

# The Spirit Helps Us in Our Prayers

Romans 8:26-27

**26 Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.**

**27 Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.**

Now, this passage obviously is about prayer — the Spirit helping us in prayer. As the children of God we know what a blessing, what a privilege it is to come before our heavenly Father in prayer. We love to talk about prayer and sing about prayer. We sing, *“Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer, that calls me from a world of care, and bids me at my Father’s throne, make all my wants and wishes known. In seasons of distress and grief, my soul has often found relief, and oft escaped the tempter’s snare, by Thy return, sweet hour of prayer.”* Another hymn sings, *“Have we trials and temptation, is there trouble anywhere? You should never be discouraged — take it to the Lord in prayer.”*

The truth of the matter is that for many of us, at certain times for all of us, prayer is a difficult thing. You know prayer is a challenge. If it weren’t hard, people would do it more often. We would have as many people in prayer meeting as we have on Sunday mornings, we wouldn’t have books and books on how to pray, and the apostle Paul would not have written this paragraph if prayer came easy.

There are times when, as Paul refers to it here, we do not know what to pray for as we ought. If you find prayer to be difficult, then Romans 8:26-27 should encourage you.

Verse 26 begins with the words **“Likewise the Spirit”** or **“In the same way the Spirit”**. Chapter 8 has been the chapter of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit set us free from the law of sin and death. He enables us to fulfill the law. The Spirit changes our nature and renews our mind. He empowers us for victory over sin. The Spirit confirms our adoption as children of God. And He guarantees our future glory even though we suffer in this present world.

As we saw last time in verses 18-25 creation is groaning and Christians are groaning as we suffer in this present world. We long for the glory that shall be revealed in us. Just as the world longs for the new creation and we long for the redemption of our bodies, so the Holy Spirit is within us also groaning, yearning for God’s will to be done in our life.

This passage should encourage us, especially when we feel our own weakness, because the Holy Spirit is groaning for us, praying for us. Even though we do not know how to pray as we should, we should be encouraged to keep praying because the Spirit is helping us.

I want us to focus on three truths today from these two verses:

## 1. Our weakness in Prayer.

Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. The word weakness means *“without strength.”* In the New Testament this word is used many times to describe physical sickness, disease, and infirmity such as in Luke 5:15 where it says about Jesus, **“and great multitudes came together to hear, and to be healed by Him of their infirmities.”** Some of you are today are suffering with this kind of weakness.

It can also be an emotional weakness where we find ourselves overwhelmed. In 1 Corinthians 2:3 Paul describes how he felt when he first preached in the city of Corinth, **"I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling."**

We are weakened by the remnants of sin in our life. Back in Romans 6:19 Paul said, **"I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh."**

Here in Romans 8 all these weaknesses show up in our weakness in prayer. He says in verse 26, **"For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought."** We have an inability to know what to ask God for in prayer. These times are frequent. Let me give you some examples:

- Your family member has a terrible disease. We don't know whether to pray for her healing or to pray that God would prepare her for the journey home.
- Your friend is in financial trouble. We don't know whether to pray for God to provide for his financial needs or to ask God to teach him to live more simply.
- Your young adult begins dating. We don't know whether to pray for this relationship to develop or to ask God to help her wait for something better.
- You face a crossroads in your career. Do you pray that God will open up a new job for you or make you content with the job you have?
- You face a ministry opportunity. You don't know whether to pray for God to you boldness to step out in faith, or the patience to wait on Him.

We don't know what we ought to pray because we don't know the future, we often don't know what is best for us. We know what we might prefer at any given moment but we don't know what is best for our ultimate good. If you offer most children the choice between a nachos, chips and candy and a plate of vegetables and fruit, many children are going to choose the candy. Likewise, we would often choose to avoid difficulties even though God develops strength and patience in us through the trials. God sees the big picture and we don't.

Listen, you are not alone in feeling weak in prayer. Paul wrote, **"the Spirit also helps our weakness."** Paul did not set himself on a pedestal as an example of spiritual strength. Rather, he included himself with us as one who was weak.

Paul himself didn't know how to pray as he should. He gives us a glimpse into this in 2 Corinthians 12 where he tells about his **"thorn in the flesh."** Paul says that three times he pleaded with the Lord to take away this affliction. But the Lord replied (2 Cor. 12:9), **"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."** Paul concluded (2 Cor. 12:9b-10), **"Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."**

Paul didn't know what he should pray for in that trial. Paul wrestled with the same thing in Philippians 1:21-24, where he couldn't decide whether to pray that the Lord would take him home, which was Paul's desire, or preserve his life for further ministry. He writes, **"For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. 24 Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you."**

Moses entreated the Lord to let him enter the Promised Land, but that was not God's will (Deut. 3:25-26). Elijah, man of prayer that he was, asked the Lord to take his life (1 Kings 19:4). Even Jesus, in His humanity, prayed that if possible, the Father might allow the cup of suffering at the cross to pass from Him, if it would be God's will (Matt. 26:36-46). The point is, we're all weak in many areas, including prayer. We often don't know how to pray as we should. But, thankfully, God doesn't leave us to ourselves.

## 2. The Spirit's Help in Prayer.

The word "helps" occurs only here and in one other place in the New Testament. The meaning is, someone is carrying a heavy load and another person comes alongside to take the other end and bear the burden with him. The other use of "help" is in Luke 10:40, where Jesus is in the home of Mary and Martha. Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet, but Martha was distracted with all her preparations. Finally, she burst out, **"Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me."** She wanted her sister to help bear the burden of preparing and serving the meal.

The word implies that the Holy Spirit doesn't do everything, while we sit back and do nothing. Rather, we are to keep praying and, if appropriate, keep working or obeying or whatever the Bible may tell us to do about our situation. But as we pray, the Spirit says, *"Let Me grab the other end. Let me help you by picking up your burden and taking it before the Father's throne. I know what to pray for when you don't."* So the Spirit helps us by praying for us in our weakness. What an encouragement!

How does the Spirit help us in our prayers? Again verse 26, **"but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."**

Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. When one person intercedes for another they go to another on their behalf. Holy Spirit goes to the Father on our behalf to interpret and give voice to the prayers of our heart.

We need the help of the Holy Spirit because we don't know how to pray. Paul says the Spirit intercedes for us with groans that cannot be expressed in words. (Literally it is "wordless groanings.") In those moments when we cannot pray, the Holy Spirit prays for us. It also means that when we lift up our feeble and even ignorant prayers to God, the Holy Spirit takes them and translates them into the language of heaven.

Paul says the Holy Spirit intercedes with groans that words cannot express. Some people believe this verse is talking about what is often called a "prayer language" or a form of speaking in tongues. I don't believe that can be what Paul is talking about here because we are told that the groaning is of such nature that words (in any language) cannot express. The Holy Spirit communicates with the Father in a deep, intimate, and wordless language that words cannot comprehend or express.

How does the Spirit pray for us? He moves powerfully in our hearts to create groanings – His groanings experienced as our groanings. Piper indicates that these groanings are based on two things: 1) a deep desire and ache of heart that Christ be glorified in our lives, and 2) our weakness that leaves us baffled as to how this is going to happen. So we are not sure how we are to pray, but we are sure that we want Christ to be magnified in our bodies.

The Holy Spirit is a great help in prayer. He makes us want to pray, he teaches us how to pray, and he helps us as we pray. And when we can't pray at all, he prays for us to the Father. What an encouragement this is. Sometimes we are so confused, so worried,

so hurried, so pressured, so ill, so distracted, so tired and so weary that words will not come. Often the best prayers are unheard and even unspoken. They arise from a broken heart to God who hears the groanings that cannot be put in words.

### 3. Our Confidence in Prayer.

How do we know that God hears those inarticulate groanings that come from deep within? Verse 27 declares that God constantly searches our hearts. Because the Father knows what the Spirit is thinking, there is perfect intimacy and perfect harmony. There is no contradiction between the Spirit in our hearts and the Father in Heaven. When the Spirit intercedes for us, he always intercedes according to God's will.

The Holy Spirit knows what is best for our life. He knows our hearts. He knows God's plan for us. He knows the purpose of every event and situation in our life. The Holy Spirit prays for God to accomplish His will in us.

The Holy Spirit **"makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God."** Because we do not know what to pray in many circumstances, not all our requests are according to the will of God. The good news is that the Holy Spirit fixes our prayers so that they line up with the will of God.

Part of our weakness in prayer is that we're not able to know God's perfect plan in every situation. We can know God's will in many things. For example we can know God's moral will, as revealed in Scripture. We should never pray for anything contrary to Scripture. You don't need to pray about whether you should steal or kill or lie or have sexual relations outside of marriage. Those things are always wrong.

But there is a mystery here that we cannot fully understand. Samson's parents rightly exhorted him not to marry a Philistine woman. But they did not know that God wanted to use Samson's wrong desires to bring judgment on the Philistines (Judges 14:1-4). Jeremiah was right to pray that God would spare His people from the Babylonians for His name's sake. But God's sovereign will in that situation was to judge them (Jer. 14:19-15:2).

So we should pray according to God's will as best as we can. In fact a great prayer in every occasion is, "Not my will but Thine be done." But even when we pray for the wrong things or for the wrong reasons, the Spirit takes our weak prayers and gives them to the Father so that they line up with God's will. God always answers the Spirit's prayers.

Don't let the fact that your prayers don't seem to be answered keep you from praying. Make sure that to the best of your understanding you are praying in accord with God's will. But if you are praying unknowingly for something that is not His will, you can trust that the Spirit will take your prayers and line them up with God's perfect will.

So the bottom line is, We should be encouraged to pray. Don't let the fact that you don't know how to pray as you should discourage you from praying. Paul didn't know how to pray as he should, but he told us to "pray at all times in the Spirit" (Eph. 6:18). So keep at it even when you don't understand it.

William Barclay said: "When we pray, remember: 1. The love of God that wants the best for us. 2. The wisdom of God that knows what is best for us. 3. The power of God that can accomplish it."

I think this anonymous poem clearly expresses what the Holy Spirit does with our weak prayers.

I asked God for strength that I might achieve.  
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.  
I asked God for health that I might do greater things.  
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.  
I asked for riches that I might be happy.  
I was given poverty that I might be wise.  
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.  
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.  
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.  
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing that I asked for – but everything I had hoped for...  
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.  
I am among all men most richly blessed.

John Piper suggests some ways that this passage can provide comfort to Christians.

1. Be encouraged that you are not expected to know the will of God in every respect.
2. Be encouraged that in your perplexity and groaning, you are not being watched, you are being understood.
3. Be encouraged that God's work for you is not limited to what you can understand and express with words.
4. Be encouraged that in your weakness and sickness and loss and hardship and danger the Spirit of God is praying for you and not against you.
5. Be encouraged that God the Father hears the prayers of the Spirit for you.

These verses in Romans 8:26-27 are wonderful promises for those who trust in Christ. But they are promises to followers of Christ alone. The only person who has been given the Holy Spirit as an intercessor is the one who has received Christ as Savior and follows Him as Lord.

The Bible tells us there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men, the testimony given in its proper time. Only those within this relationship with Christ are God's children and have these promises.

The first step to an effective prayer life is to turn to Christ as your Savior and your Lord. Admit your sin, acknowledge His provision for that sin, and receive God's Spirit to transform your life.