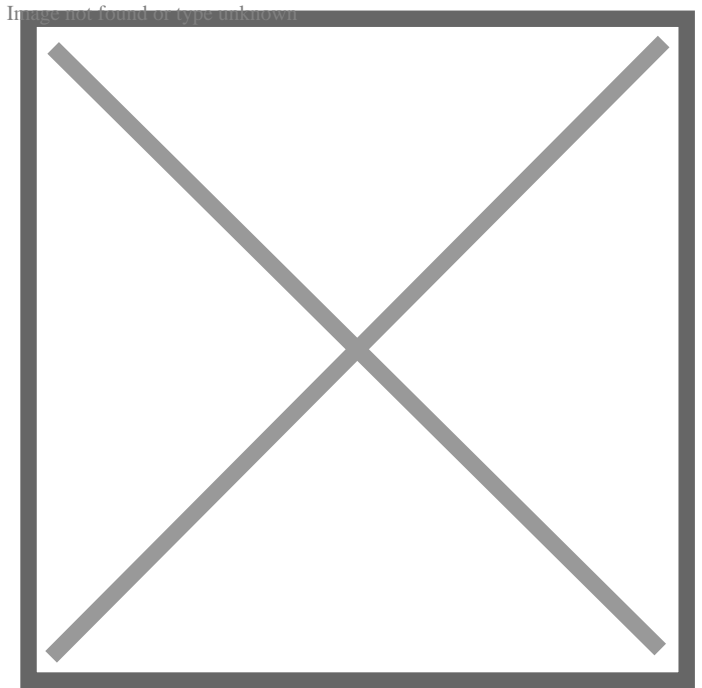


The Spice Box – Groanings that cannot be uttered

by Sharon Robertson, Lt. Colonel

When I was 9, I was given a New Testament at vacation Bible school (VBS). It wasn't the first Bible I had ever owned—that I earned at age 6 for perfect attendance at Sunday school for a full year. (I can't really claim the credit for that—I was never offered a choice—thanks for that, Mom!) That Bible I still have, and it remains my sentimental favorite.

The same day that I received the New Testament at VBS, an invitation was offered to accept an even greater gift—Jesus Christ. That entailed going forward and speaking with someone at the altar, which would have been too embarrassing! When I got home, I looked at the New Testament, and found that the first page contained a place to enter the date of my conversion. I didn't have one, so I knelt and asked Jesus to come into my heart so I would not be further embarrassed by having that blank space in my Bible.



That is the story of my conversion, and lame as the story seems, I still believe that God honored that prayer, and accepted me into his Kingdom. The point being— even if we don't always have the proper attitude when we pray, God still listens and responds.

It doesn't always seem that way. There have been times when my prayers seemed to bounce off the ceiling, times when God seemed as remote and unreachable as the most distant universe ever created. There were times when I cried in loneliness and frustration, unable to understand why he refused to respond, as though he had turned a cold shoulder to me. Those were the times when I had to learn to trust, and take him at his word: *Know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself; the LORD will hear when I call to him.* (Ps 4:3 NIV); *The poor and needy seek water, but there is none, their tongues fail for thirst. I, the LORD, will hear them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them* (Isa. 41:17 NKJV).

That is the most basic lesson I have learned regarding prayer: God said he hears and answers; therefore I am to accept and base my prayer life upon that assumption. God answers prayer, not because I offer an acceptable prayer out of an acceptable attitude, but because God is who he is, and he is faithful to his promises.

Sometimes prayer is easy. It flows freely in praise and adoration, the soul's natural expression of the

joy of the Lord and gratitude for his blessings. At other times it does not, at least for me. There are times when God must listen to outpourings of sadness and grief, anger and disappointment, outrage and resentment. There are times when the emotions surge in such a flood that I cannot possibly stem the tide, or even know how to express what I am feeling. There are times when I am so confused and troubled that I don't even know how to pray, what to pray for!

It is then that I am grateful that God has made allowance even for that: *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 with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will* (Rom 8:26, 27 NIV).

What an incredible relief! What I cannot express, when my tongue stutters and cannot find the right words to say, God's Holy Spirit takes over, and interprets my deepest longings and groanings, so that the prayer that God hears is the true expression of what I do not have the words to say. When I do not know what to pray for, what is best to ask, the Spirit has the right words; God hears, and answers, and that answer is always right.