Ephesians 2:18; Ephesians 6:18; Romans 8:26-27 *Wind and Fire: Praying By/In/With the Holy Spirit*

***Prayer Police***We are celebrating baptisms today. Three families are bringing their little ones before God and claiming the promise of salvation in Christ. As I usually say: the most important promises made in baptism are the promises made by God. And yet, at the same time, the parents are making promises too, and we shouldn’t downplay that. They are making promises about the kind of home they will raise their children in.

And one of the promises that gets made in baptism—and sometimes I feel like maybe I rush through this too fast—is when the parents promise to pray for their children and teach them to pray.

That’s an important part of having a home that loves and honors Jesus. A home where prayer takes place.

In my home as a child, one of the ways may parents kept their baptismal promises was by having devotions after our evening meal. After we had all eaten we would remain at the table until my Dad reached into the drawer and took out the Bible and the current Words of Hope devotional. Then he’d hand it to my Mom and she would read the scripture and the devotional, and then we would finish with the prayer. And that’s one of the ways we were taught to pray. It set a powerful example and pattern in our lives.

But I’ll admit, there were some unintended consequences to that practice. For little kids, it put a lot of emphasis on what we were supposed to look like and how we were supposed to act when we pray. Because, of course, we were taught that there is a posture for prayer: hands folded, head bowed, eyes closed and that when you pray you have to pay attention. That’s good, of course, especially for fidgety younger children to learn to sit still and focus on God.

But the unintended consequence in a house with three children—I have an older brother and a younger sister—is that inevitably one of us would become the prayer police. And by that I mean when the prayer was over one of us would point out that either my brother or my sister was goofing off during the prayer. Of course, for me to know that, it meant that I had my eyes open, which either my brother or my sister would immediately throw back at me, and for a while family devotions were an occasion for sibling strife.

I remember the solution we implemented—and I’m not sure which of my genius siblings came up with it—was in order to ensure we were paying attention we would have to remember the final words of the prayer. It was decided that since my brother was the oldest, he would have to remember the last three words my Mom said. Since I was the next oldest, I would have to remember the last two. And since my sister was youngest, she would have to remember the last word. Since the last word of almost every prayer is “Amen”, it really wasn’t much of a challenge for my sister.

Anyway, prayer is a vital part of our life as Christians, and an important part of Christian parenting as well. Prayer is also part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

***Re-Cap***We are in the midst of a series about the Holy Spirit. We’re calling it *Wind and Fire*, because in the Bible those are two symbols of the Holy Spirit’s presence. And the big question we are asking throughout the series is: If the Holy Spirit were removed from your life, would you notice? Likewise, if the Holy Spirit were removed from our church, would anybody be able to tell?

Last week, we talked about the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the words the Bible most associates with the Holy Spirit is power. We said one of the Holy Spirit’s main ministries is to empower us to do things we would not otherwise be able to do. Examples we gave last week were the Holy Spirit equipping us for spiritual warfare, guiding us into truth, influencing us to live holy lives, and empowering us to be witnesses for Jesus. I said last week that those are just four of many ways the Holy Spirit’s power enables us to live for Jesus.

And so, this week, we are going to look at another way the Hoy Spirit empowers us: specifically, His power at work in our prayers. I’m going to say it like this:

**The Holy Spirit makes our prayers possible, powerful, and effectual.**

One of the huge gifts of the Holy Spirit—given to every Christian as a part of our inheritance when we are adopted into the family of God—is the gift of prayer. The Holy Spirit is a divine dynamo who is dramatically involved in our prayers.

What I want to do today, then, is talk how the Holy Spirit is at work in our prayer life by looking at three separate scriptures and focusing in on three little words—prepositions—that describe the ways the Holy Spirit is involved in our prayers. As the title of the sermon suggests, we are going to talk about praying by, in and with the Holy Spirit. By, in and with.

***By one Spirit***First, **we pray BY the Holy Spirit.** The Holy Spirit makes our prayers possible. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that if there was no Spirit, there would be no Christian prayer!

Here’s the first verse we are going to look at today. **Ephesians 2:18:**

**18**For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

The context here is a discussion about how Jews and Gentiles have been made into one people because of Jesus. Paul talks about the “dividing wall of hostility” that has been torn down because of common belief in one Savior.

And the point, expressed here in verse 18, is that in Jesus (that’s the “him” in the verse) both Jews and Gentiles alike now have the same “access” to God the Father by the same Spirit.

Access is the word that makes this a verse about prayer. Prayer is access to God. Prayer is the ability to talk to God. Prayer is bringing our requests and petitions before God.

But the thing is, we shouldn’t have access to God. He’s the King. He’s the Sovereign. He’s the high and almighty seated on heaven’s throne and you and me in our sinful, finite, creaturely status—we should not have access to God. Paul’s point here is that it doesn’t matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile or whatever—without Jesus--you would not have access to God.

A couple of years ago we took a family vacation to Washington D.C. and we toured the White House. We had to do some prep work for that: we had to email our representative’s office so they could put our names on a list and we had to show up with I.D. and go through security before we were issued a pass that gave us “access” to the public portions of the White House in a very carefully supervised tour.

But even then, we didn’t get anywhere close to seeing the President. We didn’t get to go into the West Wing or the executive building offices. Because we didn’t have access. We didn’t have the kind of security clearance that would allow us into those offices. It’s not like you or I can knock on the President’s door and just be ushered in; if you or I call up the White House phone number and ask to talk to the President, they’re not going to just patch us through.

That same kind of restricted access to God should be in place for you and I. As sinful, fallen creatures, we have no status before a Holy God. And yet, Paul’s whole point here is that through Jesus we do have clearance. Because of what Jesus has done we DO have access to God!

I suppose it is possible that if you called the White House number and got an operator and if you knew the right password, you would in fact get patched through. (“White House.” “Hi, my name is Russell, I’d like to speak to the President.” “I’m sorry sir, but you are not on the approved list.” “Bananas.” “Oh, I see. I’ll patch you right through…”) In that sense, then, Paul is telling us that Jesus is the password that gains us access to God. Not just saying His name, per se, it’s not like saying “in Jesus name” at the end of a prayer is some sort of code word that turns your prayer into a magic spell, I don’t mean that. But when you belong to Jesus, when you have trusted in Jesus, you have access.

Keeping the analogy going, then, we would say that the Holy Spirit is the phone line that makes prayer possible. Notice that little phrase at the end of the verse, the preposition: “For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.” If God the Father is the President, Jesus is the password that gets our call patched through, and the Holy Spirit is the secure phone line that we call on. It is the Holy Spirit that makes our prayers possible.

I want you to notice the Trinity in this verse. It’s just a short verse, but all three members of the Trinity are mentioned. We have access to God the Father, through Christ the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

One of the more interesting theological questions you can ponder is: Who should you address your prayers to? When you pray, which member of the Trinity should you talk to? Do you pick your favorite member of the Trinity—the way Ricky Bobby in the movie *Talladega Nights* prefers to pray to the baby Jesus—or does the Bible give us instruction about who we address in prayer?

Or, to ask it another way, is it right for us to pray to the Holy Spirit? Is it o.k. to begin your prayer by saying “Dear Holy Spirit”?

Looking at this verse, and thinking about the rest of scripture, I think the answer is that the Biblical pattern for prayer is that we pray to the Father, in the name of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Generally speaking, the Bible encourages us to direct our prayers to the Father, because of the access granted to us in Jesus, by the power of the Spirit.

I don’t think this is something we should get too caught up in. I don’t think it is wrong as in “sinful” if you pray to the Spirit (or to Jesus either!) The Spirit is a person, so we can have a relationship with Him. I don’t think we need to correct somebody if they start a prayer to the Holy Spirit. In some cases, I think directing prayers to the Spirit is very appropriate, like in the song we are singing where we ask the Spirit to show us the Father and show us the Son.

But in general, the Biblical pattern for prayer is to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Spirit; and it is good for us to know that and keep that in mind in our prayers because it reminds us of the work both the Son and the Spirit are doing in order to give us access to the Father.

And, again, as I’ve been saying throughout this series, the Holy Spirit wants to turn our attention away from Himself and put it on Jesus. All our hope is found in the hands of Christ our King.

So, we pray BY the Spirit. What’s the application?

I think it is pretty obvious but needs to be said: **we should pray!** We need to take advantage of our access. We need to be thankful that the Spirit, however He does it, enables us to pray to the Father.

And we need to pray.

So those baptismal vows to pray for our kids and teach them to pray—that’s not just filler. That’s not just a formula we say so that we can maintain the tradition of baptizing our children. That’s a serious vow and a serious commitment.

We need to pray for our kids. And we need to teach our kids to pray.

And of course, we need to pray for more than just our families! We need to pray for our church family. And our community. And our region. And our state. And our country. And the world.

We’re allowed. More than that, we’re invited! Why wouldn’t we take advantage of the access we’ve been given?

***In the Spirit***Second, **we pray IN the Holy Spirit.** The Holy Spirit makes our prayers powerful. Our prayers are effective when we pray in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The second verse we are going to focus on today is **Ephesians 6:18:**

**18**And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.

The context here is the Armor of God. I made reference to this passage last week. Paul reminds us that our battle is not with flesh and blood but against spiritual powers, so he goes through some of the resources we have available to us as Christians for fighting these spiritual battles. And the last weapon is what we might call the Walkie-Talkie of prayer. “Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.”

Prayer is specifically connected here to the Holy Spirit. And the preposition this time is “in”. “Pray in the Spirit.”

Right away, that raises questions. What does it mean to pray “in” the Spirit? Is that a special kind of prayer? Is this some kind of mystical prayer? Or maybe something that only really spiritual people can do? Is praying in the Spirit some sort of experience that only happens to us when conditions are right, or when we are on a spiritual high? Is it trance-like and spooky?

I don’t think so. I know that there are times when we will feel especially connected to God. There are mountain-top experiences where it just feels like we are perfectly in tune with the Spirit and there are crisis moments when it seems like the Holy Spirit is throwing things into slow-motion and just making it so clear what we should say or do—and certainly, we should be looking to feel more connected to God.

But I don’t think that when Ephesians 6:18 tells us to “pray in the Sprit” it is telling us that we need to get into some special spiritual state. And I say that because of the word “all.” Three times the word “all” shows up in this verse. We are supposed to pray in the Spirit on all occasions—not just on the occasions when we achieve some state of hyper-spirituality. We are supposed to pray in the Spirit with all kinds of prayers and requests—during our regular times of devotions, before meals, at bedtime, but also when we are standing in the grocery line or praying as an ambulance zooms by or even shooting an emergency flair prayer toward heaven. And we are supposed to always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people—not just when we are especially feeling “it.”

If praying in the Spirit doesn’t mean a special, spiritual prayer, what does it mean? I think it means an awareness that the Holy Spirit’s power is the potency in our prayers. It means taking advantage of the gift of the Holy Spirit that enables us to pray and praying in dependence on His power in prayer. It means praying from the heart, a heart that is being shaped by the Holy Sprit’s presence.

Wayne Grudem, in his big *Systematic Theology* text book, puts it like this:

“To pray ‘in the Holy Spirit,’ then, is to pray with the conscious awareness of God’s presence surrounding us and sanctifying both us and our prayers” (pg. 382).

J.I. Packer, whose book called *Keep in Step with Spirit* I have had opportunity to quote a few times in this series, says:

“The Spirit leads the believer to concentrate on God and his glory in Christ with a sustained, single-minded simplicity of attention and intensity of desire that no one ever knows save as it is supernaturally wrought” (pg. 79).

Have you experienced that in your prayers? I’ll admit that I have not experienced that enough in my prayers. Not that the Holy Spirit is unavailable to me, but that I don’t take advantage of what He is offering to me. I don’t pray with the conscious awareness that His presence is surrounding me and sanctifying me. I don’t pray with a concentration on God’s glory and the supernaturally wrought intensity He is offering to me.

Too often I pray “in the flesh.” In my own power. I treat prayer as a chore I should accomplish or as an item on my checklist before I eat or before we begin a meeting or before I close my eyes for the day. But too often I don’t pray in the Holy Spirit. I don’t invite His power into my prayers.

So what’s the application here? I think it is this: **We should involve the Holy Spirit in our prayers.**

Pray with a conscious awareness of the Holy Spirit’s presence in your life. Involve the Holy Spirit in your prayers and never stop praying.

Look at Ephesians 6:18 again. What if we really did what this verse says? What if we prayed in the Spirit on all kinds of occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests and what if we just kept on alert and always kept praying?

This isn’t to say that there is something wrong with having set times of prayer like before meals or at bedtime. But what if we didn’t limit ourselves to that but saw our entire day as a sort of on-going conversation of prayer?

The image I have is one of those Bluetooth headsets or earpieces that connect our cell phones to our heads. What if we called God up in the morning and then we just said: “O.K. Holy Spirit” (I guess this is a form of a prayer addressed to Him) “O.K. Holy Spirit, I’m just going to leave the line open, I’m going to leave that earpiece in, and as I move through the day I’m just going to keep talking with you, and I’m asking you to keep me alert to things I should pray for and alert to the things you want to show me and just help me to keep bringing things before the Father as I move through this day?”

How would that change your prayer life? How would that change the way your day goes? Pray IN the Spirit. Involve the Spirit in your prayers, in your day.

***Groans that Words Cannot Express***The third way the Spirit is involved in our prayers is when **we pray WITH the Holy Spirit.** The Holy Spirit makes our prayers effectual. In fact, the Holy Spirit is praying for us even when we don’t know the words to pray.

The third scripture for us to look at today is **Romans 8:26-27:**

26In 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 through wordless groans. 27And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

This is the ultimate way the Holy Spirit is involved in our prayers. He doesn’t just make prayer possible. He doesn’t just insert Himself in our prayers and guide us into better prayers. He even takes over and prays for us when we can’t seem to do it for ourselves.

This is part of the “Great 8.” Romans chapter 8 is one of the greatest chapters in the whole Bible. I even did a whole series a few years ago just on this chapter. And Paul has just gotten done saying that all of Creation is groaning like childbirth because of the fall. And we groan, even though we’re God’s children, because the world isn’t what it’s supposed to be, and we’re not what we’re supposed to be YET. But as we groan (and how we often feel it!), we wait patiently. And we pray. We have prayer lives.

Verse 26 again: “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 through wordless groans.”  In our prayer lives, the Holy Spirit is interceding for us.

Interpreters differ on whether the “wordless groans” here are the sighs the Holy Spirit makes or the sighs and groans we make when we don’t know what else to say. On the one hand, this could be saying that the Holy Spirit sympathizes with us in our groaning, and when He groans it carries directly to the Father on our behalf. On the other hand, and more likely given the context, it is when the pain and struggle of life in a fallen world gets us to the point where we don’t know what to do other than sigh and groan, it is the Spirit Himself who steps in and gives voice to the prayers we need.

In that sense then, this isn’t just the Holy Spirit praying instead of us, but the Holy Spirit praying with us. The word translated as “help” in verse 26 is a word that means to “come alongside” and “work together.” What is being promised here is that when we don’t know what to pray—but we know we need to pray even if it is wordless groaning—the Holy Spirit comes alongside and makes our weak and ineffectual prayers strong and effectual.

Wow! Think about that for a second. This is how much God loves us. His very own Spirit prays for us. His very own Spirit appeals to the Father for us. He translates our prayers, feeble and weak and ignorant as they are, into the very right thing to say to God!

And look at verse 27 again. It’s very encouraging: “And he who searches our hearts [that’s the Father] knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.”

Last week, we talked about how the Spirit guides us into truth. The Spirit knows the thoughts of God and so we can only know Spiritual things when the Spirit is present in our lives. Without the Spirit, we won’t know God’s truth.

Now, here is the corollary to that thought. This verse says that God knows our thoughts because His Spirit lives in us and intercedes for us in accordance with His will. God knows what’s on our minds because the Spirit is living in us.

Of course, God is omniscient, so He would know our thoughts anyway!

But still, He sends His Spirit to live in us and intercede for us so that we know that He knows what we need!

Wow!

Why wouldn’t we pray?

And here’s how effective those prayers are. The very next verse in Romans is one of the top 5 most popular and quoted verses in the Bible. **Romans 8:28:**

**28**And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

The prayers that the Holy Spirit is praying with us are effectual. They are used by God to work all things, every circumstance, every painful trial, every blessing, every difficult thing to our good. This is promised to all Christians. All who have access to the Father through the name of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. To those who love God and who have been called according to His purpose.

Does that describe you? Do you love God through Jesus?

If you do, then this unbelievably powerful Spirit lives inside you and is powerfully involved in your prayers.

The application here is this: **We should have confidence in our prayers**. We should pray. We should take advantage of the access we have by the Spirit. We should involve the Holy Spirit in our prayers. We should walk through our days with an awareness of the Spirit’s presence and constantly praying in the Spirit’s power. And then, third, we should have confidence in our prayers because we know the Holy Spirit is interceding on our behalf so that in everything God will work for our ultimate good and His glory.

If all that is true, why wouldn’t we pray more? I know I need this reminder, I need this encouragement, and I need to accept the Holy Spirit’s invitation to empower my prayers.