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THE SPIRIT HELPS US PRAY

Romans 8:26-27

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Romans Lesson 50

The Spirit Helps Us Pray
Romans 8:26-27

In a message at the 2011 Desiring God Pastor's Conference, Francis Chan told of many answers to prayer that he has received. He said that for those who know the living God, this should be the norm. We should have such frequent answers to our prayers that we're surprised when an occasional one goes unanswered.

If you can relate to what Chan was saying, perhaps you should be the one giving this message on prayer, because to be honest, my experience is almost the opposite of Francis Chan's. I don't keep detailed records, but I seem to strike out in prayer so often that it's a big deal when I connect for a hit. My batting average wouldn't get me into the minor leagues, much less the majors! So maybe before you ask me to pray for you, you should shop around!

Seriously, I need all the help I can get to learn how to pray rightly. And so our text, while it has some puzzling details, overall is a great encouragement. Paul is saying,

Knowing that the Holy Spirit tenderly prays for us in our weakness should encourage us to pray.

Paul Miller, who also spoke at the same Desiring God conference, estimates from surveys that he has taken at his prayer seminars that about 90 percent of evangelicals do not have a meaningful daily prayer life. (I would encourage you to listen to his message and read his helpful book, *A Praying Life* [NavPress].) If you find prayer to be difficult, then Romans 8:26-27 should encourage you.

Douglas Moo (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 526) summarizes Paul's thought in these verses:

Paul is saying . . . that our failure to know God's will and consequent inability to petition God specifically and assuredly is met by God's Spirit, who himself expresses to God those intercessory petitions that perfectly match the will of God. When we do not know what to pray for—yes, even when we pray for things that are not best for us—we need not despair,

for we can depend on the Spirit's ministry of perfect intercession "on our behalf."

As I said, Paul's overall intent is clear: He wants to encourage us, especially when we feel our own weakness, because the Holy Spirit is praying for us. Even though we do not know how to pray as we should, we should be encouraged to keep praying. But there are a number of details in these verses that are difficult to understand. I'll try to explain them as best as I can as we work through the text and hope that the explanatory detours do not distract from the overall encouragement for your prayer life.

The first difficulty is to determine what "In the same way" refers to. Some authors connect it to the theme of "groaning." In 8:22, the whole creation groans; in 8:23, we ourselves groan as we wait for the completion of our adoption as God's children. So, "in the same way," the Holy Spirit "intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

Others say that "in the same way" links 8:26-27 with the other references to the Holy Spirit in chapter 8 (2, 4, 5, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, & 16). "In the same way, the Spirit also helps our weakness" (8:26).

Still others argue that the connection is with hope. We can be encouraged in our trials because of the hope of future glory (8:18-25); in the same way, we can be encouraged in our weakness by the Spirit's intercession for us (8:26-27). I am inclined to either the second or third view. Either Paul is connecting 8:26-27 with all the other references to the Spirit in this chapter, or he is linking it with the encouragement and hope of 8:18-25. But either way, he wants us to feel encouraged by the fact that the Spirit is praying for us, so that we will be encouraged to keep praying. Note two things:

1. All of us are weak, which is why we need to pray.
 - A. A sense of our weakness will drive us to pray.

Sometimes a small pronoun in the Bible can make a lot of difference. Paul did *not* write, "... the Spirit also helps *your* weakness," but rather, "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. A main reason that we do not pray as frequently or as fervently as we should is that we do not recognize how weak we really are. If we knew ourselves to

be weak, we would constantly be coming to the Lord and crying out for His strength. Jesus did *not* say, "Without Me, you can get along with all of the everyday stuff. But when you get hit with something really big, call on Me." Rather, He said (John 15:5), "... apart from Me, you can do nothing."

We tend to look at the spiritual giants in the Bible and think, "Wow, they were strong!" Look at Elijah! What a guy! He called down fire on his sacrifice and then slaughtered 400 prophets of Baal. Twice he called down fire to consume a commander and fifty armed men who were sent to arrest him. Don't mess with Elijah! And yet James (5:17) tells us, "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed" Elijah was weak, just like we are. But he prayed to the God who is strong.

Or, consider Moses. He stood up to the most powerful monarch in the world by calling down miraculous plagues on him and his kingdom. He parted the Red Sea so that the Israelites could pass through on dry ground and then he brought the sea back over the heads of the pursuing Egyptian army. He brought water from a rock in the barren desert. At his word, the ground opened up and swallowed alive those who challenged his leadership. He seemed to be a rock of spiritual strength! And yet in the mournful Psalm 90, he laments the frailty and shortness of life. The psalm ends with his pathetic plea (Ps. 90:17), "Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; and confirm for us the work of our hands; yes, confirm the work of our hands." I've often thought, "If Moses needed to beg God to confirm his labors, how much more do I!" Moses was aware of his own weakness, which is why he prayed.

Or, look at the Lord Jesus Himself. He alone lived a sinless life on this wicked earth. He boldly confronted the religious leaders without fearing their threats. He overturned their money tables and pronounced woes on their hypocrisy. If anyone seemed to be strong, it was Jesus. And yet He said (John 5:19), "The Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing." He often slipped away to the wilderness for prayer (Luke 5:16). In His humanity, Jesus knew that He must depend on the Father for all things. He is a model for us of praying at all times and for all things (Luke 18:1). Our weakness should cause us to cry out to God in prayer.

Hudson Taylor said (source unknown), "All God's giants have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on God being with them." We fail to pray because we think that we're strong enough to handle life without God. It's encouraging here in Romans 8:26 that God doesn't confront us or condemn us for being weak. Rather, He sends His Spirit to help us in our weakness.

So, if you say, "I don't have the strength to resist the temptation to look at porn," then flee to Jesus in your weakness. Cry out to Him for deliverance. "But, I don't have the strength to overcome my angry temper." The next time you're about to explode, run to Jesus. Every time you feel your weakness and inability, call out to Jesus. But, maybe you're thinking, "But that's the problem—I'm not strong in prayer." Paul says that. . .

B. Our weakness extends to our prayer lives.

Part of the weakness that Paul refers to is weakness in prayer: "for we do not know how to pray as we should." Again, I'm glad he said *we*, not *you*. Paul himself didn't know how to pray as he should. He gives us a glimpse into this in 2 Corinthians 12. He tells about his own experience of being caught up into Paradise where he heard inexpressible words, which he was not permitted to speak. Because of that great revelation, to keep Paul from exalting himself, God gave him what he calls "a thorn in the flesh." We can speculate on what this was, but the bottom line is, no one knows for sure because the Bible doesn't tell us.

But Paul says that three times he implored the Lord to take away this affliction. But the Lord replied (2 Cor. 12:9), "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Paul concluded (2 Cor. 12:9b-10), "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, 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. And that's the sense of Romans 8:26. He is not talking about the method or technique of praying, but rather the content. Paul wrestled with the same thing in Philippians 1:22-24, 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. 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 Him to escape from the cross, 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. God graciously gives the Holy Spirit to help us by interceding for us in our weakness.

Romans 8:26b-27: "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." Again, while many of the details are difficult to understand, Paul's overall intent is to encourage us with the fact that God has not left us alone in our weakness. Rather, His Spirit helps us by praying for us. I'll try to explain this with five observations:

- A. The Holy Spirit is a person, the third member of the Godhead.

The Holy Spirit is a person, not an impersonal force. He helps us in our weakness by praying for us, which an impersonal force cannot do. God is one God who exists eternally as three distinct persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Deut. 6:4; James 2:19; Matt. 28:19). The fact that the Spirit prays for us shows that He is distinct from the Father, to whom He prays. Also, the Father knows perfectly the mind of the Spirit and the Spirit prays perfectly in accord with the will of the Father. The Holy Spirit indwells everyone who belongs to Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:9). And so His ministry of prayer comes from within us, while Jesus' ministry of intercession (8:34) takes place at the right hand of the Father.

- B. The Holy Spirit helps us.

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!

C. The Holy Spirit helps us by interceding for us on an emotional level.

“The Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” What does this mean? We don’t have anything to compare it with, since this is the only reference to such a thing in Scripture. But, first, we can say with certainty that it does *not* refer to speaking in tongues, as some argue. That subject is totally foreign to the context here. Also, if speaking in tongues is a valid gift today, it is only for some, whereas the ministry of the Spirit in verse 26 is for all believers.

As you can predict, there are differing views of what this phrase means. Some argue that since it is inconceivable that God would groan, this must refer to our groans, which the Spirit translates into specific requests before the Father (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: The Final Perseverance of the Saints* [Zondervan], pp. 135-136). In line with this, Thomas Schreiner (*Romans* [Baker], pp. 445-446) understands it to refer to groanings that originate from the Spirit, but are experienced by believers. The Spirit burdens us with inexpressible longings to know and do the will of God. He then takes those burdens to the Father in an articulate form on our behalf.

Others argue that the wording of the sentence implies that these are the groans of the Spirit Himself, of which we are not

aware. John MacArthur puts it (*The MacArthur Study Bible* [Thomas Nelson], p. 1676), these groans refer to, "Divine articulations within the Trinity that cannot be expressed in words, but carry profound appeals for the welfare of every believer."

While I'm not dogmatic (and I did not find any commentators who suggested this), my understanding is that the Spirit's groaning on our behalf is an anthropomorphism, or more correctly, an anthropopathism, which is to attribute human emotions to God. For example, when the Bible says that God repents or changes His mind, it is speaking from a human point of view. To us, it seems as if God changed His mind, although His counsel is fixed from all eternity (1 Sam. 15:11, 29). In one of the most outrageous anthropomorphisms in the Bible, the psalmist compares God to a warrior who awakes from being drunk (Ps. 78:65)! Obviously, God is not sleeping off a hangover when He does not answer our prayers, but that's how the psalmist portrays Him.

So here, I suggest that Paul pictures the Holy Spirit groaning on our behalf to convey that He takes up our needs at the deepest emotional level and conveys our hurts and cares to the Father's throne, all in line with the will of God. This should encourage us to pour out our hearts before Him (Ps. 62:8).

D. The Holy Spirit helps us by interceding for us according to the will of God.

Romans 8:27: "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." "He who searches the hearts" most likely refers to the Father. Paul's point is, if the Father understands all human hearts, then He must know the unspoken groans of the Holy Spirit on our behalf. In other words, the Spirit takes our deepest feelings and unexpressed needs to the Father, who understands everything perfectly. Nothing leaves God scratching His head, wondering what our real needs are.

Since God searches and knows every heart, our prayers should come from the heart. You can impress others with spiritual-sounding prayers, but those prayers don't impress God. Pour out your heart honestly to Him. But maybe you're thinking, "But what if my prayers are not in line with God's will?"

- E. The Holy Spirit's prayers for us are always according to God's will and thus are always answered.

The last phrase of 8:27 seems to say that the Holy Spirit makes corrections for any misdirected prayers that we make by praying for us according to the will of God. Part of our weakness in prayer is that we're not able to know God's sovereign will, in the sense of His decree, until after it has happened. We can know His 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 marry an unbeliever or have sexual relations outside of marriage or whether you should steal to meet your financial needs. 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). Or, Satan demanded permission to sift Peter like wheat by tempting him to deny Christ. If I had heard that demand, I would have prayed that God would keep Peter from sinning. But Jesus, who knew the will of God perfectly, did not pray that Peter would not sin, but rather that his faith would not totally fail and that after he was restored, he would strengthen his brothers (Luke 22:31-32).

So I understand Paul's point to be that we should pray according to God's will as best as we can, but if God's decreed will differs from our prayers, the Spirit will correct our requests to line up with God's sovereign will. And so even if to us it seems that our requests are denied, in God's sovereign plan, they will be answered.

One well-known example of this is that Augustine's godly mother, Monica, prayed for years for the salvation of her wayward son. He told her that he was going to move to Italy. She prayed that he would not go, because she thought that he would be led into further sin there. But he went and got saved there. The Spirit took her deepest desire, re-directed it before God's throne, and her son got saved and became the most influential theologian for the next one thousand years.

Conclusion

So while there are difficult details in these verses, the bottom line is pretty clear: We should be encouraged to pray. We won't fully understand the mystery of prayer in this life, but we know that the Lord commands us to pray. He has ordained prayer as the means through which we cooperate with Him in bringing about His sovereign will. He encourages us with the truth that the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us, tenderly takes our prayers and directs them according to God's will before His throne. Here are three final applications:

**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.

**Don't let the fact that prayer isn't easy discourage you from praying.* Paul told the Colossians (4:12) that Epaphras was "always laboring earnestly for [them] in his prayers." Prayer is often hard work. It isn't easy. But keep working at it. Finally,

**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. This gracious truth, that the Holy Spirit tenderly prays for us in our weakness, should cause us to persevere in prayer, especially in times of trial.

Application Questions

1. Discuss: Paul Miller suggests that our lack of prayer is not due to a lack of discipline, but rather a lack of feeling our need.
2. What is your main hindrance to prayer? How can you overcome it?
3. If God knows our needs and the Spirit is praying for us, why do we need to pray? (See Matt. 6:8ff.)
4. If God has determined His sovereign will, does prayer really change things? If so, how? If not, why pray?

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