

# Spirit-Enabled Prayer

Romans 8:26-27

April 29, 2018

## Introduction:

A number of years ago somebody I know on Facebook made one of the most obviously incorrect posts I have ever read. This individual is big into the self-help movement and motivational speakers, and so I wasn't necessarily surprised when he posted on his wall a quote that went something to the effect of this: "Over 90% of who you are is determined by the decisions you make."

It didn't take long for me and many others to point out how wrong-headed such a notion was. The reality is more like the opposite: 90% of who we are is determined by people and situations that fall completely out of our control. We like to believe the lie that we're self-made men, but the reality is we're greatly dependent upon others for who we are. For example, I was dependent upon my parents to help me learn to walk and talk, to read and write, and to learn many of the most basic skills I use today. My teachers in school helped me to climb out of ignorance into a greater knowledge and appreciation about the world, from history to science, from mathematics to literature and beyond. I needed friends to help me learn social skills and develop strong relationships with others. My managers and co-workers taught me how to work-hard and be responsible. I was dependent on pastors and other believers I knew to help teach me God's Word and model what the Christian life looked like.

None of us are an island. We all need others. We all have weaknesses and shortcomings that others in our lives help us with. Well, in today's Scripture passage, we find an area of our lives where we need the help of another and that's in regard to prayer. Our focus today will be on how the Holy Spirit is at work to help us pray, because, like in so many areas of life, we need help if we're going to be effective. So if you haven't already, please open your Bibles to Romans 8, which can be found on pg. 944 of the pew Bibles. We'll be looking at only two verses - v. 26-27 - this morning. Please follow along as I read. Paul writes, **"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."**

There are three questions I want to have us answer from these two short verses that will guide us in our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We want to ask "Why?" "How?" and "What?" Why does the Holy Spirit help us in prayer? How does the Holy Spirit pray for us? and What does the Holy Spirit pray for on our behalf? So let's begin with the first question...

### 1. Why does the Holy Spirit help us in prayer?

So why do we need help in prayer anyway? To answer that, look back in your Bibles at the first sentence of v. 26. **"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness."** The

word “**likewise**” calls us back to what was said before this. Just as our hope in the future glory that awaits us helps us to be patient though suffering, so also the Holy Spirit helps us in a similar way in our weakness when it comes to prayer.

So what kind of weakness do we have when it comes to prayer? Paul answers that in the next clause. He explains our weakness in the middle of v. 26, “**For we do not know what to pray for as we ought...**” Paul’s comment here is made within the context of giving his readers encouragement in the midst of suffering, because, as he said back in v. 17 we must suffer with him in order to be glorified with him. So I think the primary reason Paul says this has to do with how we often respond to suffering.

Let’s think about this for a moment. When you’re suffering, whether that be from an illness or a difficult situation at work or because of some individual who’s making your life miserable, what do you pray for? Ninety-nine out of a hundred times we ask God to remove the suffering from us, don’t we? Someone is home sick with the flu or is recovering from a surgery or perhaps in a severe case is dealing with a life-threatening disease like cancer and we pray they get better. I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say at least fifty percent of our prayer requests involve asking God for health and healing, whether it be for ourselves or someone else.

Now I’m not saying it’s necessarily wrong to pray for a quick recovery or for someone to be cured of cancer. Don’t misunderstand me: I think it’s perfectly fine to do so. But I think there’s often more we should pray for in cases of suffering than we normally do. I’m reminded of a book by John Piper entitled *Don’t Waste Your Cancer* in which he looks at his own experience with cancer as a way of seeing God’s good plan for his life and an opportunity to trust him more and bring him glory. His prayer was not merely for healing but also that his faith would be strengthened, and that he would make much of Christ throughout his experience, to demonstrate to his doctors and nurses that Christ was his greatest treasure.

I suspect this is the kind of thing Paul has in mind here. In our weakness in suffering, we pray for the most obvious thing we could ask for: that the suffering would come to an end. But the Holy Spirit then steps in and makes additional requests that we in our fear and distress forget to pray. He asks that we might be strengthened under the trial. He prays we would bring Christ glory through our suffering. He prays we would endure and grow in perseverance as a result. We don’t often pray for such requests, but the Holy Spirit does. We are weak and often times pray for the easy way out, for the least amount of pain and suffering, when we perhaps ought to be praying for the boldness of our witness and the strengthening of our faith and the development of our character.

But I don’t think this is simply limited to times we pray regarding suffering but applies to us much more broadly. Sometimes we make foolish prayers for things that we think would bring us happiness that really won’t. For example, I can think of times praying in my teenage years, asking God to make a girl like me or for a relationship to be restored after a break-up. I can look back now and see had God’s answered my prayer how that would have been bad for me, but in the moment, when I wanted what I wanted, I couldn’t see that far ahead. I didn’t possess the wisdom to know what I really needed.

Or I am reminded of those times when I was doing a long job search and I prayed for God to open doors to particular churches that seemed like a good match for me, yet God didn't lead them to hire me. In those cases I don't know why God didn't call me to those other churches, but I trust the Holy Spirit knew far better than I did about what I needed. I am weak in that I don't see all the possible outcomes of what I ask for, not to mention how easily it is for me to pray in accordance with my pride and selfishness, for things I want for my glory and my comfort instead of for the advancement of the kingdom of God. The weakness of our sinfulness and the weakness of simply our limited knowledge and lack of wisdom and discernment means we need the Holy Spirit to pray on our behalf, to ask for those things we fail to ask for. He's got our back as it were and is there to help us in our weakness.

So this passage is meant to be a huge encouragement to us. It's not like we're going to miss out on the wonderful blessings of God in our lives because we were too stupid and selfish to ask for it. Where we fail, the Holy Spirit succeeds. When we are weak, he is strong. When we suffer, the Holy Spirit requests for more than mere healing. We are to rejoice in knowing that God helps us in our weakness by having the Holy Spirit intercede for us, praying for those things we can easily overlook and forget.

So that's the first answer to our first question: Why does the Holy Spirit help us in prayer? Because we are weak and do not know how to pray as we ought. But now that we know why he prays for us, we need to answer the second question raised by our passage today, and that is...

## 2. How does the Holy Spirit pray for us?

To answer that question, I need you to look back in your Bibles at the second half of v. 26. Paul says there, **“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.”** Let's talk about each of those two key words: “interceding” and “groaning.”

First, the Holy Spirit prays for us by interceding for us, which means he is intervening on our behalf to request what we need. There's nothing too difficult to understand about what that means but what I want us to recognize just how incredible this is. The Holy Spirit is interceding for you in prayer! I'll tell you, I'm glad for those people who have been willing to pray for me and, especially if I'm going through something difficult, it's a relief to know that many godly men and woman are praying on my behalf. But the greatest prayer warrior we have on our side is the Holy Spirit. God himself takes up our cause and intercedes for us.

If nothing else, that should give us great confidence in knowing that even if no one else prays for us, the Holy Spirit does. You and I never walk through the valley of suffering alone. The Spirit of God is with us, aware of what we're going through, and praying for us as we go through it. We need to remember this because it is too easy for us to think we must wrestle in prayer alone. You don't. The Holy Spirit is interceding for you before the throne of God the Father.

But what does Paul mean that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us **“with groanings too deep for words”**? There are some who take these groaning to refer to speaking in tongues, but such an understanding is highly unlikely. When Paul speaks of the gifts of tongues in 1 Corinthians 12, he recognizes that not all believers have this gift, but in our passage before us, this work of the Spirit is done on behalf of all believers, so it wouldn't make sense for Paul to refer to the Holy Spirit's work that only had a limited benefit when trying to encourage all believers. Furthermore, Paul refers to this as being **“too deep for words”** but of course speaking in tongues in something that is verbalized, so again, this rules out Paul referring to speaking in tongues here.

It is far more preferable, as one commentator states it, “to understand these ‘groans’ as the Spirit's own ‘language of prayer,’ a ministry of intercession that takes place in our hearts in a manner imperceptible to us” (Moo 526). I think what we have here is the work of the Spirit in our hearts that takes our inner longings that we don't always express and then expresses them to God on our behalf.

Sometimes, we are so frustrated, so hurt and angry or in such excruciating pain that words fail us. Have you even been there? It's those moments when our emotions are like swirling hurricanes inside of us that so rage that we don't know how to properly express how we feel. Sometime all you can do is sigh, groan, whimper, cry, or moan. There are pains and sorrows where words fail you. You cannot express the anguish in your heart. Well, even in those moments when we are so overwhelmed by grief and pain, when we can't even speak the words to express what we are experiencing, God has us. When we have groanings too deep for words, the Holy Spirit takes up our cause and intercedes for us. Our groans become his groans. He feels along with us the fear and frustration and pain and sorrow we are going through.

What an encouragement to know that as a Christian, God is truly present with us. His Holy Spirit is with us in the pain and confusion of life. I don't know everything you are going through, but I know not all of you have it easy. I know not every marriage is full of love and harmony. I know that not every relationship within your family is what you wish it were. I know there are painful emotional scars that some of you still carry, from wrongs done to you that were unspeakably evil. I know there are fears and aches and painful suffering that comes from old age and disease and sickness. So there isn't a person in this room for whom this passage is not applicable for. God is present with you in your pain. You are not alone. In your weakness, the Holy Spirit intercedes for you. He takes up all your groans and bring them before the throne of your Heavenly Father. We may not always perceive it, but it is happening nevertheless.

So rest in that, Grace Fellowship. Find comfort and joy in this. When God said, “I will never leave you or forsake you,” that promise is true. It is fulfilled by the Holy Spirit who dwells in you and intercedes for you and carries your deepest sorrows to God. Don't doubt the presence of God in your lives. Others may abandon you, but God never will. He insures that no matter what you're going through, no matter the depths of suffering, he remains faithful to have his indwelling Spirit comfort you and be in constant prayer for you. Rest in the promises of God my brothers and sisters.

But there is one more question we need to answer than comes out of this text, so moving on now to our third and final question, we need to ask...

### 3. What does the Holy Spirit pray for on our behalf?

Let's look back in our Bibles once again at v. 27. Paul writes, **“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.”** While we can incorrectly pray for things that really aren't good for us, the Holy Spirit has a perfect intercessory ministry for God's people because he prays in perfect accordance with the will of God.

What this means is that since the Spirit's intercessions for us are always aligned with God's will, we can know his prayers will always be answered affirmatively. Once again, this is meant to be a huge comfort and encouragement for us because we can know that God's will is always being fulfilled in our lives. God is not somehow troubled or frustrated with us because we didn't pray just the right way. Our weakness in prayer is supplemented by the Spirit praying for us according to God's will. And since, as it says, **“he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit”** there's no worry of anything being lost in translation, as it were. What the Holy Spirit prays for on our behalf is perfectly understood by God the Father and is perfectly aligned with God's good and perfect will for us.

But there is a flip side of the coin to this which we ought to keep in mind. Since we need this work of the Holy Spirit on our behalf to intercede for us according to the will of God, it means that part of our weakness is that we don't always pray according to God's will. Like I mentioned earlier in the sermon, we can sometimes pray for things that are more motivated by our selfishness and desire for comfort and ease than for the glory of God and the advancement of his kingdom. So I think there is very much a place in our prayers, especially on matters where we don't have abundantly clear direction from God, to couch our prayer with “if it be your will.” That's not a confession of doubt: it's a humble recognition that we aren't the Holy Spirit, and therefore we don't always know God's will in every situation we face.

Now I'm not saying we should constantly say “If it be your will” when we pray, such that it becomes some legalistic phrase we feel obligated to use all the time. Don't think any such thing. But if not in our words, it should be in our attitude when we pray. We are weak. Our knowledge is limited. We can easily be swayed by our selfishness and fear. It's humble to recognize that we don't always know what's best for us. So pray with a realization that what you ask for may not be aligned with God's will, but pray also with the confidence that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness, and always intercedes for us in according with God's will so that no matter how ignorant or selfish or fear-filled our prayers might be, God is always faithful to answer the prayers of the Holy Spirit, made on our behalf.

But I would be remiss if I spend all this time talking about prayer and how the Holy Spirit is graciously at work to help us in prayer without coming to the end of the sermon and saying by way of application, you ought to pray! The unstated assumption in this

passage is that God's people will, in fact, pray. So let me say that this passage is an encouragement to be people of prayer. None of us has to be "good at it" because no matter how bad we are or think we are, the Holy Spirit is present to help us.

So let me call you to prayer. If anything else, this passage undercuts any reluctance toward prayer that might come from the notion that you're doing it all wrong. The truth is, sometimes we do. Sometimes we don't pray for the right things. Sometimes we are clumsy with our words. Sometimes our sinfulness leads us to pray for things that are foolish. But we never pray alone. Our prayers are Spirit-enabled prayer because the Holy Spirit pray prays with us and for us.

So pray. Make time for it in your day. Maybe that's early in the morning. If you aren't a morning person, fine, set aside time in the evening. If you need accountability, invite others to pray with you. Come and join us for corporate pray on Sunday mornings. God is inviting us in this passage to be men and women of prayer because the Holy Spirit is with us, helping us when we pray.

## **Conclusion**

What joy it is to know that no matter what we face, we can go to our Heavenly Father in prayer and that he is already at work to help us in prayer through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Won't you please join me in doing that right now as we bow our heads together? Let's pray.