

Well, thank you, my beloved congregation and visitors. It's been a wonderful summer, and I have missed you all more than I can say. It's only been a month out of the pulpit, well, actually two months out of the pulpit, but a month on vacation, and it's been a long break. I feel a bit rusty this morning. I forgot to put my mic on for the first service. I had a bit of a stressful moment at the end of the glorious brass ensemble rushing out to find it. But here we are again with the mic, and it's been the subject given to me this morning is to speak to you on the Holy Spirit and prayer. This is the last lecture, as Jay said, on the Holy Spirit and the Christian life. So over the past few weeks this summer, we have seen that there is both unity and diversity in the heart of the Godhead. It's been said that *e pluribus unum*, out of many, one, is the central question of Western philosophy. And we find that same principle of diversity and unity. And that's the great struggle, not just of our philosophy, but of our political establishment. How do you go from many to one and one to many? It's difficult to have a melting pot of so many cultures coming in and forming one nation under God. It's a struggle, but that struggle reflects the glory and the unity of ultimate reality that there Behind all things in heaven and on earth there is the God who made all things, and that God is one and that God is also three. He's one in essence, one in divine nature, one in being, and yet there are three persons within the Godhead. And it's very difficult to define what a person is. Augustine famously said, but he used the word person because it would be embarrassing to say nothing, We have to say something, and so we'll use the word person. What do we mean by person? It's hard to define. I'd like to describe a person. I'm going back to Martin Buber here, an old theologian. He described a person as someone capable of an I-Thy relationship. And there are three I-Thy relationships in the heart of the Godhead, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And it's not like three slices of a pizza, boys and girls. It's not that you have three parts to God. God is one, right? And each person of the Godhead has full, eternal, necessary, and complete possession of the divine essence. All that makes God God is found in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Spirit. As one person said, the Son is everything the Father is, except Father. And the Spirit is everything the Father and the Son are, except Father and Son. And the Father is everything the Son and the Spirit is, except Son, and Spirit. They're different personally, but they are the same in being, substance, and glory. That's a great mystery, but it's the truth of the Bible. It's beyond our capacity to explain, but that's okay. If you could explain God, that would make you God, and you'd have some explaining to do. But God is beyond us, but it does, there are so many areas. We can't go there this morning. I need to be disciplined. So there's unity and diversity. I love Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the great fathers of the church, the Cappadocian fathers, who said, we cannot think of the one without immediately being encircled by the three, and we cannot think of the three without immediately being drawn back to the one. John Calvin famously said, this statement vastly delights me, Calvin says. So there's unity and diversity, we've seen that this summer. And then we also have seen that as the Trinity faces outward, as it gets to work, or as he gets to work, in creation, providence, and redemption, all three persons of the Godhead work together. Where one goes, they all go. What one does, they all do. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Augustine has a saying, *opera ad extra trinitatis indivisus*. The external works of the Trinity are indivisible. And yet there's order in that work. The Father works through the Son and by the Spirit. That's always the way it works. The Father works through the Son and by the Spirit. Or, young folk, a way to think about it is

medicine. The Father designs the medicine. The Son makes and procures all the ingredients, mixes them together, and he makes the medicine, and then the Holy Spirit rubs the medicine in. So the Holy Spirit, in that sense, you might say, is the business end of the Godhead. And he's absolutely essential for living the Christian life, as he takes the work of Christ and applies it to the souls of men and women and boys and girls. And if we've learned anything this summer, it's surely this, that if we don't have the Spirit of God, then we do not have Christ. We are nothing, spiritually speaking. We are a dead shell, a husk. It doesn't matter how religious you are, how noble and moral you are, without Christ you're the spiritual equivalent of a cicada bug shell you might find on a piece of climbing equipment in your yard. You look at it, it looks like an insect, and you poke it and you realize there's nothing living in it. There's no movement. There's no life, there's no noise. It's just a husk, and it's empty within. And without Christ, that's what we are. We're dead souls in dying bodies. We are goats in the herd of sheep. We're a wolf in sheep's clothing. We are a Judas amongst the disciples. We are a lost wife leaving Sodom, but always looking back over our shoulder to our real home. There'll always be something missing. There'll be no life in our Christianity. We'll have a form of godliness, but deny its power without the power of the Lord Jesus from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit in our hearts, bringing the life of God down into our souls. And when the Spirit comes into a new man, that's what he does. He brings God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, all come and make our dwelling. His dwelling in us, so that you are now temples of the holy God. You are His dwelling place. It's not this room, it's not the sanctuary even across the road. God doesn't live in buildings anymore. He lives in a people. He lives in you, and all of His fullness fills you. You are a mobile holy of holies. Your soul is the place where Nadab and Abihu breathed their last when they offered strange fire. It's an amazing thought when you're watching television. You're watching television as the Hoolie of Hoolies. That should challenge the shows you and I watch. mobile Holy of Holies, filled with all of the fullness of God. He brings life where there was death. He brings a new way of thinking, a new way of feeling, a new assurance that we are children of God. He comes, the Holy Spirit does, as the spirit of adoption to assure you that you belong to God, that you're his child. He gives new desires. He gives you the power to make new choices. He enables us to do the work of sanctification, to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, to put on the Lord Jesus Christ and to make no provision from the flesh. That's a work that is impossible without the Holy Spirit. You need him every step of the Christian life. Without him, we can do nothing. Now, this morning, I wanna talk with you specifically about the work of the Holy Spirit when it comes to prayer. He is our great prayer partner. So if you would, please turn with me in your Bibles to Romans chapter eight. I suspect some of you are already there. We're gonna jump into the middle this morning. And you'll notice the theme of groaning in this passage from verse 18 down to verse, let's read down to verse 30. This is the word of God. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation eagerly waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it in hope. That the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we also ourselves who have

the first fruits of the spirit groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with it, with patience, we wait for it with patience. So Paul here has been speaking about the struggle you and I have when it comes to living between two worlds. between the world we were made in, this world, that's sinking under the wrath and curse of God, a bit like that old ship made in Belfast, the Titanic, as she sank, the creaking, the groaning of the ship, the piano sloshing across from one side of the ballroom to the other, chandeliers crashing down, It's a beautiful ship, but it's sinking. This world is beautiful, but it labors under the wrath and curse of God. We had five inches of rain last night in Blithewood. There was literally a waterfall coming over our wall and a river running through our yard, like the scene of a Brad Pitt movie. The world is not as it ought to be, and it's a struggle. We struggle living between the world we were made in, this one, and the world we were redeemed for, the next one. We live, as scholars say, between the now and the not yet. Now you're a son of God, but it has not yet revealed what you shall be, right? And that's a struggle, and creation groans with that struggle. Even Baxter knows to hide under the table when there's lightning going on, because deep down in his wee doggy spirit, he knows that somewhere, someone who's very big has a just cause to be very angry, and he wants to hide till the thunder passes. And we share that groaning, we long to be free with the glorious liberty of the children of God. And we groan, and we wait. So it's a struggle. Now, verse 26, likewise, now Paul's connecting this coming passage with the one just preceding. So he's been speaking about the groaning, struggling to live between two worlds. And now he's gonna talk about the groaning struggle of connecting with God in prayer. Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good. For those 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 firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined, he also called. And those whom he called, he also justified. And those whom he justified, he also glorified. So Paul is talking here about the struggle of prayer. And prayer is a struggle. Prayer's hard. Prayer is, I think, one of the hardest things we do as a Christian. And for a number of reasons. First of all, we're praying to a God we can't see, we can't always touch, and we can't hear him, at least not his voice audibly. And if you have, maybe very early, very rarely, but we don't hear God's voice outside of scripture as a real, So that's a struggle. So it can be like a cell phone commercial. You're praying and you're going, can you hear me now? And there's silence. And that's the second problem. We don't see God acting, right? You pray and you wait, and sometimes nothing observable happens. And then when something does happen, the devil whispers in your ear, well, was that God or would that have happened anyway? So that makes it hard. And then doubly, triply hard, it's a struggle to pray because we don't actually know what to pray for in our prayers. It's a struggle. We do not know, Paul says, what to pray for as we ought. So for example, You've a knuckle-headed teenager, this is not autobiographical, at least not this morning, but you've a knuckle-headed teenager and you're on your knees praying, you say, Lord, be kind to them. Send your loving kindness, quote of

loving kindness, draw them back to Jesus. And you think, hmm, no, send an angel with a two by four. And you don't know what to pray for, right? Or be kind to them, or be severe to them, and it can be a struggle. Or a new job opportunity comes up, and you think, is it a temptation or an opportunity? How do you tell the difference? Should I pray for the job or against the job? Or you get two job interviews, one with a great package and one with maybe less of a good package and you're trying to figure out, but the cities are different and you just don't know what to pray for. Or even more severely, you have a bad visit at the doctor and you're sick or your loved one is sick and it's a normally mortal illness and you don't know, do I pray for Lord, give them grace to be healed? Or do I pray for give them grace to suffer hardship well as a good Christian and to die a good death? What do I pray for? And it's a struggle. It's a struggle to prayer. And this confusion can often leave us feeling hesitant and uncertain and a little bit insecure on our knees. Which is why Samuel Taylor Coleridge said, believe me, to pray with all your heart and strength, to engage the reason and the will, to believe vividly that God will listen to your voice through Christ, that verily he will do the thing he pleaseth thereupon, this is the last, the greatest achievement of the Christian's warfare on earth. Lord, teach us to pray. that learning to pray with a sense of confidence as a child to a father ready and able to help us is the last and great lesson you'll learn as a Christian. When you've mastered that, Coleridge is saying, you are a master Christian, it's a struggle. So this morning in our text, I wanna give us three encouragements in prayer. Three encouragements from this passage. And the first is, when you pray, or when we pray, we never pray in strength. We never pray in strength or from a posture of strength. Strong people don't pray, they don't need to. The essence of prayer is a sense of helplessness. Tim Keller, in his wonderful little book, Prayer, Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God, he quoted Norwegian author Ole Halleby, heretofore unknown to me, who says that the defining nature of prayer is an attitude of heart and mind characterized primarily as helplessness. As far as I can see, Halleby says, prayer has been ordained only for the helpless. Prayer and helplessness are inseparable. Only he who is helpless can truly pray. Well, how helpless are we in prayer? We don't even know what to pray for when we pray. That's how bad we are at praying, you and me. And I want you to see this morning in this text that that's not just a problem for you. And it's not just a problem for your pastor. It was also a problem for the Apostle Paul. Did you notice what he said? Likewise, the Spirit helps in our weakness. For we do not know how to pray as we ought. Paul doesn't say, the Spirit doesn't help in your weakness, you poor Christian, you're ordinary Christians, you're part of the hoi polloi, me, no, I'm the apostle, I'm the mighty apostle. I have a direct line of communication to God and prayer. You haven't got. I know everything that I should be praying for. Not you, of course, but me. Oh no, it's different for me. That's not what Paul says. Paul says, on my knees, I'm in the same boat as you are. A weak, finite, fallible, frail creature. We do not know what to pray for as we ought. And I'm saying to you, not just was that something that Paul struggled with, but it's something you know that Jesus struggled with too. That might shock you to hear that. We often downplay the finitude and the frailty of Christ's human nature. One of the most amazing statements in the Bible in Luke 2, when it says, Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. No problem he grew in stature. He was a baby when he was a baby and he was a grown man when he was a grown man. That's not a struggle, right? So his physical frame had finitude, so when he was carrying the cross down the Via

Dolorosa and he collapsed under its weight, he wasn't pretending. No, he had the strength of a man, and when that strength was exhausted, he couldn't put one foot past the other. He fell down. And unless the Holy Spirit gave him the strength of Samson, He was as weak as a kitten when he had been half exsanguinated through the beatings and the scourgings and the dehydration of the entree to the cross. And so physically he had limitations, but it also that he grew in wisdom, that's amazing. He was never foolish, of course. but he was wiser as a 12-year-old than he was as a baby, and he was wiser as a 30-year-old than he was as a 12-year-old. Never foolish, but he grew in wisdom, and he also grew in favor. That's an amazing statement. With men and with God. Never out of favor, but as Christ's ability. to grow and mature and to think and to live and to deny himself, to pour himself out, lay himself down, give himself up. His father's pride in his son grew and expanded. Like maybe Simone How do you write her second name? Biles. Simone Biles. Parents watching her do her tumbling. A little toddler doing her little kind of, you know, I don't know what she was doing. And they thought, that's so cute, so wonderful. But now she's doing these triple quadruple spinning somersaults off. anything and it's amazing and and their pride has increased in her as her abilities has increased and men looked at Christ like that but so did God as he grew he grew in favor and in stature with men and with God till that climactic moment he laid his life down So Christ had a finite human mind. There were things he did not know. He didn't know the time or the hour of his second coming, for example. And in Gethsemane, there is that if. Father, if there be another way, if it's possible for this cup to pass from me. There's an if, a humble, childlike, human if rising from his knees. So we never pray from a posture of strength, but from a posture of weakness. And this confusion doesn't invalidate your prayers. God expects his children not to know everything. Your prayers don't sound silly in God's ears. Your ignorance does not render your prayers ineffectual. God isn't put off by our weakness. And so when you're in your bedroom praying and you're struggling, I don't even know what to say, what am I supposed to ask for, I'm confused, and your mind is just being in a swirl of chaos, you are not being judged by God, as we shall see in a moment, you're being understood by him. So the first thing is, we never pray in strength. Secondly, we never pray alone. Now prayers are lonely work. We go into our bedroom alone to pray, right? But we don't pray alone, really. It's a remarkable text. Likewise, the spirit helps in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the spirit himself intercedes. Now that's very emphatic. In the Greek, it's the spirit intercedes. himself the spirit he himself intercedes it's a very emphatic statement this is something the holy spirit does with you alongside you when you're praying he is you remember called the para kleitos the word para kleitos in greek para means alongside and kleitos called he's the one called alongside to help you And you've maybe been in a situation where you needed help, maybe moving a piano or something. I had some kind men move a piano for me recently. And I just sat and watched and gave instructions. And you get helpers like that. They give you advice, right? And they'll say, no, not like that. Bend your legs, boy. You're going to hurt your back. And keep your back straight, good form, like a deadlift. Don't bend. You'll do yourself an injury. And they'll give you advice. But they don't give you any help. They tell you how you're doing everything wrong. But they're not come alongside, that's one kind of helper. Then there's another kind of helper and they'll come and they actually roll their sleeves up. And they get their hands under the piano or whatever you're lifting and they lift and sometimes they're stronger than you and they do the heaviest part of

the lifting. And that's the kind of help, that's the word used here of help. The spirit helps in our weakness. The Greek means someone who joins in with you to help. And this word is used only one other time in the New Testament, and it's the time of Mary and Martha, when Mary's sitting at the feet of Jesus, hanging on his every word, and Martha comes in and goes, you're gonna just let my sister sit there and do nothing when I need help? That's the word used here of the Holy Spirit, praying alongside us. How does he pray? When he puts his heart into it, he groans. Likewise, the spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. Now, there's a dispute here in the commentators between who's doing the groaning here, right, and Calvin and John Piper, and I'm loath to go against Calvin and John Piper, but they believe that we're the ones do the groaning, that the Holy Spirit inspires the groaning in us, and that's possibly correct. It's a little bit like my, in Christ Covenant Church Greensboro, the fire truck would park outside my office when they wanted lunch, and they would sit there with their fire truck on idle, and this big diesel engine, and it had sympathetic resonance with everything in my study. And the whole study must start to shake. Eat your lunch quickly and go, please. And Calvin would say, that's like the Holy Spirit comes along. As he's praying alongside us, there's like a sympathetic resonance between his spirit and ours, and we find ourselves groaning. The groans are inspired by the spirit. John Stott, and I'm inclined to agree with John Stott, he takes a different position. The most natural reading of the text in both the English and the Greek is that the Spirit is doing the groaning. Listen to the text again. The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. How does the Holy Spirit intercede? With groanings too deep for words. It's the spirit droning. And what I think's going on here, what he's describing, it's a bit like Jesus in that passage we looked at this morning, or looked at later, depending which service you came from, when Christ says to the woman, oh, woman, that's a word of emotion. Christ's heart is engaged. He's been holding this Canaanite woman at arm's length to teach her a lesson, to teach the disciples a lesson, and he's had to steel himself to do it. He wants to run to her, but he has to wait. And then when his heart breaks, he says, oh, woman, great is your faith, and heals her daughter immediately. Well, the Holy Spirit prays, not with an academic distance, but with a warm, groaning spirit. Illustration, imagine there's a young child, Back in the days when a fever could kill you, right, and the child's got scarlet fever, and she's sick, or diphtheria, and the fever's high, and the doctors can do no more, and the mother goes in, and she gets down on her knees by the bedside, and she starts to pray. But the emotions run so deep, she can't find words. And so she just groans, and sighs in prayer. And the father walks in, and looks at his wife, and he knows exactly what she means. Those groans by our daughter's bedside, they tell the story of a thousand words. And that's, I think, the Holy Spirit here. He's there with us as we're praying, and he's groaning, and God looks at him, and he looks at us, And God doesn't need the Holy Spirit to speak because he knows the mind of the Spirit. He knows exactly what the Spirit is wanting, exactly what the Spirit is saying in and through these passionate groans on our behalf. So think about that, Christian. First of all, you never pray from a posture of strength. It's supposed to feel weak because prayer is the posture of helplessness. Only helpless people pray. And so when you're in trouble and you pray, and the devil goes, you're useless, you're helpless. And you say to him, that's exactly why I'm praying, because I need God's help. I can't do it by myself. And secondly, you

never pray alone. The Holy Spirit prays alongside you. It's a beautiful picture that John Murray says. We've actually got two intercessors. The Son prays for us in heaven, always living to make intercession for us. And the Spirit prays for us or with us on earth. William Gurnall used the illustration of Jacob's ladder, and you've got a help at the top, Christ, but you also have a help at the bottom, the Spirit. These two divine prayer partners. Well, lastly, you never pray in vain. You never pray in vain. How could you? God never ignores the prayers of God. Jesus says, Father, I know that you always hear me. And the Spirit prays, and the Son is praying, as we are praying, and the prayers rise up. It's beautiful. J.A. Packer says he fixes our prayers on the way up. The Spirit does. And Jesus perfumes them in heaven, filling them with his merits and with his righteousness. We do not know what to pray for as we ought, and so when we pray, our prayers as we speak them often sound confused. They ramble. They ramble from Dan to Beersheba, and we're struggling. We feel like a turtle on its back. Help. And the Holy Spirit is there, and Paul says he knows. He knows, we don't know what to pray for, but he does. And the father who searches hearts, who knows our struggle, who knows our frame, who knows the burdens we're carrying, he also knows what is the mind of the spirit, because the spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And so we're praying, we're confused, but the Spirit's not confused. We don't know what we want. We don't know what God's doing. We don't know what we need. We're just struggling. But the Spirit is there, and he knows. And the two illustrations in my mind that come to mind are a little boy bringing his mommy a little bouquet of flowers from the garden. And there's a daisy that's half dead, and then there's pieces of grass and a few weeds and a nettle and a worm. And he's bringing them into the kitchen. And as he's walking into the kitchen, his daddy's walking out. Daddy goes, no, no, son, come on, come on, come on. And daddy pulls him aside. And let's go out to the garden. And he takes a little bouquet. And he goes, let's take this out and this out. definitely the worm, and then, oh, here's a rose, and here's a chrysanthemum, and we'll put it in, and we'll tie it up in some holly and some greenery. Now, there, you bring that to mummy. And the wee boy goes into the kitchen with the bouquet. The worms are gone, the grass is gone, the nettles are gone, and there's just the flower and the dizzy and everything there. And that's the picture of the spirit, is we're praying, confused, don't know what to say, just lost, struggling, The Holy Spirit is there and he's taking out the weeds and the nettles and the selfishness and the sins. And he's saying, Father, this is what he really means to say. The other illustration is of another little girl this time. And true story, I'm told, there's a famous concert pianist back in the day called Paderewski. And there was a concert and this little girl is going with her parents and they go in and there's all the stress getting parked and getting in and getting your popcorn and everything and again getting in. And the curtains are down and the piano's there and suddenly mum looks to dad, where's Samantha? I thought you had her. No, I thought you had her. Samantha's gone. Can't find Samantha. Where is she? And they're looking, and in the beginning they get panicked, and they're about to ask one of the security guards. And then they look up at the stage, and to their horror, little four-year-old Samantha's crawling up the steps of the stage, onto the stage, walking across to the grand piano and sitting down. And she pulls up the guard and starts praying, twinkle, twinkle, little star. And her mom's going, oh, no. And then the curtain rises, and there's the old maestro. And he walks across. And what does he do? Does he rebuke her? Get off this piano, you silly little child. No. He sits down beside her and whispers, don't stop. And

starts playing these glorious arpeggios on the bass sound. And then puts his right hand around her and starts playing a harmony in the right hand. But the music, oh, it's glorious as the maestro comes alongside her. And that's a picture I want you to take home with you, my brother and my sister, when you're praying. You might be struggling. You're hardly able to play Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star in your prayers. The devil's laughing at you. The demons are mocking you. But the Holy Spirit's sitting beside you and saying, don't stop. He's praying with you. You can't hear him, but God hears him. You don't know what you need, but he knows perfectly what you need. And your confused prayers are rising up to heaven, and they're important. We must pray, Paul prayed, Jesus prayed, we must pray, but our prayers are confused. Oh, but they're mixed with the glorious symphony of Jesus in heaven and the spirit on earth fixing our prayers as they rise and what glorious music you make in the ears of God, Christian, when you pray. Let's join you to God in prayer. We thank you this morning for the Holy Spirit. We often neglect him. We see other churches that think too much of the Holy Spirit, and they think hardly ever mention the Son, it's all the Spirit. We go to the other extreme, we neglect him, our Father. Yet he's our great helper, who brings you and your Son into our souls, and your truth, he applies it to our minds, and he gives us strength to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. And when we bow our knees in prayer, we're never alone. He's always there beside us with his arm around us as one called alongside to help, to encourage, and to teach us to pray. And I pray you'd forgive me, Father, for the many times I forget to pray and neglect prayer. Forgive the congregation. I'm sure they commit the same sins. And teach us, encourage us by this unseen but not unfelt helper who comes alongside us to strengthen us to pray and to fix our confused ramblings when we do, knowing that Our words rise to heaven, and so it's no surprise, the very next verse, Paul says, and because of that, in a sense, we know that all things work together for good. How could they not, with the Holy Spirit praying alongside us, that everything, the good, the bad, the ugly, the bright and the dark, all are woven together to make us wise unto salvation and to bring us home to God in the end. We offer these prayers in Jesus' name.