



**Private Prayer,
Prayer Sins and
Prayer Sighs**

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Private Prayer

“But *thou*, when thou prayest, enter into *thy* closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward *thee* openly” (Matt. 6:6). Eight times in the space of this verse is the pronoun used in the singular number and the second person—a thing unique in all Scripture—as though to emphasize the indispensability, importance and value of private prayer. We are to pray in the closet as well as in the church: in fact if the former be neglected, it is not at all likely that the latter will be of much avail. He that is an attendee at the prayer meetings in order to be seen of men, and is not seen alone in his closet by God, is an hypocrite. Private prayer is the test of our sincerity, the index to our spirituality, the principle means of growing in grace. Private prayer is the one thing, above all others, that Satan seeks to prevent, for he knows full well that if he can succeed at this point, the Christian will fail at every other.

Alas, how remiss we have been, how sadly we have failed to discharge this duty, and what irreparable losers are we by this sinful neglect. Is it not high time that some of us heeded that word, “Consider your ways” (Hag. 1:5, 7)?! Shall this year witness a repetition of the sad failures of the past? Can we go on robbing God of His due, and our souls of the blessedness of communion with Him? The secret place of the Most High is one of vision, peace, joy. The closet is where strength is renewed, faith is quickened, graces are revived. It is not always the cares or pleasures of this world which are the hindering cause—some allow the discharge of public duties to prevent the performance of private ones. Beware, my reader, of being so busy in running from one meeting to another that personal dealings with God *in secret* are crowded out. Some are so busily engaged in reading, and preparing sermons, that private communion with God is prevented.

Not a few are puzzling their brains over prophecy when they should be on their knees before God. “The Devil knows he is no loser, and the curious soul but a little gainer, if he can but persuade

him to spend most of his precious time in pouring over the mysteries and hidden things of God. He that affects to read the Revelation of John more than his plain Epistles, or Daniel's prophecies more than David's Psalms, and is more busy about reconciling different Scriptures than he is about mortifying of unruly lusts, or is set more upon vain speculation than upon things that make for edification—he is not the man that is cut out for closet prayer. Such as affect sublime notions, obscure expressions, and are men of abstract conceits, are but a company of wise fools, that will never take any delight to be with God in a corner. O how holy, happy, heavenly, and humble might many men have been, had they but spent half the time in closet prayer that they have spent in searching after those things that are hard to be understood” (Thomas Brooks, Puritan).

The most eminent saints, in Old and New Testament times, applied themselves to private prayer. “And Abram planted a grove in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the everlasting God” (Gen. 21:33). Why did Abram plant that grove, but that he could have a secluded spot where he might pour out his soul before his Maker. “And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide” (Gen. 24:63): the Hebrew word for “meditate” also signifies *to pray*, and is elsewhere rendered “commune” and “pray.” So, too, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, Hezekiah, etc., were men whose private devotions are recorded in Holy Writ. Concerning Daniel, we read, “he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God” (6:10)—busy as he must have been, he allowed not public duties to crowd out private devotions.

Christ Himself, when upon earth, did much exercise Himself *in private prayer*: ponder such passages as Matthew 14:23, Mark 1:35, 6:46, Luke 5:16, where it will be found that He retired “into a mountain,” “into a solitary place,” “into the wilderness” that He might be alone with God, free from disturbance and distraction. But why was *He* so much in private prayer? Another has suggested the following reasons. First, to put a very high honour and value upon the same: to enhance and magnify this duty. Second, that He might avoid all shows and appearances of ostentation and popular

applause: He was very shy of the mere shadow of pride and vainglory. Third, to set us such a blessed pattern and gracious example that we should not content ourselves with public prayers only, nor with family prayers only, but that we should also apply ourselves to *secret* prayer. Fourth, that He might approve Himself to our understandings and consciences to be a merciful and faithful High Priest “who ever liveth to make intercession for us.”

It is the exercising of ourselves in secret prayer which distinguishes us from hypocrites, who go through their religious exercises merely to be seen of men: Matthew 6:1, 2, 5, 16. The hypocrite places a far higher value upon the applause of his fellows than he does upon the approbation of his Maker. The praise of men is his meat and drink. The outstanding mark of a hypocrite is that he is one thing in public, but quite another in private. But the genuine Christian makes conscience of his prayer life, knows that God sees and hears him in secret, and cultivates communion with Him in the closet. The diligence with which we perform our *private* devotions is the criterion of our sincerity. We never read in Scripture that Pharaoh, King Saul, Judas, Demas, Simon Magus, and the scribes and Pharisees ever poured out their souls before the Lord in secret! The hypocrite is more concerned about a good name than a good life, of a reputation for piety than a clear conscience—not so God’s children. In secret we may more freely, fully, and safely, unbosom our souls to God than we can in the presence of our fellows. There is no danger in opening our heart and confessing in detail our vilest sins before God in a corner, but there might be a considerable hazard in doing so even before our fellow Christians. No one with wisdom and refinement would think of exposing his bodily ailments and diseases to any but his bosom friend or physician; neither should he make known his weaknesses and wickedness to any but to his best Friend, the Great Physician. There need be no restraint or reserve in confession when we are apart with God. It was when David was alone in the cave (see the Psalm heading) that he poured out his complaint and “showed Him his trouble” (Psa. 142:2). Observe carefully the repeated “every family *apart*” and “their wives *apart*” of Zechariah 12:12-14—to manifest not only the soundness of their sorrow, but to show their sincerity.

It is striking to note that God has often granted the freest communications of Himself to those who were before Him in secret. It was so with Moses on the mount, when Jehovah gave him the Law—and again when He gave him the pattern for the tabernacle. It was while Daniel was engaged in private prayer that God sent His angel to reveal to him the secrets of His counsel concerning the restoration of Jerusalem and the duration thereof even unto the Messiah (9:3, 21-27); as it was also during a season when he was alone before the Throne of Grace that God assured him he was “a man greatly beloved” (10:11, 19). It is in the closet that God usually bestows His sweetest and choicest blessings. Cornelius was highly commended and graciously rewarded upon the account of his private prayer (Acts 10:1-4). Peter was granted that wondrous vision concerning the Gentiles while praying alone (Acts 10:9-13).

Scripture records much to illustrate and demonstrate the great prevalence of private prayer. O the wonders that followed secret wrestling with God, the grand mercies that have been obtained, the judgments that have been diverted, the deliverances that have been secured! When Isaac was all alone entreating with God for a good wife, he met Rebekah (Gen. 24:63, 64). While Hezekiah was weeping and praying in private, God sent the prophet Isaiah to assure him that He would add unto his days fifteen years (Isa. 38:5). When Jonah was shut up in the whale’s belly, he was delivered in answer to his supplication (2:1-10). O the power of private prayer: it has issued in the dead being raised to life—1 Kings 17:18-22, 2 Kings 4:32-35. May the Holy Spirit graciously use these considerations to stir up writer and reader.

“My voice shalt Thou hear in the morning, O LORD; in the morning will I direct my prayer unto Thee, and will look up” (Psa. 5:3). Let this be our resolve, and, so long as we are spared, our practice, throughout the year we have just entered. It is both our wisdom and our duty to thus begin each day with God. “Should not a people seek unto the Lord their God?” Surely the light of nature dictates that we ought to do so, while the light of the Gospel affords us ample instruction and encouragement for the same. When He says to us “Seek ye My face,” should not our hearts answer as to One we love, “Thy face, LORD, will we seek” (Psa. 27:8)? But

suppose our hearts have grown cold, and we have wickedly strayed from Him? Well, when He says “Return ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings,” should we not readily reply, “Behold, we come unto Thee, for Thou art the LORD our God” (Jer. 3:22)?

O my reader, is there not much that we need to say to the Lord our God, the One whom we serve? How many and important are the concerns which lie between us and Him. We are constantly dependent upon Him—all our expectation is from Him. Is not all our happiness for time and eternity bound up in His favour? Have we not need to seek His approbation—to seek Him with all our hearts; to beg as for our very lives that He will lift up the light of His countenance upon us, to plead Christ’s righteousness as that through which alone we can hope to obtain God’s lovingkindness (Psa. 71:16)?! Are we not conscious that we have deeply offended the Lord our God by our numerous and grievous sins, and have contracted defilement thereby? Should we not confess our folly and seek forgiveness and cleansing by the blood of Christ? Have we not received innumerable bounties and blessings from Him—must we not acknowledge the same, and return thanks and praise? Yes, prayer is the very least we can offer unto God.

Let us now make a few suggestions upon how this duty is to be performed. First, *reverently*. In all our approaches to God we should duly consider His exalted majesty and ineffable holiness, and humble ourselves before Him as Abraham did (Gen. 18:27). The word “*direct* my prayer unto Thee” (Psa. 5:3) signifies a fixedness of thought or close application of the mind. We need to set about the discharge of this duty solemnly, as those who have at heart something of great importance which we dare not trifle with. When we come before the Throne of Grace and address the Most High, we must not offer the sacrifice of fools: “be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God” (Eccl. 5:2). He that shoots an arrow at a mark *directs* it with a steady hand and fixed eye—so when engaging the heart to approach unto God, it must be disengaged from everything else. O to be able to say, “My heart is *fixed*, O God” (Psa. 57:7). See to it that the awe of God’s greatness be upon your soul together with a deep sense of your utter

unworthiness.

Second, *sincerely*. We cannot be too strongly or too frequently warned against that mere external worship to which we are so constantly prone, and which is the bane of all spiritual good. Of old, Israel was charged with making mention of God's name, "but *not in truth*" (Isa. 48:1). The desire of our heart must prompt and correspond to the petitions we present. How we need to beg God that this may be wrought into our spirits. How we need to search our hearts and see to it that we mean what we say, for "The LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain" (Exod. 20:7). Form the habit of challenging yourself by inquiring, Am I consistent with myself when I invoke God, or do I think I can impose upon Him with hypocrisy. "The LORD is nigh unto all them that call upon Him, to all that call upon Him *in truth*" (Psa. 145:18). As an aid to this, ponder the high value of those spiritual things you ask for—your deep need of them—and inquire, Do I really desire the same?

Third, *submissively*—that is, subserviently to God's glory and our own highest good. Our petitions should ever be presented with the provision, "If it be Thy will." We are ever prone to act amiss and often know not "what manner of spirit we are of" (Luke 9:55). The prayer of faith includes submission as truly as it does confidence, for if the latter be without the former, it is presumption—and not faith. To pray in faith is not to ask in the certain belief that God will give us what we ask for, but rather that He will grant us what is wisest and best. If we knew assuredly beforehand that God would certainly give us the very things we ask for, we would have reason to be afraid to pray, for often we desire things which would prove a curse if we got them! Our wisdom as well as our duty is to pray, conditionally and submissively. We must bow before God's sovereignty.

Fourth, *confidently*. There are some men, who because of their high station or known sternness towards all inferiors, we would be afraid to approach. And because we have none to introduce and speak a good word for us, we would therefore abandon the idea of speaking to them. But there is no reason why a believer should be discouraged from speaking to God—nay, He bids us "come boldly

unto the Throne of Grace, that we may obtain mercy.” (Heb. 4:16). Let not, then, a sense of God’s greatness or holiness, nor a realization of your own entire unworthiness, deter you. Such are God’s compassions unto humble supplicants that even His terror should not make them afraid. It is directly against His revealed will that His people should frighten themselves thus. He would have them encourage themselves as children: “for ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father” (Rom. 8:15). By that very spirit of adoption we were brought into the nearness, freedom, and liberty of the children of God, and though we are still full of sin, yet, “we have an Advocate with the Father” (1 John 2:1).

Fifth, *fervently*. David said, “I entreated Thy favour with my whole heart” (Psa. 119:58). It is not sufficient that our tongues babble out a mere form—our hearts must be in this work—we are to be more concerned about the exercise of our affections than in the selection of our words. It is to be feared that we pray far more from our memories than our consciences. But let it be pointed out that fervency in prayer is *not* a working up of our animal spirits so that there is shouting and shaking of the body—actors work themselves up into a great heat to move their audience, and lawyers to impress a judge. Fervency is expressed in Scripture as a calling upon the name of the Lord (Rom. 10:13), a stretching out the hands toward Him (Job 11:13), a following hard after Him (Psa. 63:8), a laying hold of Him (Isa. 64:7), a pouring out the heart before Him (Psa. 62:8). It is a striving in prayer (Rom. 15:30). God hates lukewarmness. Note Daniel’s intensity: 9:19. David compared his prayers to “incense” (Psa. 141:2), and no incense was offered without *fire!*

Let us now anticipate an objection. I would be often in praying before God, but sin has so much power over me that it severs communion, and utterly quenches the spirit of prayer in my heart—I feel so polluted that it would be a mockery for me to appear before the thrice holy God. Ah, but God’s hearing of our prayers does not depend upon our sanctity—but upon Christ’s mediation: “I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for Mine holy name’s sake” (Ezek. 36:22). It is not because of what Christians are in

themselves, but because of what they are in Christ, that God responds to their requests: “to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God *by Jesus Christ*” (1 Peter 2:5). When God answers our petitions it is not for our sakes, nor for our prayers’ sake, but for His Son’s sake: see Ephesians 4:32. Seek to remember, my distressed brethren, that you are a member of the mystical body of Christ, and as Luther said, “What man will cut off his nose because there is filth in it?”

The more desperate be our case, the greater is our need to pray: if grace in us be weak, the continued neglect of prayer will make it weaker. If our corruptions be strong, the omission of prayer will make them stronger. Sins which are bewailed never hinder the access and success of our petitions. Jonah was a man full of sinful passions, yet *his* prayers prevailed with God: (2:1, 2, 7, and 10). David said, “iniquities prevail against me,” yet he at once added, “as for our transgressions, Thou shalt purge them away” (Psa. 65:3). On another occasion he said, “The LORD hath heard the *voice* of my weeping” (Psa. 6:8)—his very tears prayed! God hears the sighs and groanings of those who cannot put them into words. Then encourage yourself by the greatness of God’s mercy, His covenant promises, His Fatherhood, and by the answers you have received in the past.

Prayer Sins

We hope that this unusual title will startle some of our readers and shake them out of their complacency. The fact that it *is* unusual is a sad commentary upon the religious conditions of this age. Much has been written during our lifetime on the privileges and potency of prayer—considerably less on prayer as a duty and the conditions which must be met in order to be ensured of an answer—but scarcely anything on the sacredness and solemnity of prayer, particularly along the line of warning God’s children against the sins they commit when asking “amiss” (James 4:3). And yet, a little reflection should convince the young Christian that here, too, the flesh needs to be mortified, the heart quickened, and the understanding enlightened, if he is to pray *acceptably* unto God. The very fact that it is the Holy One he is to approach calls for the

exercise of the utmost circumspection, lest he insult and offend Him.

In Psalm 141:3, we find David praying, “Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips.” We wonder how many of our readers could—without looking it up—describe the context. Probably many of them suppose it is a petition asking God to curb our unruly tongues when in the presence of our fellows: that we may be restrained from the angry retort when provoked, kept from the evil of idle gossip, and tale-bearing, etc. Instead, the preceding verses are in no wise treating of our converse with men and women: something far more weighty and solemn is there in view, namely, the use of our tongues when engaged *in prayer*—see verses 1 and 2, and then connect verse 3. It is indeed permissible to make a wider application and use of verse 3, but its first and immediate reference is to our praying. Who had thought it necessary to make *this* request in *such* a connection: that after asking, “Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense,” David should at once add, “Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth” (Psa. 141:2-3)? Ah, dear reader, if the setting of that request comes as a surprise to us, does it not indicate what urgent need there is for us to *test* OUR ideas of “prayer” by the Scriptures? to re-examine the subject and have our thoughts thereon formed by the Word? If our tongues be so unruly when in the presence of our equals, is there no danger of them trespassing when we open our lips before the Most High? If our hearts need to be warmed, our faith strengthened, our minds informed, in order to pray aright, does not our speech also need to be directed and *curbed*? Let us now point out some of the more common sins. “Keep the door of my lips” from:

1. *The surgings of pride.* The case of the Pharisee in Luke 18 is a lasting warning against self gratulation in prayer. But there are other forms of phariseeism besides prating of our good works. One is, “for a shew make long prayers” (Luke 20:47). That, of course, has reference to praying in public; and it is *there* we most need to be on our guard against the workings of pride. To be called upon to pray in the assembly presents a very real test of character and a

powerful temptation to sin. Unless such an one is exceedingly careful, he will find himself praying to the congregation rather than to the Lord. It is natural he should wish to make a good impression and convince his fellows of his piety, but nature must be bridled when we are engaged in holy exercises. It is a horrible mocking of God when under the guise of pouring out our hearts before Him, we are really seeking to further our reputation before men; as it is also to weary the brethren when he makes “long prayers.” It takes grace and courage to pray briefly when called upon to pray in public.

2. *The making of ill-considered pledges unto God.* How many a one upon a bed of sickness or in severe straits has promised God certain things if He would deliver him, but only to fail in the actual performance. Even in our dealings with men, we should think well before we speak, and be very slow in engaging ourselves for the future; much more should we be cautious in making commitments with God. “Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay” (Eccl. 5:5). “Holy resolutions to do the will and work of God should be taken up in the strength of divine grace; but to vow this or that or the other thing, had best be left alone” (John Gill, 1697-1771). Scripture supplies a number of warnings—especially so the New Testament—against making rash promises and vows to God: Jephthah (Judges 11:30-31), Herod (Matt. 14:7-8), Ananias and Saphira (Acts 5), the band of Jews (Act 23:12). Make no hasty promises or pledges unto God.

3. *The language of insincerity.* Not only should we think before we speak, but make sure that our words express the real desires of our souls. The great Searcher of hearts cannot be imposed upon by pretences of piety. Of old, He complained, “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me” (Matt. 15:8). To ask God for something we do not feel the lack of, to simulate fervour by raising our voices, to multiply words in order to fill in the time, is to mock Him. To mechanically repeat some form of prayer, or to coldly utter stated petitions, is a species of hypocrisy and a grave affront unto the Omniscient One. Against such sins, we need to earnestly beg God to “keep the door of [our] lips.”

4. *The spirit of irreverence.* There is indeed a very real difference between holy intimacy with God and freedom of utterance before Him, and unholy familiarity; nevertheless, it is sadly easy for the former to quickly degenerate into the latter. God is clothed with infinite majesty and is ineffably holy, and it ill becomes a worm of the earth to approach and address Him as though it was His equal. “Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling” (Psa. 2:11) is the injunction He has laid upon us. It is not only indecorous, but impious, to rush unto the Throne of Grace without due realization of the August One occupying it, and there, gabble off the first things which enter our minds. If the seraphim veil their faces when standing before the LORD of hosts, what reason have we fallen creatures to exercise humility, godly fear, and spiritual propriety when supplicating Him!

5. *The preferring of carnal requests.* Some affirm that the promise of Christ in John 14:13-14 is a “blank cheque” which He has placed in the hands of believers, that “they may fill it in for what they please, and that God stands pledged to honour the same.” But that is a horrible perversion of a sacred ordinance. God has not appointed prayer as a means by which we may satisfy our corrupt affections: “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts” (James 4:3). To pray for long life that we may enjoy the world, for prosperity in business that we may improve our social status, for wealth that we may gratify our vanity, is to “ask amiss.” We may pray for spiritual things from carnal motives and with fleshly ends: as to request more light from the Word that our personal reputation may be advanced, or for more grace that we may cut a better figure before fellow Christians. Unless we have the glory of God in view, our motives and designs are carnal.

6. *The exercise of self-will.* The chief design of prayer is to bring our hearts into conformity to God: “If we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us” (1 John 5:14). The bending of the knee before God imports the attitude of soul which He requires from us, namely, that of humble dependence and acknowledged subserviency. The Throne of Grace is available to suppliant and

not dictators. To ask God for something which His Word nowhere warrants, or to insist that He regulate His providences according to my behests, is rank self-will. Much of the so-called praying of this degenerate age is nothing but blatant impudence and presumption. It is not only impious, but dangerous, to insist that God should grant our selfish requests. Remember the case of Israel: “And he gave them their request; *but* sent leanness into their soul” (Psa. 106:15).

7. *The utterances of unbelief.* There is a little need for us to say much upon this point: “But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord” (James 1:6-7). To “ask in faith” is to exercise confidence in God, to be assured of the lawfulness of the thing requested, to plead and rely upon the merits of Christ, to believe that God will assuredly give that which will be most for His glory and our real good. To “waver” is to give way to doubting, to question God’s goodness and faithfulness; and certainly He will not place a premium on that. What need has both writer and reader to beg God “keep the door of my lips” that I commit not any of the prayer-sins mentioned above!

Prayer Sighs

Those who are unconscious of and unconcerned about the sins which they commit when at their devotions will not be able to enter into the meaning of this piece, for it treats of that which is quite foreign to their experiences. But they who make conscience of the surgings of pride, the promptings of carnality, the workings of unbelief, and the exercise of self-will, when supplicating the Lord, will—if He deigns to bless it unto them—find here something to help and comfort them. “The heart knoweth his own bitterness; and a stranger doth not intermeddle with his joy” (Prov. 14:10). Each regenerate person has deep exercises of soul and painful pangs of heart which those dead in trespasses and sins have no acquaintance with; yet have they their own peculiar hopes, comforts, and delights, which strangers to Christ know nothing of. Those exercises of soul and pangs of heart find expression in sighs and sobs, in moans and groans, yet such as mere nature never produced.

The word “sigh” has a much stronger force in its Scriptural usage than in our ordinary conversation—or, we should say, in more modern speech—for three hundred years ago, it signified a lament rather than a mark of peevishness. Though not quite so intense as a “groan,” yet it approximates very closely thereto, as appears from the fact that the Hebrew *anach* is translated both “sigh” and “groan,” as also is the Greek word *stenazo*. Its first occurrence at once intimates its force: “And the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage” (Exod. 2:23)—the meaning of which is explained in the next verse, “And God heard their groaning.” Their “sighing” expressed their suffering and sorrow under the oppression of their Egyptian taskmasters. So again, we read that the sorely afflicted Job declared, “For my sighing cometh before I eat, and my roarings are poured out like the waters” (Job 3:24). So by prayer sighs, we intend those agitations and breathings of soul which are virtually synonymous with groans.

A “sigh” is an inarticulate declaration, an indistinct cry for deliverance. The saints are sometimes so opposed and troubled that they cannot find language suited to their emotions: where words fail them, the thoughts and feelings of their hearts find expression in sighs and cries. The workings of a Christian’s heart under the pressure of indwelling sin, the temptations of Satan, the opposition of the ungodly, the burden of uncongenial society, the wickedness of the world, the low state of the Cause of Christ on earth, are variously described in Scripture. Sometimes he is said to be “in heaviness” (1 Pet. 1:6), to cry “out of the depths” (Psa. 130:1), to roar (Psa. 38:8), to be “overwhelmed” (Psa. 61:2), to be “distracted” (Psa. 88:15). The tossings and anguish of his soul are depicted as “groanings” (Rom. 8:26). The groanings of the believer are not only expressive of sorrow, but also of hope, of the intensity of his spiritual desires, of his panting after God, and his yearning for the bliss which awaits him on high (2 Cor. 5:2, 4).

Such exercises of soul are peculiar to the regenerate, and by them the Christian may identify himself. If the reader now be the subject of sorrows and sighs to which he was a total stranger while in a state of nature, then he may be assured he is no longer dead in sins. If he finds himself groaning over the infection of his heart and those

workings of inward corruption which prevent his perfectly loving and uninterruptedly serving God as he longs to do, that is proof that a principle of holiness has been communicated to his soul. If he mourns over the lustings of his flesh against that principle of holiness, then he must be alive unto God. The worldling will groan over the common troubles of life—such as financial loss, pain of body, the death of a loved one—but that is only the voice of nature. The Christian, too, will groan over such sorrows, for grace does not destroy the feelings of nature, though it both regulates and sublimates them. But the worldling never weeps in secret over the coldness of his heart or the workings of unbelief.

Where one groans over the workings of indwelling sin, over manifold temptations, over his comparative barrenness, over his being so little like what he longs to be (fully conformed to the image of Christ), those “groans” or “sighs” are the evidences of spiritual life, the pantings of holiness, hungering and thirsting after righteousness. They are, as Octavius Winslow (1808-1878) expressed it, “The muffled chimings of Heaven.” They are the sure pledges of deliverance (2 Cor. 5:4). They are the marks of the Christian’s union with Him who was “The Man of sorrows.” Before Christ healed the deaf man, we read that “he sighed” (Mark 7:34), which expressed His deep sympathy with the sufferer, as one “touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (Heb. 4:15). And again, when the Pharisees came to Him, “tempting him” by asking a sign from heaven, we are told that Christ “sighed deeply in his spirit” (Mark 8:11-12), which denoted His holy indignation at their sin, godly sorrow for their persons, and grief within His own soul, for He “*suffered*” when He was “tempted” (Heb. 2:18)—His holiness *felt* contact with evil.

The more the Christian’s light and love increase, the heavier does the burden of indwelling sin become, and the more ardently does he long for deliverance from his body of death. There are sighs and groans which issue not only from sorrows, but from obstructed desires and delayed hopes. The groanings of 2 Corinthians 5:4—for the glorified state—breathes the fervency and intensity of our longing for the same, in contrast with a stolid indifference or cold formality. The stronger be that longing, the more groaning until it

be realized. “The more we grow in faith and spiritual light, the more sensible are we of our present burdens, and the more vehemently do we groan for deliverance into the perfect liberty of the sons of God...The nearer anyone is to heaven, the more he desires to be there, because Christ is there. For the more frequent and steady are our views of Him by faith, the more do we long and groan for the removal of all obstructions and hindrances. Groaning is a vehement desire, mixed with sorrow, for the present want of what is desired” (John Owen, 1616-1683).

Now the spiritual sighs and groanings of the Christian are interpreted by God as *prayers*! Those sacrifices which are acceptable to Him are “a broken and a contrite heart” (Psa. 51:17). Sobblings of soul are of great price in His sight (Psa. 56:8). The believer’s moans are intelligible language to heaven: “The LORD hath heard the voice of my weeping” (Psa. 6:8)—that “weeping” possesses an appeal unto Him which the flowery eloquence of professional praying does not. “Lord, all my desire is before thee; and my groaning is not hid from thee” (Psa. 38:9). Those who wish to be reputed as very humble and holy by professing Christians may go about talking of their corruptions and proclaiming their vileness, but the truly broken-hearted will mourn in secret before God. Romans 8:23 says we “groan *within* ourselves:” our groans may be inaudible not only to other men’s ears, but to our own; yet not so to God’s. “He knoweth the secrets of the heart” (Psa. 44:21) and among those “secrets” are those aspirations of the soul which are expressed in sighs and groans.

Yes, God interprets the unexpressed exercises of a renewed heart. An illustration of that occurs in Exodus 14:15. When Moses was confronted with the Red Sea, his soul was deeply stirred before God. Nothing is recorded of his praying or audible groaning, yet the Lord asks, “Wherefore criest thou [inwardly] unto me?” Poor Eli supposed that Hannah was drunken because he observed the moving of her lips, but heard not her voice; but the Lord heard, for “she spake in her heart” (1 Sam. 1:13). What comfort is *there* for deeply tried saints? You may be one who feels utterly incapable of praying in public (as was the case with the godly father of the writer), and may lament the fact that at times, you cannot find words to express

yourself before God in private; nevertheless, if you sigh and groan within yourself, He understands the longings of your heart, and in due time will satisfy them. Those sighs are as acceptable unto Him as the songs of “the spirits of just men made perfect” (Heb. 12:23).

Very remarkable are those words in Romans 8:26: “The Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.” The deep longings and agitations of heart experienced by the saint for relief are the work of the blessed Comforter, and therefore does God give ear to them. The Holy Spirit excites longings in our souls for deliverance from the power of sin within and the world without. He it is who inspires yearnings after holiness and heavenly mindedness such as are greater than words can express, and, as verse 27 tells us, they are “according to the will of God.”

Blessed be His name, God reads every longing caused by His grace within us. He recognizes the symptoms and diagnoses the case of our soul with infinitely more accuracy than the best physician does that of the body. Our tears speak to Him of godly sorrow, our moans as the breathings of a contrite spirit. “From heaven did the LORD behold the earth; To hear the groaning of the prisoner” (Psa. 102:19-20)—such “groaning” as that of Romans 8:14, 19, 23. They are “*his* prisoners” (Psa. 69:33), and therefore, the “prisoners of hope” (Zech. 9:12). Here then is consolation: God is privy to our secret sighs, Christ is touched with them (Heb. 4:15), they ascend as petitions to heaven, and are the sure pledges of deliverance.

