

Prayer, Providence, Praise

by Ray C. Stedman

Romans 8 is a great favorite of many people, and yet, though we love to read this chapter, amazingly, there are relatively few who really live in it. The reason for this is that we like to get into the beauty and glory and triumph and victory of Romans 8, but we tend to skip over the struggle and heartache and darkness of Romans 6 & 7. But you can't live in Romans 8 until you have experienced the reality of Romans 6 & 7. The joy and the victory of this great chapter rests solely on the death and the struggle of Romans 6 & 7.

I wonder if you have learned the principle in your Christian life that Calvary comes before Pentecost – that the fullness of the Spirit is only possible after having entered into the experience of the death of the cross. I am not speaking, of course, of being crucified in physical terms, but of what this means to you spiritually. All through the Word of God, the testimony of the Scripture is that death precedes life – that it is out of death that life comes. You remember that the Lord Jesus said, “except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit,” {John 12:24 KJV}.

This is the unerring principle of productivity and fruitfulness as set forth in the Scriptures. Likewise, it is necessary for you to be an infant before you can enter into your inheritance as a son and experience the fullness of what life is like in Jesus Christ. That is what we have been learning in these opening chapters of Romans, and, if you have followed along, you remember, in our last study together, we were noting how the Christian life is a life of paradox:

- It is a life of power lived in the presence of weakness, and you have to have the weakness in order to have the power.

- It is a life of hope that is lived in the midst of futility, where everything around is stamped with futility, yet, in the Christian, this becomes translated (transformed) into hope.

It is all because of the indwelling presence of Jesus Christ in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

I hope that we have seen that the life of the Christian – the Spirit-filled life – is not a life designed just for the weekend, just for Sunday, or just for the church. It is a life designed for the home, the school, the shop, the office, the sink – wherever you are. And it is there that God expects us to live a Spirit-filled life. The Spirit-filled life is not a religious jag that you experience every weekend to make you forget what happened during the week, but, rather, it is designed to meet the need of every moment of that week, and to be your source of strength and power right through all the difficulties of the week.

Let's pick up our text in the 26th verse of Romans 8, where we see now how this begins to work out in our practical life. The first thing that Paul brings before us is to show us how this works in the matter of **prayer**:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. {Rom 8:26-27 RSV}

Notice that Paul admits that we do not always know how to pray, but it is very clear that we know that we should pray – if we are Christians. In fact,

prayer is the instinctive mark of the believer in Jesus Christ.

Remember when Paul was converted on the Damascus Road? He had gone to Damascus breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the Christians, and had already gained a reputation as the most violent and hostile persecutor of the Christians. Then he met Jesus Christ in the dust of the Damascus Road, and was led by the hand, blind and unseeing, into the city to wait there till someone should be sent by God to instruct him further as to what to do. Then it was, you remember, that the Spirit of God spoke to a man by the name of Ananias, and said, "Go to the street called Straight, and there you will find a man called Saul; and there I want you to baptize him because he is a Christian," {cf, Acts 9:11}. Ananias objected, and said, "Lord, this man is the most terrible persecutor the Church ever had; I can't go to him!" {cf, Acts 9:13-14}. And you remember what God said, "behold, he is praying," {Acts 9:11 RSV}. In other words, this is the sign that he is now a believer, and he has yielded himself to Christ – he prays.

Prayer, I think, is the most distinctive mark of a Christian. If you don't pray, or have any desire for prayer, then it is very likely that is a sign that you are not a Christian at all, because, as the poet has put it, "Prayer is the Christian's native breath." And we can't live without praying – it is the simplest and best expression that we have of our sense of dependence upon God.

Have you noticed that nobody prays unless he feels a sense of dependence? People that feel independent, and able to run their own lives, never pray. It is only when we come to the place where we realize we can't handle everything that we begin to pray, and out of that sense of dependence comes the instinctive cry of the heart expressed in prayer. In fact, that Christians pray indicates very clearly that God desires us to have a conscious participation in working out our own salvation.

As we have been seeing all along, God himself is in us, having taken up residence in the believer to perform all that is required, and each one of us has a power within which is quite sufficient to meet every need that we have: God is that power. He is the originator and the performer of it all. Nevertheless, he always involves us in conscious cooperation.

This is something that I think many people fail to see. So many Christians get the idea that God is going to do everything, and they just have to sit and wait, and think all they need to do is fold their hands and nothing more than that, and God will do everything. God *is* going to do everything, but it is going to be *through* them. You will never grasp the full meaning of the plan and program of God for Christian activity until you see that the human will, and the *human mind*, and *human effort* are always involved in what God does *through you*. This is certainly obvious in the matter of prayer. God expects us to pray. He wants us to ask for things – even though he knows that we need them.

Christianity is not a kind of sublime welfare state, where you just sit around and the government does everything for you. That is a false conception. But the Christian life is expecting God to be at work in you – and then going ahead and doing that which is necessary, with a conscious realization that God is present to do it through you. This is quite a difference.

When the Lord Jesus taught about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, he pointed out that there were certain things that we need. He spoke of eating, and drinking, and living, and wearing clothes, and all these necessary things. He said, "Your Father knoweth that you have need of all these things," {cf, Matt 6:8 KJV}. You don't *need to tell him*, he already knows it. Yet, at the same time, he said in his model prayer that he asked us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," {Matt 6:8}. God knows that we need bread, but *he wants us to ask* for bread. He is ready to supply it; he is ready to meet our need, but there is always this conscious participation in what God is doing in our lives.

So this passage sets forth the fact that *we ought to pray*, and James reminds us that "we have not because we ask not," {cf, Jas 4:2 KJV}. Much of the time we are miserably poverty-stricken in our spiritual lives, and in our physical lives, simply because we never stop to ask God to give us anything. We expect that he knows what we need, and we expect him to supply it, and we never ask him for anything.

God wants us to ask, but, also, there are times when life is just simply too big, and too complex, and *we don't know what to ask for*. This is what Paul is speaking about when he says,

... we do not know how to pray as we ought... {Rom 8:26b RSV}

Haven't you been in the situation where you wondered what in the world to pray for? You didn't know how to pray. You didn't know what would be the best solution to the problem. You could see two sides to it, and one way looked like it would work, then you would see the other side and it looked like another, entirely different process would be the thing to do – and you didn't know what to pray for. We recognize that there could be times when we would be praying conflicting things.

I imagine the San Francisco Giants pray that God will help them win the pennant, and the Dodgers are praying the same things. What is right? I don't know. There are many other situations like that – when we don't know how to pray as we ought. What then?

Paul says the indwelling Spirit helps our infirmities, our weaknesses, and he prays

for us with sighs too deep for words. {Rom 8:26c RSV}

The word for “sighs” here is really the word “groanings” – “with groanings to deep for words.” Now, what are these?

There are some who tell us that this means a special manifestation of the Spirit, such as tongues or ecstatic cries that come from the heart, and there is a movement abroad today to revive the gifts and signs of the gifts of the Spirit. I understand that, in the next few weeks, here in Palo Alto, there are going to be meetings held to investigate this matter of reviving of tongues and other ecstatic gifts in the church. I am not going to go into that subject this morning, except to say that this is *not* what this verse is talking about – there are not ecstatic cries or tongues or any special language that is mentioned here. No, Paul specifically says that the praying of the Spirit is too deep for words – or utterance – it is unuttered, it cannot be expressed. It is felt only in the heart; it never comes to the surface of the lips; it never can be expressed. In other words, these are those deep yearnings of the soul that all of us feel at times *for more of God* for ourselves, or, perhaps, for someone else. This what we often call “a burden.”

Have you ever sensed a burden in your life for prayer for your own needs or someone else's

needs? Well, this is what Paul is talking about. It is that clamant thirst after righteousness that our Lord Jesus said is *blessed*:

“Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled.” {cf, Matt 5:6 RSV}

It is a dissatisfaction with the present experience of your life, and a discontent with the shallowness of your present Christian experience, and a hungering after richer fellowship with God which are born of the Spirit within. It is the evidence that, deep within the heart, is a spirit that cries out for more of God. It is expressed in the song, *Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts*, in the words, “from the best bliss that earth imparts, we turn unfulfilled to thee again.” This is the cry of the Spirit within for something more, something deeper, something more precious, something more satisfying than our present experiences – and it is always according to the will of God, as the apostle says. In other words, the job of the Spirit of God in your life is to keep you pressing on, so that you don't settle down and become satisfied. Now isn't the time to be satisfied.

Have you ever noticed that men and women of God, both in the Word of God and in the history of the church, have been hungering and thirsting after more? There will come a day when *we are going to be satisfied*, when we will awake in his likeness, but down here there is never any resting place.

We have all experienced this, haven't we? We have come through times of spiritual crisis to the place of victory, perhaps after weeks and months of weary, frustrating defeat. God, at last, brings us to the place of victory, and we rejoice in the freedom and the glory of the new found fellowship with him, and then we say, “Lord, I want to live on this plane.”

We are like Peter up on the mountain top: We say, “Lord, let's build three tabernacles here, and let's stay up here! This is wonderful!” {cf, Matt 17:4, Mark 9:5, Luke 9:33}. But God will never let us stay there – there is always that pressing on which is born of the Spirit within. The Spirit prays within us, creating those restless yearnings for something more of God than we now possess.

Then what happens? Well, you see the results of such praying, in this next section. It is what we oftentimes call “**Providence.**”

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. {Rom 8:28-30 RSV}

The great statement here is in Verse 28: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him.” Or, as the King James Version has it, “All things work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

Now, you know that verse, don’t you? How many times have you quoted it? It is simply saying that the things that happen to you are God’s answer to the silent yearnings of the Spirit within you –

- Not some things that happen to you, but
- Everything that happens to you,
- Whatever it may be!

It is God’s way of meeting the cry of the Spirit within to lead you into a deeper and a more wonderful experience of God’s grace, and God’s glory, and God’s person.

We preachers tend to expound this as though it only covers the trials and the heartaches because that is where most people have trouble – they can’t accept those – but it isn’t speaking only of trials and heartaches. It is *everything* that happens, all the delightful things as well.

One of the wonderful things about walking with Jesus Christ is the many delightful surprises that lie along the way. He often has happy little incidents that take place:

While we were in Colorado Springs recently, we drove up to Denver for a day or two. We had planned to take the super-highway that runs between the two cities, but we ended up taking a gravel, wilderness road. The day before, I had taken the

family fishing in the mountains back of Pike’s Peak. My wife caught a record trout, and we got so excited over the trout that we forgot the baby’s stroller, and left it by the side of the lake. So we had to go back up and get the stroller. While we were there, we saw that the gravel road that we were on eventually led to Denver, so, having plenty of time, we decided to take that road to Denver.

It was a wilderness road (i.e., it went through the mountains away from civilization), but we were used to California wilderness roads – where there is a gas station at every other bend in the road. We went for 32 miles and didn’t see a thing, and were beginning to run very, very low on gas. Still there was no sign that we were arriving anywhere!

Finally, I saw a car stopped along the road, coming from the other direction, so I stopped to ask him what was ahead. I said to the man, “Can you tell me how far it is to a gas station on up ahead?” He looked at me, and said, “Oh, I don’t know. I have been riding around in these mountains all morning and I haven’t found one.”

So we went on a little way, and there was another car stopped and I asked him, and he said, “Well, it is at least twenty miles on to a gas station.” Since, the needle on my gauge was already resting on the empty mark, and I said, “I’m sure that I can’t make that!” He said, “Well, I tell you what to do: You go up the road about two or three miles, and you will come to a fork in the road, and there is a sign that says there is a campground about half a mile away. There are lots of campers there, and perhaps one of them may have some gas.”

So we began to ask the Lord for enough fumes to get us down the road three or four miles. We got down there all right, and asked the first campers if they had any gasoline. The man said, “Well, no. We don’t have any gas, but we have a can – an empty can. Maybe I could drain some out of the car.” We were talking about it when another man walked across the road, and said, “You-all having trouble?” I said,

“We are running pretty low on gas, and it doesn’t look like we are getting anywhere where we can get some.” “Gas?” he said, “I’ve got 10 gallons of it in the back of my pickup here.” So he took us over and gave us 2 gallons of gasoline – plenty to get us to the nearest gas station – and *our need was provided*.

As we were riding along I just thought to myself, “I don’t know why this happened, but I just imagine it was one of those little delightful things that the Lord Jesus throws in to show you how well he can take care of you when you need it – even poor California tenderfeet, wandering around in the wilderness, can be taken care of.” It isn’t all heartache, by any means, there are so many delightful surprises.

Incidentally, the next day, in Denver, a man who had been down at the conference in Glen Eyrie, and was greatly troubled about circumstances in his life, heard that I had gone to Denver. He chased me all over town, and finally sought me out, and we talked for two or three hours. When I had occasion to relate this little incident to him, his face just beamed as he realized how true it was that God could take care of his own. I think that is why the Lord allowed it to happen.

But there is no need to avoid the other side, because not only does this include the lovely things, but it also includes those heartbreaking and painful experiences where life just seems to collapse around you and fall apart at the seams. Now, these experiences are sent; they don’t just happen. This is the testimony of Scripture to the believer. These things are sent – everything, without exception – they don’t just happen. They are working together for good to accomplish the deep yearning of the heart, awakened by the Spirit within, for more of the grace and glory and person of God.

Many of you remember Wendy Welch, who was here for many years, and the experiences of pain and sorrow that he went through – how his legs became diseased and had to be amputated, and how, at last, the disease took his life. Just before he died he wrote this testimony, which I read at his funeral:

I asked the Lord to heal me and to make me whole,

But he lamed me to teach me humility.
I asked him to make me rich,
But he impoverished me to teach me to trust him.
I asked him to let me run my life and do his wishes tomorrow,
But he admonished me that there may never be a tomorrow.
I asked him to let me enjoy the sin of pride in material things,
But he took them away to make me dependent upon him alone.
He gave me nothing that I asked for, and everything that I wanted.
I have no choice but to trust him with everything, from now to eternity.

That says it, doesn’t it? “He gave me nothing that I asked for, but everything that I wanted.”

This expresses what God is doing in our lives – he is working out the situation not to supply *our wants* but *our needs*. And those needs find expression in the deep unuttered longings of our hearts, those restless dissatisfactions that show we cannot be satisfied with what we are presently going through, but cry out for something more, something greater, something yet to slake the thirst of our soul.

The great revelation here in Verses 29-30 is that it is all according to a plan. These things sometimes seem to come to us without any pattern or meaning, but they don’t. There is a plan and a goal that God has in mind, and the goal is set forth here in Verse 29: “Those whom he foreknew, he also predestined.” Don’t be afraid of that word “predestined.” That means that God thought it out in advance, just like we plan a house before we build. So God planned what he is going to do – he predestined:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. {Rom 8:29 RSV}

You see, God isn’t content to have just one Son in his family; he wants a whole host of them. He wants a great crowd of sons, of whom Jesus Christ is the first and the chief.

In order to accomplish that, through the encircling centuries, he has been working out his plan by which he is producing (through the Spirit at work in men's lives) the glories, and the grace, and the character of Jesus Christ – that we might “be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the first-born among many brethren.”

This is his goal with you: It is not to make you a great prayer warrior, or to make you a top Christian layman. These all may be a part of the process, but the goal that he has in mind is to make you like Christ – not to look like him, but to be like him. Yet, the amazing thing is that, though he makes all in the same character, there is an infinite variety in their expression; this is the glory and beauty of God's work.

Have you noticed that this pattern is so prominent in nature? God makes everything out of the same simple elements, but they are always different. Every one of us has a nose, two ears, a mouth, a forehead, some hair (more or less), a chin – and, with these few simple elements, God made faces. But he never makes two alike; with these few simple elements to work with, there is infinite variety.

Now, this is the way God works: Though we all share the character of Jesus Christ, it is not a mold that stamps out the same being over and over and over again, but there is an infinite variety of expression of the beauty of the character of the Lord Jesus Christ. The plan began in eternity past and doesn't end until eternity in the future, but it is such a vast process that we can't comprehend it.

That is why we are puzzled and confused about the parts of the process along the way. We are like the weaver who weaves cloth, and, working from the wrong side of the garment, all we ever see is a tangle of threads that seems to make no sense at all. But, when the process is finished, you can look on the other side, and there is the pattern beautifully worked out. That is what life is like with us. That is what God is doing in your life and mine.

In view of this, the final word here is a great shout of **praise!**

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring anything against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died,

yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecutions, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

“For thy sake we are being killed all the day long;

we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. {Rom 8:31-39 RSV}

Now, that is a wonderful statement, and, in times of doubt, I suggest that you try to answer these questions. There are eight of them here. Just take them, one by one:

1. “What shall we say to this?” Well, what shall we say? How do you answer this kind of proposition?
2. “If God is for us, then who can be against us?” That is, “What difference does it make who is against us?” If God is for us, is there anything that can be against us that is greater than he?
3. “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also [freely] give us all things?” He who so freely gave the choicest thing that he had to give when we were yet sinners and enemies of God – now that we are his friends – will he not complete the process? That is Paul's argument.
4. “Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?” What voice is there that can say something that will stand against us, when God is for us?
5. “It is God who justifies; who is to condemn?”
6. “Is it Christ Jesus?” Is he the one? Why he died for us; he arose again; he is at the right hand of God; he loves us; he intercedes for us. Is he going to condemn us? No!

7. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”
8. Then he lists these things in two parts:
 - A. First, he lists the perils of life: “Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword?” No! None of these things!
 - B. Then he lists all the things of the unseen world: “I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation...”

And his conclusion is that “in all these things we are more than conquerors.” What does that mean, “more than conquerors”?

If we barely manage to win our way to heaven by the skin of our teeth, we could be said to be a conqueror, but a “more than conqueror” is someone who takes the worst that life can throw at him and uses that to become victorious. “More than conqueror” is one who, by the grace and the gift of God, and in the strength of God within him, actually takes the very things that are designed to destroy him, and they become stepping stones instead of stumbling blocks. That is being “more than conquerors.”

Just this week, I finished reading an amazing book written by Ernest Gordon, the dean of the Chapel at Princeton University. He tells of his own experience as a British officer in the Japanese prison camp by the River Quai in Thailand. This camp was made famous by the movie, *The Bridge over the River Quai*.

He was one of the prisoners that built that bridge, and he tells about that camp, and about their indescribable starvation diet which made them nothing but walking skeletons, yet they were driven out each day to do heavy labor on the bridge. Thousands of them died as cholera, and other diseases, swept through the camp. The morale of the camp plummeted to the bottom – there was nothing left. It was a hopeless, hideous situation in which men lived in filth and squalor, and walked about as the living dead. He tells how he himself descended,

through disease and weakness, to a place where his body was taken and laid away in the death house, among all the corpses. Though he was still alive, he was laid there to die.

In that camp, there were one or two people who, though they were not what we would call Evangelical Christians, nevertheless, entertained a deep faith in God. One or two men began quietly, in the midst of the darkest hour of the camp, to exercise a little faith and a little love, and to do things for one another. Gradually this spirit spread, and soon others became involved. They organized a massage team to go around and massage one another’s legs to try to restore health to these members that had ceased working. Gradually this spirit transformed the camp, and faith and joy and hope sprang into being again. They organized an orchestra, made their own instruments, and finally had a 40-piece orchestra. They organized a church. They began Bible study classes, and a man who had been a skeptic all his life was the teacher. As he taught the Bible, he began to see something of the reality of these things.

The story goes on to tell how this whole camp was transformed, and though the outward circumstances were unchanged, the Japanese were as hostile and as cruel as ever, the work was as heavy and the disease was rampant, yet the spirit of those men was literally transformed and they became joyous, happy, victorious individuals – many of them. The whole camp became entirely different.

He told how, when at last they returned to civilization, they looked forward to coming home – to a place where they would experience again the joys of life. But, when they got home, they discovered that civilization is an illusion – that the realities of life were discovered back in the prison camp. It was when they were down in the darkest, and the deepest, and the lowest depths of their lives that they began to lay hold of the eternal verities that strengthen a man’s soul. They became, by faith, “more than conquerors.”

This is the message of this chapter, isn’t it? The eternal verities are not doubt and fear and death, but life and hope and love. Though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet – and now abideth faith, hope, and love; these three, but the greatest of these is love {cf, 1 Cor 13:13 KJV}. And as God’s love, shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit {cf, Rom 5:5 KJV},

manifests itself in your life, you can discover (as Paul discovered, and as every Christian has discovered through the centuries) that faith and hope and joy and peace are the great underlying verities of life.

They always work, no matter what the situation may be.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you that we have this great testimony from the apostle, and we join with him in these words of praise. Thanks be unto God, who has given us such a One who can triumph in us – in the

midst of the most pressing circumstances of life. Lord, we thank you for the indwelling Spirit who creates within us a hunger for this very experience, and, in the creating of the hunger, brings about the circumstances that will drive to the discovery of these things. We thank you, Father, for this. We know that, though the road be painful, and though it may lead through some times of sorrow and stress and heartache, yet it leads always into the dawning of a day when we shall see and know as we are known, and enter into the reality of rest in thee. We thank you for it in Jesus' name. Amen.