

ROMANS 8:26-28
LUKE 18:1-8

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WHAT IS PRAYER ANYWAY?

Sean Smith was a young man in my church in Seekonk, Massachusetts, who gave me permission MANY years ago to share his STORY with whomever I wished. SO, here it is. Sean was a GIFTED baseball player -- a PITCHER. And when he was only a SOPHOMORE in high school, he was ALREADY drawing BIG league SCOUTS to town. They came from the Red Sox and the Yankees, the Dodgers and the Braves. He may have been only 15, but his fast ball was CLOCKED at well over 75 miles per hour. His father, MIKE Smith, had done a brief stint with the Boston Red Sox, but never really had the CAREER that he longed for in baseball, so he lived out his OWN faded DREAM by pushing his SON to be the BEST that he could BE on a PITCHER'S mound.

I received the TELEPHONE call at breakfast. Sean's mother said: *Gordon, I WISH I'd called you YESTERDAY morning, but I didn't. We had to take Sean to the HOSPITAL yesterday. When he woke up, his legs were PARALYZED. We thought it was NOTHING, of course, and that it would get BETTER soon. But it's NOT getting better; it's getting WORSE. THIS morning, he woke up completely PARALYZED from the NECK down. And NOW, he can't even TALK. They put him on a RESPIRATOR because the muscles around his lungs won't WORK anymore, and they're AFRAID for his HEART. They call it GILLAM'S-BERET disease, and they said it might KILL him, OR, after a TIME, it could REVERSE itself. But he'll probably NEVER get back to his full CAPACITY again. They're TRANSPORTING him to MASS General Hospital in BOSTON very shortly. But the LAST thing he SAID to me was: CALL Gordon! Gordon, do you THINK that you could come right NOW?* And of course, I did.

Well friends, I have NEVER seen so much FEAR and TERROR in the eyes of ANYONE as I saw in young Sean's EYES that morning. As it turned out, Sean had ONE question for me. It took us HALF an hour of trial and error, with HIM blinking ONCE for "NO" and TWICE for "YES," in order to FINALLY understand what he was ASKING me. And this 15 year old's QUESTION to his pastor was THIS: *HOW can I PRAY when I can't even TALK. I want to PRAY! Teach me!*

Well, FIRST I explained to Sean that he could THINK his prayers, and that God would still HEAR them! And THEN, I explained our Scripture Lesson from ROMANS this morning, that EVEN when our prayers are just GROANS -- and even SILENT ones -- and EVEN when they don't make any SENSE at all, GOD still hears and understands them, because the God WITHIN us is praying FOR us -- IN and THROUGH our groans, in and through our thoughts, and in and through our TEARS. And I'll tell you: AS I explained all this to Sean, TEARS began POURING from his eyes, and he began to VISIBLY relax, as if a WEIGHT were being LIFTED from his very SOUL. It was one of the most PRECIOUS and MOVING moments in my entire MINISTRY. And AS Sean cried, his mom and I cried right along WITH him. And I suspect that those TEARS may have been the most ELOQUENT prayers of ALL! Yes, it was a PRECIOUS moment! It REALLY was!

Well, for the next 9 months, SEAN remained HOSPITALIZED. At its WORST, his paralysis left him with only ONE eye that he could MOVE at will. And at ONE point, they nearly LOST him, because his HEART slowed down so much. But ULTIMATELY, and VERY slowly, his paralysis DID subside, and he had to RELEARN everything -- from TALKING to TOILET training, from GRASPING at something to PULLING on something, from EATING to WALKING. During that time, I visited Sean OFTEN, and we TALKED and PRAYED, and CRIED and LAUGHED together MANY times. I helped him practice whatever NEW skill he was working on at the time, and taught him a LOT of what I was teaching his PEERS in Confirmation Class. But MOST of all, I found that I

could NOT get Sean out of my MIND and HEART. The boy was CONSTANTLY WITH me, REGARDLESS of WHAT I was doing, or to WHOM I was ministering!

Well friends, IN that experience of NOT being able to get Sean out of my mind and heart, I learned a new MEANING of WHAT it means to PRAY. I had NEVER thought about it this way before, but suddenly I DID. It's SUMMED up in Jesus' story of the WIDOW and the JUDGE. Luke INTRODUCES it as a PARABLE on the necessity of praying ALWAYS, and NOT losing heart. And MOST of time, we RIGHTLY see OURSELVES as the WIDOW, and GOD as the JUDGE. When we WANT something from GOD, we PRAY for it. And we KEEP praying for it! However, IN my experience with SEAN, I realized that PRAYER is DEEPER than that! Prayer is actually OUR response to GOD, and GOD is like that WIDOW! GOD is the PERSISTENT one, who is CONSTANTLY coming at us, and who NEVER gives up! We CONSTANTLY feel the MOVEMENTS, and the YEARNINGS, and the GROANINGS of the Spirit of God WITHIN us! And our RESPONSE to that Spirit is our PRAYER!

Let me tell you what I mean. As CHILDREN, we're taught that prayer means *LIFTING what's on our heart and mind up to GOD*, and that IF we decide to PRAY, we just say a PRAYER. And we pray ESPECIALLY if we really WANT something or NEED something. However, THAT definition of prayer, while it's true in ONE sense, MISSES a very important FIRST step. Prayer is NOT about sitting on the lap of some great, cosmic SANTA CLAUS and reciting our WISH-LIST! Prayer is ALSO not about talking to some great ANSWERING machine in the sky in a 1-way CONVERSATION! No, prayer is a DIALOGUE! And moreover, you and I never START the dialogue! GOD is the One who ALWAYS takes the INITIATIVE! God is the One who ALWAYS takes the FIRST STEP! God is the One who ALWAYS makes the CALL! And then WE respond!

And it BEGINS with our LIFE experiences! How OFTEN, for example, do we find ourselves MOVED or JOLTED, fascinated or mystified, HORRIFIED or frustrated, RENEWED or feeling at PEACE? Yes, in the MIDST of our day-to-day EVENTS and EXPERIENCES, God SPEAKS to us from WITHIN. Sometimes, it's in the MIDST of the JOYFUL, when we are celebrating -- maybe a new BIRTH, or a graduation, a moment of deep PASSION, or some special ACCOMPLISHMENT, or maybe making a special CONNECTION with someone. At OTHER times, it's in the midst of PAIN or suffering. Maybe we've lost a SPOUSE of 40 or 50 or 60 years, OR maybe a CHILD. Maybe we have a chronic ILLNESS, or an ADDICTION. Or maybe we've LOST our JOB, and WITH it our self-esteem. Or maybe we see something on the NEWS that just HORRIFIES us. OR, maybe it's in the LITTLE things. Maybe we're MOVED by the simple beauty of a ROSE or the AUTUMN leaves, the SMILE of a stranger or a SONG on the radio, the TASTE of fresh-baked BREAD or a NOTE from a friend. Maybe we've had a DREAM that's JOLTED us, or a DAYDREAM that's brought us a sense of PEACE. Yes, in the MIDST of our everyday experiences, we CONSTANTLY feel the MOVEMENTS, the YEARNINGS, and the GROANINGS of the Spirit of God, praying WITHIN us. And our RESPONSE is to say a PRAYER! And that prayer MIGHT be in WORDS; but then again, it MIGHT just be in our LAUGHTER or our TEARS, our GROANS or our ANXIETY, our sense of AWE and WONDER or our feelings of peace. OR, maybe it's in our pursuit of JUSTICE and LOVE! Yes, ALL of these are WAYS that you and I PRAY in the midst of our day-to-day lives! And God HEARS our PRAYERS, whether we put them into WORDS or NOT!

Sometimes people will come to me after worship and APOLOGIZE for CRYING during church. And I say to them: *DON'T be sorry! It's actually a COMPLIMENT! If OUR service of worship MOVED you, then GOD must be at WORK here -- and THAT'S a GIFT! THAT'S precious! Your TEARS this morning were your PRAYERS! They were your HONEST, heart-felt and hopeful PRAYERS! And THAT'S what you're HERE FOR, isn't it? To pray? So, DON'T apologize! I'm GLAD you cried during worship!*

Well, if God BEGINS the dialogue that we call PRAYER, then WE need to learn to LISTEN for the voice of GOD, no matter HOW it comes to us. And IF that VOICE comes to us most OFTEN in the experiences of our day-to-day lives that MOVE us in some way, then WE need to learn to keep a kind of STETHOSCOPE on ourselves, in order to stay in TUNE with WHAT we're FEELING at any given MOMENT. And that's ONE reason why St. PAUL tells us to "pray CONTINUALLY," because it means CONSTANTLY staying in TUNE and RESPONSIVE to the movements, to the YEARNINGS, to the GROANINGS, to the anxieties, to the ecstasies, to the jolts, and to the fascinations that we feel WELLING up WITHIN us at ANY given moment, because THAT is where the dialogue of prayer BEGINS. THAT is how you and I begin to PRAY -- NOT by SPEAKING to God, but by LISTENING to God. SO, we need to work at keeping a STETHOSCOPE on ourselves and on our feelings, so that we might HEAR the voice of God WITHIN them. And friends, REALIZE that your RESPONSES to those feelings are your PRAYERS, whether they're in WORDS or LAUGHTER or GROANS! Now, I REALIZE that this is a DIFFERENT concept than you MAY have ever HEARD before, and it's a DIFFICULT concept. But THINK about it, because it makes a LOT of sense. PRAYER is a DIALOGUE, a dialogue INITIATED by God. And our RESPONSES to God's initiations are our PRAYERS!

In closing, I'd just like to tell you what happened to young Sean Smith. First, he decided to do everything in his power to try and make a FULL recovery. However, he ALSO decided that IF that didn't HAPPEN, he could STILL live a RICH and full and rewarding LIFE. In fact, he decided that he could EVEN have a FULL and rewarding life if he ended up living his life in a WHEELCHAIR. And THEN, EVEN while he was still in the hospital, he found great JOY and MEANING in befriending kids with CANCER and other illnesses, and USING his OWN experiences and his OWN pain, his OWN broken dreams and his OWN courage and hard work to help THEM find COMFORT, strength and courage; HOPE and joy; in SPITE of facing life-threatening ILLNESS and disease. And AS those 9 months passed, Sean DID work EXTREMELY hard, and he DID make a FULL recovery. He even RE-LEARNED how to PITCH. Now, during his FIRST season BACK on the mound, he was pretty WILD, and everyone had to be very PATIENT with him. But he practiced HARD, and kept getting STRONGER and BETTER! Out of high school, he was DRAFTED by the New York Yankees, and he played in their FARM system for a number of years, the roommate of Andy Petite. However, Sean NEVER made it to Yankee Stadium, but THAT doesn't matter, because he's ALREADY a hero. And SINCE his stint with the Yankees, he's gone on to SEMINARY. And the last I knew, he was serving as the YOUTH minister in his church. And I'm VERY proud of him. But I'm ALSO very GRATEFUL to Sean because HE taught ME the meaning of PRAYER. It's funny: I taught him what I knew, and it CHANGED his life. And then HE taught ME what HE had learned, and it changed MINE! But that's the BEAUTY of ministry, isn't it? We always seem to RECEIVE more than you GIVE. Thanks be to God. AMEN.