

+ 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost: August 2, 2020 +  
St Paul Lutheran, Tomah, Wisconsin  
Pastor Korey Van Kampen  
*"When Life Hits Hard, Pray"*

The famed though fictional champion boxer from the 80's and 90's, Rocky Balboa, once said, "Nothing hits harder than life." Outside of the Bible, I don't know that truer words have ever been spoken. It seems as though there's always another challenge around the bend. We get through a tough personal situation -- losing a loved one, a family crisis, or a tragedy that hits close to home, and then a few months later, it's something else: challenges at work, your car breaks down, the fridge quits, you get sick or hurt, and so on. Maybe some combination of these things happening leads you into a crisis of faith, wondering "God, how could you let this happen?" All of it is kind of like a game of whack a mole, except instead of the moles popping up and you get to whack them, they pop up and whack you when and where you're not expecting it. So what can we do when life hits hard? What can we do when we feel concerned and anxious or beat up from the body blows that life throws at you? The section of the Bible that we're looking at today gives us a good place to start: Prayer.

**Romans 8:26-27 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. <sup>27</sup> And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.**

In the verses right before these, Paul has encouraged his readers to bear up under present sufferings by looking ahead to their coming ultimate deliverance from them -- because the glory that we will see and experience on that day is so much greater that it will drown out even the faintest memories of whatever hardship we endured in this life. In fact, the separation between our present challenges and future glory is so great that it is not even worth taking the time to compare them. There is a bright light at the end of the tunnel. But, what we don't know is just how far away that bright light is -- when exactly it will arrive. Will it be a matter of days, weeks, or months? Or will it be a matter of years, decades, or centuries? We just don't know. And that's often the hardest part, isn't it? We know that there's this ultimate deliverance and blessed eternity in store. It's ours by faith in Jesus Christ, and it is more certain than the sun rising in the east. But it's not in our grasp at this very moment. So right now we wait.

And while we wait, nothing hits harder than life. When it does, in general we experience two emotions: Sadness and Fear. Sadness because of the pain of what's happened, and Fear that the pain will never go away -- that it's always going to feel this way. So what can we do when we're wrapped up in these tears and fears? That's when Paul gives his encouragement to pray. Prayer is simply talking to God. It's bringing him your thoughts and requests and hopes and fears. So, how does Paul encourage us to pray? He says, "**The Spirit helps in our weakness.**" Our weakness is best defined as a summary of our fallen state. We're sinful. Therefore we're weak. We're pressed on from every side by temptation, by hardship, by doubt, and by the world around us. The foes are too many, and the challenges and problems are too big for us to tackle on our own. And so, because of that, we often don't know what we're supposed to pray for. But we don't need to worry about praying the wrong thing because the Spirit helps us in our weakness. He comes to us from a

position of strength to give us what we lack in ourselves. How does he do that? Paul writes: **“the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.”** The Holy Spirit speaks -- he groans even -- to God on our behalf and for our benefit.

There are three specific ways in which the Spirit helps our prayers. The first is this: we don't know what to pray for because our vantage point is limited. Do we pray for strength, for deliverance, for a miracle, for a time of suffering to be cut short? We don't know because we can't see around the bend to what's next in life -- we can't even see what the next hour or even minute is going to bring us. All we can see is what is right in front of us. From our limited perspective, we can't possibly see or know what's really best for us, what we really need in this particular moment. But that doesn't need to stand in the way of our prayers. The Holy Spirit helps you. He who sees eternity from one end to the other, and who sees your life from beginning to end, knows exactly what you need to safely arrive at the place in life where he knows you are going, and what you need to get through every step of the way there. So when the Spirit intercedes for you, what he does is he takes whatever it is that you're asking for or that you're praying about, whatever situation is heavy on your heart, and he shapes those words into what you would be praying for if you could see everything that God sees and if you could know everything that God knows. His wordless groans fill in the gaps in your knowledge, understanding and perspective. So when life hits you hard, pray, because the Spirit helps you.

The second way the Spirit helps us comes in this way: we don't know what to pray for because our desires are often times out of whack. Sometimes the things that we think we can't possibly live without are the things that are killing us or have the potential to do that. Sometimes the things that we think are killing us are, in fact, growing in us perseverance, character, and hope. Sometimes our motives are clouded by our sin and selfish desires. But none of that needs to stop us from carrying our prayers to God, because, as Paul writes, **the Spirit intercedes for us in accordance with God's will.** That is, the Holy Spirit takes our prayers and cleans out any desires or motivations or understandings that are misinformed. He removes any impurities from our prayers, and he shapes those prayers into what we would pray for if our will lined up perfectly with God's will. The Spirit intercedes -- he takes your prayers and makes them perfect. So when life hits you hard, pray.

Finally, there's the third way the Spirit helps our prayers: we don't know what to pray for because sometimes we just lack the words. A situation is so hard, so troubling, so intense, so tragic, so whatever that we just don't even know what to say. We're speechless. Or maybe we don't know what to pray for because we have too many words. They're all jumbled up and mashed together and totally incoherent. When life hits hard, all we can do is say what's on our heart at that very moment. Sometimes, our heart's thoughts are raw. Sometimes they're upset. Or angry. But it's almost never clean, never formal, and almost never comes out in flowery language. Instead it's simply crying out for help and deliverance from the one who can save you. Those kinds of prayers are ok too. We actually have an inspired book of the Bible full of them. It's called the Psalms. Read through them and you'll find lots of raw emotion: “Where are you, God? Why do you let these wicked people prosper? How long do I have to wait for your help? I'm surrounded by enemies, when are you coming to save me?” These prayers are OK because the Spirit intercedes. When we don't know what to say and are speechless, the Spirit speaks to God

because he knows exactly what to say. When we have too many words, the Spirit organizes and collects those thoughts and brings them to God. When we're overcome with raw emotion, the Spirit takes those prayers before God and cleans out anything improper and adds in anything that is missing. So when life hits you hard, pray, because the Spirit helps you.

It is safe to take your heart to God in prayer. It's safe to tell him how you really feel. It's safe to bare your soul before him. It's safe because God knows how we speak when we're hurting, when we're desperate. He knows how it feels when we're feeling so overwhelmed that we say desperate things. He knows because he's been there. Think of Jesus the night before he died. He's in the garden of Gethsemane. He knows every detail of what is going to happen to his body and soul in the next 18 hours and he feels this deep sense of dread falling over him. He says, **"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."** He then poured his heart and soul out to God, pleading that if there was any other way to save the world from sin and death that didn't involve all that suffering, to please do it. He was desperate. You see, we have in Jesus Christ the only God who knows what it is like to cry out in the midst of sorrow, of fear, of dread, and of pain, because he's been there. Life hit him hard too and then some. He can relate to whatever it is you're living through.

But even more than that, in Jesus Christ we have all the assurance that God hears our prayers and will not turn away from us. On the cross, Jesus cried out, **"My God My God, why have you forsaken me?"** and what did he hear in return? Silence. Nothing. Jesus on the cross got the abandonment that we deserved because of our sins. When life hits you hard, you can pray with the cross of Jesus in your heart's view, and even in the midst of your trouble, be certain of one thing: God has not abandoned you. He has not turned his back on you. And he is not punishing you. All of that already took place on the cross, where Jesus was rejected, abandoned, and punished in your place. And because of that the big barrier that stood in the way of our prayers has been removed. Our sins are forgiven and the wall they built between us and God has been demolished by Jesus and his cross. And together with that, we don't have to worry that we're somehow not good enough to have our prayers heard, because by faith you have been credited with Jesus perfect life. So now, you and I pray in Jesus' worthiness, confident that our prayers are heard, all the while the Spirit helps us and intercedes for us.

So when life hits you hard, pray. It can be something as simple as, "God, I need you. Help me, help us." or "Why did this have to happen?" or "Why did it have to happen now?" or just plain "why?" It can be, "I can't do this alone." or "Save me," or "fix this." It's okay to ask hard questions, or to talk to him like you do a trusted friend. However the words or the thoughts come out, you can be real to God in prayer, because the Holy Spirit helps you. He speaks on your behalf when you don't know what the right thing to say is, or when you're too emotional to think straight. He purifies your prayers of any misplaced or bent desires. He perfects your prayers so that they are offered and heard in line with God's will. We can pray with confidence and hope because the Holy Spirit prays for us. When life hits you hard and you don't know what to do, start with prayer. AMEN!