



**Columbia, Missouri**  
**The Worship of God • March 20, 2022**  
**The Third Sunday of Lent**



**THE SCRIPTURE**  
**Romans 8:26,27**

*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

**THE MESSAGE**  
**“Sacred Rhythms: Deepening Our Intimacy with God”**  
**Mark Briley**

*I could be wrong.* No need to wait for the *but*, here. It’s not coming. *I could be wrong.* Period.

I’ve got to say, I’m sort of relieved. Sure, we want to be right. We believe what we believe, we do what we do, we fight for the things we fight for because we believe we’re right. But some of us never seem to get to that point of saying, “*I could be wrong.*” It really is sort of refreshing. Do you want to try? Just say it: “*I could be wrong.*” Doesn’t it feel good?

Nah. We much prefer to be right. So, I won’t speak for you. I’ll just speak for myself. I could be wrong, you know. I mean, I’m thinking specifically about prayer in this moment. I’m sure there was a time when I once thought prayer was about getting what

I want. I'd heard all the quips: "God wants me to have the desires of my heart." Terrific. I want to date her, drive that, live there, go to that school, and do that job. Done.

Even Jesus said something that turned into a great worship tune I sang in college:

*"Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be open to you... the door will be open to you."*

Boom. Prayer. This stuff is easy. Well... not everything turned out as I prayed so I was confronted with what that was all about. You've had this struggle, too.

Think football. 98% of NFL fans prayed for Tom Brady to retire. 2% prayed he wouldn't. And our prayers were answered... for about six weeks. And now he's back. What's that



about? I saw this meme that said, "Bruh, even Tom Brady saw them gas prices and came outta retirement." I joke but we know some people pray for their teams to win and you know, we *could* be wrong about this stuff. And it gets way more serious than football.

I got a text from a friend whose mother was in the hospital... things weren't looking good. My friend texts me that his sister is praying for a miracle to heal their mom, and my friend was praying for the suffering to end so their mom wouldn't be in this terrible state any longer. That's a little deeper, isn't it? What about *those* prayers?

Another friend comes to me with a great heartache in her spirit about something she's been facing for decades and is weary and scared and uncertain and she simply says, "I don't know what I want from you... I guess I just want your prayers." Of course. But what do my prayers mean for her?

Another friend yet texts about a job interview – this would be a great career step for my friend and good for his family, and he said, "Please pray me in..." Absolutely.

But do I pray he gets the job, and my other friend's heartache gets removed and for a miracle for my other friend's mom or his request that her suffering ends and she joins the great saints of the resurrection?

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, wrote a great book called "Falling Upward," addressing the two halves of our lives – which I highly recommend. This book and idea came up in our first sacred interview on our Wednesday evening Lenten series, "What it's like to be Me." I've been thinking about the book again. Two halves of life.

I remember as a kid going to a family friend's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday surprise party, and we hid a bunch of "Over the Hill" gags around the house. I thought that Don must have known Jesus personally he was so old. Since I've crossed that threshold, I see it a little differently... pray for me? Anyway, Rohr quotes Paul in Romans 9 where Paul writes...

***"The only thing that counts is not what human beings want or try to do, but the mercy of God."***

*"The only thing that counts is not what human beings want or try to do (which Rohr calls the first half of life), but the mercy of God (that's the second half of life)."*

But Rohr says we *only* realize this is true in the second half of life. Rohr's life halves are less numerical and more spiritually based. *"We had to do the wanting and the trying and the achieving and the self-promoting and the accomplishing. The first half of life is all about some kind of performance principle. And it seems that it must be this way. We must do it wrong before we know what right might be. In the second half of life, we start to understand that life is not only about doing; it's about being."*

He then tells a story about going home to Kansas after his father had just retired at the age of 65. For 37-years, his dad had painted trains for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad. He had grown up poor during the Depression and the dust storms of western Kansas. Generationally, jobs were something you valued deeply, and once you got one, you weren't going to lose it. Never missed a single day of work in all those years. The company said, *"He turned on the lights every morning."* Isn't that something? And so here he is on Day One of retirement literally falling into his son's arms in tears saying, *"I don't know who I am now. I don't know who I am. ... pray with me, pray with me."* Here is Richard Rohr, a grown man, a priest, supposed to be strong for his dad and he said, *"I didn't know how to do it. I guess I said the appropriate priestly words, but I didn't know how to guide him into the second half of life, and he was begging for a guide."*<sup>1</sup>

Our prayer lives may reflect this same struggle of claiming our identity. A church friend sent me an article<sup>2</sup> a while back about the importance of community, and it engaged this very idea. The author said, *"I spent my days focused on optimizing myself: Endlessly working and improving on a permanent quest to do as much as possible in*

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation from the Center for Action and Contemplation. Week 12. Growing in Christ. Tuesday, March 19, 2019.

<sup>2</sup><https://qz.com/1570179/how-to-make-friends-build-a-community-and-create-the-life-you-want/>

*the unforgiving confines of 24-hours. It was the only way I knew how to be. Compete. Excel. Win.* She then said, *“I never considered there might be a cost to a life of high-octane, high-reward competition.”*

Bill Gates reflected on aging and perspective in recent years. He said that as a young man in his twenties, he was consumed with making Microsoft a personal-computing giant. Today, his focus is on other people. *“Did I devote enough time to my family?”* he asks himself now. *“Did I learn enough new things? Did I develop new friendships and deepen old ones?”* *These would have been laughable to me when I was 25, but as I get older, they are much more meaningful.”*

Given this current season in your life, what is pulling your greatest reflective attention? And how do your prayers, if at all, reflect such a season?

The Apostle Paul brings a word for us today from his letter to the church at Rome. Rome! Have you ever been? I’d love to go. In Paul’s day, Rome was a place that was hustling and bustling with amazing world-class art, exquisite poetry, finely-crafted moral philosophy, and imperial decrees. People of great influence in this city. And Paul writes this little letter to a church there that would have mostly gone unnoticed in such a place. It’s 30-years after the Jesus event – death, burial, resurrection – which had taken place in a remote corner of the Roman Empire. Few of the elite in Rome were giving it much worry; nobody tweeted about the resurrection, you know?

Peter didn’t post a selfie of himself on Instagram with the abandoned linens in the empty tomb. The movement took some time to catch on. But this letter of Paul’s – somehow, some way, in the midst of such deep and culturally important work – would soon leave all those other writings in the dust; a world-altering word from a man whose life had been altered by an encounter with Jesus.

In the brief piece, we look at this morning, Paul’s writing about the birth pangs of the world. Change, difficulties, tension, conflict – externally, yes, but Paul says, *“That same turmoil is going on inside of you.”*

We’re yearning for deliverance from meaninglessness and we’re waiting and wondering and yes, even praying, for whatever that may look like for us. When it all seems unanswered and growing in its complexities and our relationships get rocky and the job is uncertain and the desire isn’t coming to pass as easily as the praise song said it would, we get tired in the waiting. Paul says, *“that’s exactly when God’s Spirit is right alongside helping us along, making prayer out of our incoherent thoughts... even our deepest sighs that are beyond any words we could muster. The Spirit is right there.”*

The Spirit is right there? And then it hit me... made a lot of sense to me... and I could be wrong, remember? But this sounds a lot like keeping good company. Is that the true gift of prayer? The Spirit gets us...at the very essence of our being... and holds company with us. "*That's prayer,*" I thought, "*Keeping company with God.*" There's less a spirit of "*fix-it*" in this company and more a *togetherness*. There's a change in your prayer life if you consider such a possibility.

I've prayed "*God, fix it!*" plenty of times. But that's generally desperation and frustration more than me asking God to keep company with me through this. I'm all for the bold prayers – "*Come boldly before the throne of God,*" we read in Hebrews.

I was invited recently by a ministry partner in our city to share prayer requests. They'd be praying for our church on a particular day, and I responded with gratitude and a whole list of things. Yes. Pray for this. Pray boldly with us for this. And as much as I long for the answers to those prayer requests to be clear, I recognize, in part, I was honoring the invitation to keep good company together with this partner and with God for what really matters to us right now. Because in the end – whether that thing or spirit or hope we prayed for gets "*fixed*" or cashed in as some transaction – the more important thing is the good company of relationship – with God and with each other.

We miscarried our first pregnancy in a very hard way as Carrie was about 14 weeks along. We were waiting to tell anyone we were pregnant just in case something went wrong. But when something did go wrong, we hadn't told anybody, and there was nobody there to keep good company with us in our heartbreak. We landed in an emergency situation with the baby on a Saturday night, and I had to call my colleagues at the church to cover me, and we had to call our families who had no idea we had our first on the way that we were heading into a really hard moment. So, we told people early next time. We wanted to have company along the way – if we were celebrating or if we were grieving.

I'm not telling you how to blurt out every life detail to the world or even to God – but I do know when someone asks me to pray about something, I'll say, "*I'll be honored to hold that with you.*" That's how we keep company with each other in the presence of God. And when life gets tough, we've been in conversation with God all along (*and with some other trusted people in our lives*) so that there's not shock in the sharing, but comfort in the company we've been keeping along the way.

The support, then, doesn't come in somebody's fumbling theological dissection of what you're living through. It comes in that understanding eye contact or a familiar hand reached out that takes yours or even a sigh too deep for words that already *knows*... and *you know*... you're not holding it, facing it, fighting it alone. You've been trusting this together in good company for a long while.



I snapped this picture just moments prior to Rock Bridge Show Choir's finals performance at the Battle-fest last weekend. Just their feet – all facing the same direction – READY! They've worked countless hours. They've sweat. They've fought with and for each other. There's been some tension and some ups and downs and euphoric elation – but that's keeping good company. That creates moments like this that demonstrates they are for each other.



That's the company we often call *witness*. Have you been with people in this sort of way? Maybe your small group has been there for you in this way. Maybe a team of some kind. And the reality is... they were there for you when it was go-time; when there was the loss or the crises... and they were there for you because you kept good company all along. That's what holds you when the moments come. That creates a steady foundation because otherwise, we just cry out in crisis, and we don't feel the same holding because we haven't shared our lives.

So, this company seems real to me. It also seems the key to dealing with the latter verse in Paul's word to the Roman church about all things working out for our good. I'm not so sure. Are you? All things? And I know... some is our attitude and how we choose to face whatever we encounter.

I heard Dan Meers, otherwise known as KC Wolf – the Kansas City Chief's mascot say, "*You can rise and whine or you can rise and shine.*" He said, "*Everyone has something to complain about and everyone has something to be grateful for. You get to choose which you spend your time on.*" Focusing on gratitude goes a long way into our perception of what we live through.

But I'm just not sure. How can Paul write, "**All things work together for good for those who love the Lord.**" Man, I've fought that one because I've just seen it be *untrue* so many times. Or at least, I *thought* it was untrue. When you see the illness *not* go away – how is that good for *that* one who loves the Lord? Or the relationship ends, or the boss is abusive, or whatever it may be – sure didn't work together for good for that one. And I have no cliché answer that cleans that up for Paul... or Jesus... or God for that matter. But... I do wonder, if that thing that seems like unanswered prayer or worse yet a failure or loss or something that doesn't seem to be working together for *my* good or *his* good or *her* good or *their* good... I wonder if that thing is just an ingredient to a cake that is still being mixed. Do you know what I mean?

I hate it when I go to the kitchen to look for food and all I find are ingredients. Don't you? I want the finished, ready-made product, and I want it now. When in actuality, all the ingredients are there – I just must be patient. I just must mix it together for it to find the good outcome I seek. And some of those ingredients taste terrible on their own – they're bitter or sour or powdery all on their own – but mixed together, somehow comes out all right.

It's my friend who had a terrible experience and cursed God saying, "*I'll never thank you for this, God,*" and I understood. But some 18 months later and all that transpired, he said, "*Okay, God. I get it now.*" And it wasn't that God was pulling some marionette strings on his life, but just with him long enough to see some new healing open his

spirit to whatever is next. Good company – even when just a silent and knowing presence – is as powerful a prayer as you’ll ever pray.

Jesus’ final time with the disciples before he ascended into heaven, he simply says, “*Go into the world and make disciples, and I’ll keep company with you.*” That seems to be the promise. I could be wrong. I wonder, however, if that is truly the greatest gift of prayer... and worth our daily practice... simply to keep holy company with God and one another... and trust that such is enough. Surely that’s the pray-without-ceasing idea... keeping constant company. The Spirit already recognizes our sighs... knows the need; holds it with us. And there is enough power in the holding to transform the world.

So, when you text me or email me or call me or pull me aside or sit with me over coffee or in my office or however, we communicate – there’s something about the gift of prayer that turns that communication into communion. I don’t have an explanation for all that. There’s something in our *witness* that changes outcomes and strengthens weakness and brings hope to despair. When we say, “*I’m holding that with you,*” we’re trusting the Spirit to be with us too; to transform us, heal us. I could be wrong. Period. God already knows. So, I’ll trust God with that without really needing to say any words at all. We’ll simply keep good company.

May it be so.

## SONG OF FOCUS

“

### ***Too Deep for Words***”

**Words and Music: Ed Varnum**

1. Spirit, closer than our breath,  
mind of God who knows us,  
we know not what to pray.  
Our wisdom cannot show us.

*Refrain:*

“Surrender in sighs too deep for words,  
the tender offerings of the heart,  
knowing your prayers will all be heard  
in sighs too deep for words.”

2. Spirit, crying from our depths,  
we surrender through you.  
Light your flame within us now,  
illumine hearts anew!

*Refrain:*

“Surrender in sighs too deep for words,  
the tender offerings of the heart,  
knowing your prayers will all be heard  
in sighs too deep for words.”

**BROAD HEARTS   BROAD MINDS   BROAD REACH**