

Welcome

One of the things I'm most looking forward to is getting back in the gym. It's personal for me - I tore my ACL last year, and before that injury (which was not related to lifting), I was chasing some personal bests for squatting and bench press. After my surgery in January, I obviously couldn't do any squats, and a week after my physical therapist cleared me to go back to the gym, the pandemic hit.

A lot of you know I work out with Michael Hughes, who is an expert. We're like Batman and Robin in the gym. (I'm Robin in this scenario, if Batman knows he can't leave Robin alone with the weights or he'll hurt himself.)

One of the most important pieces of strength training is a good spotter. If you're just doing light weight, you don't really need a spotter, but if you're training to get stronger, and you want to shoot for PRs, the only way you're going to get there is with a spotter. Because to find your max weight, you've got to fail.

After all, who knows if you could have thrown a 2 1/2 pound weight on each side of that squat bar and lifted five more pounds?

On the other hand... let's say you DID hit your max, and you try for more weight anyway. The last thing you want to do is not be able to lift that weight, and end up dropping 350 pounds on yourself.

So when we're squatting, the spotter is right there behind, hands ready to grab the bar. If I stall out, if the weight starts to drop, he helps lift the bar back up.

Spotters only work if you trust them, though. That was something I had to learn early on. Mike would say, "I'm here. I've got you. Just do it."

And really, when you have a good spotter, that's the most important is that constant encouragement.

Because when you find your max weight, there's a secret: it's more than you think you can lift. It feels too heavy. When you come up under that squat bar and the weight settles on your shoulders, you have to psych yourself up.

Then you drop. The weight pushes you down, to the bottom of the squat.

That's the easy part.

Then comes the lift. And when you're maxing out, there's a spot you want to stop, a spot where, if the weight's gonna drop, it's gonna be here.

This is the moment when the spotter shouts out, "C'mon! Get it!"

And... I'm not going to lie... most times I let out a shout. <shout>

I know, I know. Nobody likes *that guy* in the gym. But I'm telling you... when you're at your limit and you have to give it one more good push to break through... that's the most natural reaction.

That <shout> is my body's way of being fully present to the pain, embracing it but also refusing to be ruled by it.

Throughout this series, we've been exploring the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and today, I want to suggest - as silly as it probably sounds - that the Holy Spirit is our spotter.

The Spirit is with us, in the trenches of life, so to speak. The Spirit knows better than we do what - by God's grace - we're capable of. And when we reach our limit, when the pain of transformation envelops us, the Spirit joins us in that primal scream of embrace and refusal.

Today is about how the Spirit empowers us to be agents of new life.

Message

We're in the wake of Easter, when we gathered to celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Easter night ended with Jesus appearing to the disciples when they were hiding in a room, afraid to go outside. Jesus breathes on them, giving them the Holy Spirit. This is a powerful image - in both Greek and Hebrew, the word "Spirit" can also mean 'wind' or 'breath'. John imagines the Holy Spirit as the very breath of Jesus, filling us with Jesus' own life and power.

So during this season following Easter, we're going to explore what a life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit looks like. Where does a life whose sails are filled with God's divine wind take us? What does it mean to have the Holy Spirit's divine power transforming us?

First, we saw that the Holy Spirit is our ADVOCATE, God teaching us how to know God, speaking for us, praying with us. Making us look more like Jesus.

Then we spent a couple of weeks exploring how the Spirit helps us to face our sin and repent so that the Spirit can transform us. For the last couple of weeks, we've looked at the nature of that transformation - both in terms of the fruit the Spirit produces in all of us and the gifts the Spirit gives us individually to enrich our collective faith.

Today I want to acknowledge something: real transformation is really hard. The adage that people never change is, as a rule, sound advice. That whole character change that's so deep, so dramatic we call it crossing from death into life is a real struggle. It doesn't happen overnight. Or automatically. Or without a lot of effort on our parts.

And that's something we *have* to acknowledge as a part of this series. Because on the one hand, it's true that, without the Spirit's breath in our lives, we can't change. If God left us to ourselves, we would be hopelessly lost in our sin, condemned to lives of oppression, injustice and selfishness.

But on the other hand, it's not true that God is a genie or magician who simply waves his hand and POOF we're suddenly a whole different person.

Faith is a relationship. We're changed by being with God, knowing God and allowing God to know us. We have a part to play in our faith journey. We have to take responsibility for our part in the transformation God is working.

But even in this, we're not alone. Paul writes to the Romans:

The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. -- Romans 8:26

When we don't even know what to pray for, the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that can't be put into words.

Huh.

I mean... that sounds awesome, but what does that mean, exactly?

[Scripture Slide] This section of Paul's letter to the Romans is all about what life on the other side of transformation looks like. Paul has been using big, sweeping categories. He sees Jesus' resurrection as having divided the world into two. Now, there is the old creation, ruled by Death and under Adam, and there is the new creation, ruled by Life and under Jesus.

Chapter 8 is specifically about life in this new creation, a life made possible by the breath of the Holy Spirit. And so, beginning in verse 15, Paul says:

You have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father." For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering. Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay.

Paul spent chapters 5-7 acknowledging the reality of our sinful world. Here in chapter 8, he affirms that transformation is hard - we suffer in this life. But we are no longer *part* of the world of Adam, the world

of sin and death. We have been made new, invited into life by Jesus himself, and the proof of that change is the Holy Spirit within us who affirms we belong to God now. So what of this suffering?

Well, Paul goes on to point out that we don't suffer alone. And here's where that groaning comes in. Pay attention to the different 'groans' happening here:

For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children... The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. -- Romans 8:15-23, 26

So creation groans 'in the pains of childbirth'. We groan because we long to be released from sin and suffering. And the Holy Spirit prays with groans that can't be expressed in words. So what, exactly, is this 'groaning'? These all come from the same Greek root, and it's a word that most basically connotes a sigh of frustration. You know that sound you make when you're trying to explain something to someone and they're just not getting it? That <UGH!>? That's this groan.

Another way to translate that 'groaning that can't be expressed in words' is 'a wordless groan'. Not a shout of a word, but a shout of primal defiance. At the core of this groan is a rejection of the way things are and a hopeful look forward. Paul compares it to the cries of pain women make during childbirth. This isn't only a mourning. It's not a cry of lamentation. It's a cry of birthing a new life. It's strength and power, bringing new goodness into the world. It's that same cry we use in the gym, that scream that says, "This weight pressing down on me will not crush me. I will rise. I will gain. I will grow." <scream>

That scream is defiance. It's a refusal to accept the way things are. It's an insistence that, as anti-racism activist Andre Henry says, "Things don't have to be this way."

That scream is strength. It's a refusal to be crushed by the weight of injustice, hate and sin. It's an insistence that the One within us is greater than those in the world.

That scream is hope. It's a refusal to believe this pain is the last word. It's an insistence that new goodness is coming, and that I have a part in bringing it forth.

We are not alone in this. God's own Spirit - the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is within us, with us, like a spotter, helping us to do the work God has called us to. Paul elaborates on the Spirit who is with us, cheering us on, screaming in defiance with us:

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us

right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God’s right hand, pleading for us. -- Romans 8:31-34

Friends, I want to invite you to consider the weight you're under today. Some of us bear personal burdens. We're weighed down by a habit or a fear we just can't shake. We know the right path, but when it comes time to push, the weight of that transformation seems to great. Time and again, we just collapse, letting the weight crush us.

Others of us feel the weight of our circumstances. Whether it's this pandemic, or consequences for choices we've made or because of what someone else has done to us, we feel crushed by that which is beyond our control. We want to stand tall, but the weight on our shoulders feels too heavy.

And still others of us feel burdened by our calling. We see injustice in the world and know God is calling us to face it. But the problem is too big, the evil too great. We feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task before us, so we drop to our knees in defeat before we even begin.

Friends, Paul wants to remind us that the One who calls us is the One who equips us. The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is right behind us, spotting us, cheering us on, shouting out in defiance of sin and death, shouting with that wordless groaning.

The Spirit rejects the rule of sin and death. The Spirit empowers us to stand tall. We can bear the weight not because we are strong, but because the Spirit is our strength. So stand tall, brothers and sisters. Let us face all that would press us down, and with God's own Holy Spirit, offer a wordless shout of defiance!

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] asdf

1. Asdf
2. Asdf
3. Asdf
4. Asd

Assignment + Blessing

Meditation

Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, “For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.”) No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. -- Romans 8:35-39