

Romans: The Spirit Intercedes for Us

Romans 8:26-27

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 8. This great chapter is a favorite of so many of us, and we turn to it time and again in our times of need. And no wonder, for this chapter not only shows us about the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, but so much of that work concerns comforting believers who are really in the midst of it. You are undergoing trials and tribulation and suffering, and we've already found great encouragement in this chapter.

In fact, the last time we were together looking at verses 18 through 25, we saw the first of a number of comforts that Paul offers to believers who are enduring suffering. He reminded them that that was going to be the state, that they were going to expect in this fallen world; that all believers were going to endure from time to time in different ways, various types of suffering. But, he held out to us the hope of glory to help us endure our present suffering. And so this was the first of the comforts that Paul offers to us in this passage.

We turn today then to a passage which slightly shifts the focus. There's a sense in which Paul is talking about suffering from verse 18 all the way to the end of the chapter, as you will see. But there's another sense in which Paul slightly changes the focus in verses 26 and 27 to talk with us about not simply suffering, but our weakness. So let's hear God's holy and inspired word here in Romans 8:26.

"And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's Holy, inspired and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's look to Him in prayer.

Lord, we do need the help and the understanding of the Spirit to understand this inspired and infallible word about the work of the Holy Spirit, especially with regard to our prayer. And so we pray right now that you would bring to pass the

promise to Your people contained in this word. And that we would be encouraged by Your fulfillment of this promise, even in our hearing of Your Word this day. Make the Word to be plain to us and understandable and cause our hearts to respond with joy and comfort, we ask these things in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Have you ever noticed how often that the Bible emphasizes that Christ and the gospel come especially to the aid of those who are weak. The Old Testament is filled with such assurances. The Psalmist often prays that God would come to rescue the weak. Those who can't protect themselves, those who are oppressed, those who are poor, those who are despised, those who are weak. Jesus not only ministered to those who are weak, but on one occasion at a crucial point in the history of redemption, in the Garden of Gethsemane when His disciples slept while they need to be praying, He would say of them kindly, but very truthfully, the Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Have you ever thought how often Paul talks about ministering in weakness and ministering to those who are weak, and Christians being careful not to harm those brothers and sisters who are weaker than themselves? You know, we live in a world and a culture and a community where everyone is working very hard to look strong. We don't pull for the weakling. We like it when the underdog shows himself to be strong. In sporting events, we like the teams that win the championships. We don't celebrate the teams that lose. They may have beat all sixty-three other teams, but they lost the championship game, and so as far as we're concerned, they're a bunch of bums. The number two team is a washed up has-been. We like the professionals that get the most prestigious positions. We like the scholars that give the most prestigious fellowships and residences. We like the students who get the best scholarships. We like the businessmen who make the most money, and who are most successful. And those who struggle, we so often ignore or even look askance upon. But as far as Paul is concerned, we are weak. Is that how you view yourself? Do you view yourself as weak? That's how Paul viewed himself. Do you remember what he prayed in 2 Corinthians 12, and what the Lord's answer to him was in verse 9? This is what the Lord said to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness." And do you remember what Paul said in response to that? Remember, he's ministering in the strong-crazed Corinthian community. The Corinthians loved the strong, they loved the powerful, they loved the prestigious. And here's what Paul says to them: "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." Paul has a word of encouragement in the passage we are going to study today for the week. And that's good news. Many of you came here today knowing that you were weak. There may not have been many around you who knew your weaknesses, and there may be few who know the nature of those weaknesses. But many of you came knowing your weakness, and knowing that you were in need of aid. And if so, I have good news for you. Paul has a word of incredible strengthening and encouragement and comfort. And if you came today viewing yourself as strong, I have good news for you too. For when you take off the mask, and when

you stop the charade, and when you stop trying to convince everything and everybody else around you that everything's all right, you've got it together. Paul has a word to meet you in that moment of honesty. A word of hope and comfort which will bring you more relief than all your charades ever have.

I. Just we are are helped in our suffering by the hope of glory, so we are helped in our weakness by the Spirit.

And I want you to see three things in particular that Paul does as he gives us a grand comfort in these two tiny, but profound verses. First, I'd like you to look at the first part of verse 26. Paul says there, in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness. I want you to understand two very important things there. Paul takes our weakness as a given, and he makes it clear that even in that weakness, God ministers to us by His Spirit. Now, notice what Paul has done so far. In verses 18 through 25, he has been helping you deal with your suffering. In response to your suffering he's offered a support. What is that support? He says this, "Your present suffering is helped, and you're coping with your present suffering is helped by your realization of certain future glory. The hope of glory helps you cope now, helps you bear up under your present suffering." And he's talked about that at length in detail. Now he says, "Now, I've got a word of encouragement to you as you deal with your weakness. As you're looking in the mirror, and as you're acknowledging the weaknesses that are there, maybe nobody else knows them, but you know they are there, I've got a word of encouragement for you. In your weakness, I've helped you in your suffering, now here's the word of encouragement in your weakness. And the word is that in your weakness, God grants us the Spirit to help. You see what Paul is saying here. He's saying that we are weak, and we all stand in need of aid. And God generously supplies that need in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Just as we are helped in suffering by the certain future hope of glory, so also, we are helped in our weakness by the person and work of the Holy Spirit. That is what Paul is saying.

Notice that Paul does not say that God removes our weakness in the same way the Spirit removes our weakness. No, no, no, no. In the same way the Spirit helps our weakness. He does not transpose us into strong men; He aids us at the very point of need. But we remain constantly dependent upon Him, that His power might be perfected in our weakness. And notice what it is that God does in our time of need. He grants us the spirit. You're looking at a friend who is struggling through things. That friend is a friend in Christ. That friend trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you're wondering who is helping that friend in the hour of his need or her need? And here's Paul answer, the third person of the trinity. In your weakness God, the Spirit, comes to aid you. At that moment where you need it the most, the person who realizes that he is weak finds this comfort God the Holy Spirit has come to aid him. At that moment when you need it the most, the person who realizes that he is weak finds this comfort. God the Holy Spirit

has come to aid him. You know sometimes we run up against things, and we literally don't know what to do. When I was ten or eleven years old, my youngest brother had a seizure. He was upstairs. He was playing, talking with my other younger brother. They were playing games. It was about bedtime. Mother had let him stay up for about fifteen more minutes, and his lips began to turn blue, his face went ashen, my brother thought he was teasing with him. And it frightened him. And he said, "Mel, stop doing that." And then suddenly he fell over unconscious and not breathing. My brother, John, called, and mother and dad rushed upstairs, and they immediately began to administer CPR. And dad said to me, "Lig, go down and call Dr. Wyatt. Tell her to meet us at the Emergency Room." I managed to dial the number. When Dr. Wyatt's nurse answered, all I could say was this. "My brother needs help. My brother needs help." And to every question that that dear nurse tried to ask me, I had only one response. "My brother needs someone." I didn't know what to do. I dialed the number, but I didn't know what to say. I didn't know the words, I had no idea. And at just that moment my father came, and he took the phone away, and he said, "Now here's what is happening, and here's what we need." And the apostle is saying when you come to those moments, and you don't know what to do, God is sending His Spirit to your aid. He's coming to help you. When you're saying I can't do one more thing, I don't have it in me, I don't have the energy, I don't have the knowledge, I don't have the wisdom, I don't have a clue what to do, God the Spirit is coming to your aid. That's Paul first encouragement for you in this passage.

Now look at the rest of verse 26, because Paul is not finished. He's got another word of encouragement, and it's not just that God the Holy Spirit Himself is coming to the aid as the rescuer of His people. He tells us something else about our neediness that we see in prayer. You know, prayer is an exercise of admitting we're in need. Why do you pray unless you're in need? Well, one example of our neediness is indeed our practice of prayer. And it's precisely there that we see how the Spirit helps us. Look at what he says.: "We do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." In other words, Paul is saying this. The Spirit's help in prayer to us is a great comfort for our prayer shows our need, and our expression of our need in prayer itself is needy. Follow my argument. Prayer show that you need. Paul says you don't even know how to say to God that you're in need. You don't even know what to express to God in prayer that you need. And so even your expression of need is needy. Your prayer itself falls short. You don't even know how to express your need very well. And it's precisely at that point Paul takes his example. It is precisely that the Holy Spirit helps us.

Most of us are keenly aware of our deficiencies in prayer. And I want to give you a word of encouragement in that regard. Isn't it great that the apostle Paul in this verse does not say, now, you do not know how to pray as you should, but I've got good news for you. The Holy Spirit will help you in your weakness. Now me, on the other hand, I do know what I need to pray for, and I don't need the help of the

Holy Spirit. That's not what Paul says. Paul says this. We do not know how to pray as we ought. But the Holy Spirit helps us. The apostle Paul, who prayed Ephesians 3, 14 through 19, and if I could just pray one prayer like that in my life on my own that I thought up, I could go on home - the Paul that prayed that prayer says we don't know how to pray.

You see, sometimes we're in circumstances where God doesn't reveal the future to us, and we don't know frankly what we ought to pray. Moses once prayed Lord, let me into the promised land with Your people. Moses didn't know how to pray did he? Because that wasn't God's plan. Jeremiah once prayed, Lord, let your people hear the Word and return to You. God's response was I'm sick and tired of hearing these people. I'm going to judge them. Paul didn't know how to pray. Once upon a time, he prayed Lord, take this thorn in the flesh from me. The answer was, "No." Sometimes we just don't know what to pray for. Sometimes there's nothing there. The breath has been taken out of us. There's nothing left in us to offer up a prayer. We're stunned, we're numb in silence. Sometime we're just fumbling around, and we can't even concentrate.

One of the more encouraging things, and I know this is a little bit morbid, but one of most encouraging things I even discovered was that Calvin struggled with prayer. I was reading along in the *Institutes* in the Golden Booklet of a Christian Life. He's talking about prayer, and suddenly he talks about the struggle with wandering thoughts in prayer. And I started, and I said, "You mean John Calvin's mind wandered when he prayed?" This is great news. I'm not alone. No, as far as the apostle Paul is concerned, we, all of us, don't know how to pray as we ought.

We, all of us, need help. And he gives two great encouragements in the second part of verse 26. First of all he reminds you that if you're a child of God, if you trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, you have not only the Lord Jesus Christ as your intercessor, you have another intercessor. You have two intercessors. There is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, ever living to intercede for you. You have the Holy Spirit who dwells in the tabernacle of the flesh interceding for you here. You've got an intercessor on both ends of the line, the apostle says. And furthermore, this intercessor groans with you. This intercessor, he says, joins in with your groans. These unutterable, these inexpressible things which you try to lift up to God, but you can't find words for, the Spirit joins in those groans, and He causes those groans which emanate from the believer's heart to become the vehicle of His intercession to the Heavenly Father. And though they are unarticulated, and though they are unarticulatable, yet he causes them to serve the interests of intercession. The Spirit takes our groanings, and He makes them to suffice for intercessions beyond our capacity of expression. Daniel is praying, and he's praying for the return of Israel to the land. God not only grants that prayer, but in the course of it, uses words that are beyond Daniel's own knowing to indicate the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. God answered him beyond his comprehending. He answered him beyond his asking. And the Spirit who meets us in those

groans of frustration, and He turns those groans into intercession on our behalf; so that Plummer can say, "By the work of the Spirit, a heart without words may bring down the blessing of God." He's got no words. You've come to the end of your rope. You don't know what to say. You can't even say it, even if you knew what to say. The breath has been taken away. There's no voice. It gets here, and it chokes. No words come out. You're Hannah, and your heart is torn up within you. And you're there, and you're lips are moving, but the words won't come out. And Eli thinks you're drunk because you're moving your lips while you pray in the courtyard, and no words are coming out. And the spirit takes the groaning of that heart, and makes a prayer that Mary will copy at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul is saying don't you underestimate what the Spirit will do with your groans. But he's still not finished. The Spirit is your aid. He intercedes for you with His own groans joining yours.

II. The Spirit expresses our heart's longings perfectly to the Father, and is perfectly understood.

And thirdly, notice what he teaches us in verse 27. It's a huge encouragement, and that encouragement is this: That the Father knows the mind of the Spirit. There is this huge encouragement in prayer, and it is the Father's knowledge of the mind of the Spirit. Look what he says. "He who searches the heart knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." What is Paul saying there? He is saying that the Holy Spirit expresses our heart's longings perfectly to the Heavenly Father. And they are perfectly understood by the Heavenly Father, even if we can't quite comprehend them all ourselves. The Spirit expresses our heart's longings perfectly to the Heavenly Father, and they are perfectly understood by the Heavenly Father. We don't know what to pray for or how to pray for it, and God is still able to discern the voice of the Spirit in our groans.

Have you ever been at that point where you didn't know what to pray for? Where you were so beaten down you couldn't pray? I've been riding around listening to some sermons by Don Carson for the last two or three days. He tells us an acquaintance he knows in Illinois. They have seven children. All seven children are hemophiliacs. Six of the seven children have died of AIDS, contracted through blood transfusions through no fault of their own. Now what does a parent do who has lost six children to AIDS through no fault of their own? What do you lift up as a prayer to God? Just as I left the sanctuary at the end of the last service, a friend came to inquire about the PCA minister at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama, who was killed just hours ago. He's got a two-month old child. What words does his wife lift up to God? Now I don't know where you are. I don't know what end of the rope you're on right now. But I know this. The apostle is saying when you don't know what to say, God the Father still knows the mind of the Spirit, and it is the Spirit that is interceding for you.

Do you see what he is saying? It's so easy for us to become discouraged in prayer because we do it so badly. And because we get to points in our experience, where we don't know what to say. And here is the apostle Paul saying the Spirit makes our groanings His own, and He makes them as acceptable and understandable as the intercession of Christ. I want you to listen to that again. He takes your groanings, and He makes them as acceptable and as understanding to God the Father as the intercession of our Lord Jesus Christ. And you're saying, "Where in the world did you get that from?" Look at verse 27. "He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is." What is he saying? The Father knows the mind of the Spirit, and it's the Spirit who is interceding for you. So even though your mind is so befuddled that you don't know what you think, God knows the mind of the Spirit interceding for you.

And, furthermore, in the second half of the verse, "The Spirit intercedes according to the Saints according to the will of God." Every prayer that the Spirit renders up through your groanings is in perfect accordance with the will of God Almighty just like the intercession of our Lord Jesus Christ, wherein He says not My will, but Your will be done." And every groan, every sigh, every moan, every unuttered and unutterable expression, every word that gets stuck in the throat and cannot come out, the Spirit makes it to be as acceptable and understandable as the intercession of our perfect Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ. There's Jeremiah. He doesn't know what to pray for. And the Spirit makes his prayer acceptable. He's there in Jeremiah 20. He's begging God to end his life. He's cursing the day that he was born. He has no clue. He is so torn up inside, he doesn't know what to pray. And the Spirit is taking that prayer and correcting it even as it goes up. There's David lifting up his broken sentences. He can't even get a full sentence out. How long, oh Lord? And the Spirit is rendering it up in perfect accordance with the will of the Heavenly Father in such a way that He turns it into Scripture and makes it a model prayer for you and me.

God is so gracious and so sovereign, that He makes groans without words to be understood and to prevail by the work of the Holy Spirit. Even when through the pressures of life, and the accompanying spiritual darkness, we grow helplessly and inarticulately in prayer, God still hears. For confused or even mistaken as we may be, He discerns the voice of the Spirit in our prayers, and He is not confused, even if we are. But the Spirit is interceding for the Saints according to the will of God.

And that is so important for your own understanding of the spiritual life because in the fight of fate, there are times when the pressures are so great that you are left bewildered and darkness assails your soul, and it's impossible to be clear eyed. You don't know what you think about you, you don't know what you think about your circumstances, you don't know what you think about God, and you don't know what you want to say to Him. And often that real, horror of darkness comes down upon the Spirit, and words fail us for prayer. We can't even come up

with clear thoughts. And it is then when you can do no more than groan, that He groans in your groans with an unutterable intensity. And that nameless and wordless agony of the Holy Spirit, God understands. So don't forget it. When you're at the end of your rope, and your weakness is manifest at least manifest to you, it is the Spirit who intercedes. He intercedes for you in groans too deep for words but in perfect accordance with the will of God. Now if that won't encourage the weak, I don't know what will. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, hear our prayer, help us, O Spirit, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

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