sometimes people even say, I worry that I've said the wrong thing. I've asked them, I've used the wrong words. You don't have to worry about being misinterpreted by God. You can't be.

I don't know if you've ever sent a text and it's done autocorrect. Yeah, have you done that? Either you've been talking into your phone or you've just been typing it and it automatically corrects it and then you send it and then you read it back and you realise you've accidentally sent the wrong message.

If you're familiar with that experience, it suggests other words and it's too late, you've gone and sent it. I did search this online for some funny examples and they were hilarious but they were way too rude to actually share in a Sunday service.

If you want to go home and Google it, then you can decide whether it's appropriate or not. But the point is, you can't be misinterpreted or misunderstood in that kind of way with God.

You can't. Why? Because God is so much bigger than language. When you connect with him, you connect at a far deeper level than the words that you use.

[19 : 47] Whether you get them right or whether you make a total lash-up of them. Because God sees so much deeper. And so it is that Paul talks about when we find ourselves in that place where we are just lost for words, we may be reminded that it is the spirit of God within us that is actually groaning.

We are connected not to an empty future but to that future in Christ that begins now. So stay focused on Jesus and on his promises.

There's one last image that I want to close us with as we go in to pray and to share communion. I just want to come back to where we started with these words of Paul where he says, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

But for this image I was trying to get hold of a set of those old-fashioned scales that actually work with the weights. I couldn't find them. So I'll just pretend to be a set of scales.

Imagine I'm a set of scales. And in my right hand looking to your left I want you to imagine that I'm holding all of the weights and burdens of the world.

[21 : 13] Whether that could be your personal things whatever it is that's on your heart and mind right now that weighs you down. Whether it's something that's going on within the world that's weighing you down. Whatever it may be but just imagine that it's in that hand.

And it's like this, isn't it? It's just weighs it's too heavy it's too much. We've grown under the weight of all of that. Now imagine that you take all of the promises of God and the future that eternal future that we are called to live in the light of and you place it into this set this side of the set of scales.

What happens when we do that? Paul says this that future that eternal tomorrow is literally off the scale.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

Let's be a people who've grown who've grown with and alongside the whole of creation who've grown not just an empty groan but grown as believers in the risen Jesus and because we do that we know that that groaning is not just our human groaning but the spirit of God within us connecting us to that future God who we can know now by faith.

[22 : 51] Let's pray together now. Just a moment as I say the words Lord in your mercy please respond with hear our prayer Lord in your mercy hear our prayer.

Lord we thank you that even though we live in a world that is groaning that it doesn't stop there it doesn't end there but that you point us in Jesus from groaning to glory.

So we ask that whatever may be going on in our lives whatever weights we may carry whatever it is that makes us groan may that groaning point us to your glory.

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer. Lord we pray for peace as the world groans with war and with violence we pray for Ukraine and for the situation that exists between Ukraine and Russia.

We pray for the situation in Israel and Palestine China and Taiwan and that region Sri Lanka Yemen Myanmar and so many other parts we pray for those who have fled their home country in search of refuge.

[24 : 50] Lord in your mercy hear our prayer. Lord we groan as we pray for the future of our country and its leadership.

worship we pray for our government for our leaders for all who sit in parliament we pray for wisdom integrity and compassion Lord in your mercy hear our prayer.

Lord we think of everybody who mourns the loss of loved ones through death and we groan alongside them we groan with all those who face difficult situations of change and uncertainty fill them and surround them and renew them in your perfect peace we pray Lord in your mercy hear our prayer.

Lord we groan with all who are sick for those who are in hospital for those who are at home for those who need access to hospitals but don't have it.

We pray for healing and restoration of health Lord in your mercy hear our prayer. And Lord we groan with your church in the widest sense we pray for the renewal for the revival of your church in this country and throughout the world.

[26 : 44] At this time we pray particularly for all the different festivals and camps and gatherings taking place during the summer season new wine falcon camps ventures limitless some of our young people are at these things right now and we pray for all those involved in these activities Lord may your spirit move in and through these things Lord in your mercy hear our prayer Lord we take a few moments as we bring before you whatever is on our own hearts and minds that causes us to groan right now as we hold them before you point us from groaning to glory Lord in your mercy hear our prayer and we join our prayers together in the name of Jesus

Amen