

- d. The Holy Spirit is the first fruits of the believer's salvation, and as such, He is the *Spirit of glory*. For, His indwelling presence is not only the proof of present sonship, it is also the sure promise of future glory. He is the *pledge* of the inheritance of the sons of God and their revelation in glory in the day of Christ Jesus (Ephesians 1:13-14; also 1 Corinthians 1:4-9; Philippians 1:6-12). For this reason the indwelling Spirit is central to the believer's hope.

But his contribution to Christian hope is not limited to His being the "down payment" of the saints' salvation. He also establishes and strengthens their hope in His role as the *Spirit of intercession* (8:26-27).

- 1) Paul transitioned into this sub-context with the phrase, "*In the same way.*" This clearly connects these two verses with what precedes them, but there are disagreements among commentators as to the correspondence Paul had in mind. Some connect the ideas of *groaning*, and so conclude that Paul was indicating that, just as believers groan within themselves, so also the Spirit groans in His intercession for them. This is certainly possible, but Paul's immediately preceding statements in verses 24-25 indicate that he intended to connect together the believer's continuance in patient hope and the supporting role of the Holy Spirit in relation to it.

Paul has already established the Spirit's centrality to every Christian's hope (cf. 5:1-5, 8:1-17). He is the first fruits of their salvation and the source of their adoption, and His indwelling presence guarantees their glorification. But He also has an *active, ongoing* role in believers' lives. This role is related to the incompleteness that defines the "already but not yet" state of their salvation and the *weakness* that attends it. The spirits of the saints are alive in Christ, but their bodies have not yet partaken of the renewing power of Christ's redemption (6:1-11, 8:10). They share in the new creation, and yet corruption, infirmity, and weakness still afflict them.

- 2) From the outset Paul has ascribed the Christian's hope entirely to the purpose, work, and power of the triune God. Whether his righteousness and justification, his sanctification, his adoption or his inheritance – all depend solely on God's kind intention and the power of His grace. This is the reason that Christian hope can never disappoint; it will always realize the full attainment of that for which it longs.

Nonetheless, Paul did not confine God's involvement strictly to the *objective* issues of salvation and its realization in the lives of His children. God would be perfectly justified in leaving them to persevere in hope purely on the basis of His promise, Christ's accomplishment at Calvary, and the Spirit's transformative power. *But He is not such a Father and Christ is not such a detached Husband*; through the indwelling Spirit, the Father has poured out His love into His children, and the Son has granted His abiding presence with His bride (ref. again 5:1-5; also John 14:1-21).

The Spirit does not simply renew and transform the saints by the sheer force of His divine power. He is intimately involved in the *subjective* issues of salvation as well. The Father and Son have sent the Spirit as the *Paraclete*: He is the believer's advocate, helper, and comforter (cf. John 14:16-18, 26, 15:26-16:7). *The Holy Spirit is referred to under these titles because He is the presence of the Father's love and the Son's intimate husbandry.* And that being the case, He is deeply and constantly concerned with the saints' nurture, encouragement, and consolation.

Paul taught that Christians live with a settled hope, but he also recognized that this hope exists in the context of real and abiding weakness. Nevertheless, he remained convinced that "hope does not disappoint," for this weakness is not left to the remedy of the saints' own devices and efforts. The same Spirit who has given them life in Christ, and who guarantees the consummation of that life, ministers to them and carries them along in their infirmity: "*the Spirit helps our weakness*" (8:26a).

This verb is used just this once in Paul's writing, and only one other time in the entire New Testament (Luke 10:40). It is a compound form whose parts combine to convey the generic idea of a joining together for the sake of receiving a benefit or accomplishing a task. This verb is used twice in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew phrase *bear with*, where the context is a mutual bearing of a burden (Exodus 18:22; Numbers 11:17).

The most important thing to note is that it connotes a *sharing* between two or more parties. The implication for this context is that Paul was not indicating that the Spirit in any way acts in the believer's stead, and much less that He removes his weakness. Rather, like those who held up Moses' arms in the battle with Amalek (Exodus 17:8ff), the Spirit joins together with those He indwells to bear the burden of their weakness with them. He does not vanquish their infirmity, but comes to their aid, supporting and assisting them in the midst of it.

- 3) Here Paul was concerned with Christian weakness specifically in relation to prayer: "*for we do not know how to pray as we should*" (8:26b). But although incapacity in prayer is his focus in the present passage, the overall context and its emphasis on the "already but not yet" state of salvation indicate that Paul envisioned the believer's weak condition as comprehending the whole of his humanity. In other words, Paul cannot be understood as limiting Christian weakness to the matter of prayer.

Furthermore, verses 26 and 27 together reveal that Paul's particular concern was with the feebleness that is the present lack of full conformity of the believer's mind to Christ, and the way in which that lack of conformity implicates his interaction with God in prayer. Three things about Paul's statement are important to note:

- The first is the structure of his statement. Literally it reads: *We do not know what we (should) pray as it is necessary*. Grammatically, the second clause serves as the object of the verb *know*. In other words, Paul was indicating that believers are characterized by a weakness of insight and understanding – they do not know – and their lack of knowledge has its object in the “what” and “how” of prayer. *They lack discernment of what they ought to pray for and how they ought to pray concerning it*.
 - Secondly, Paul ascribed this lack of knowledge to *all* believers, including himself. Yet he was not implying that Christians are entirely in the dark when it comes to prayer. This would be a gross overstatement, for all believers pray with some degree of correctness in their perception of issues, and with biblical insight into the mind and will of God. Again, *Paul was simply recognizing the weakness that is inherent in believers given the “already but not yet” state of their salvation*, and specifically the weakness of their knowledge. The verb he chose refers to knowledge acquired through the senses, either experientially or perceptually. Christians stand incomplete in their salvation; the mind of Christ is not yet fully formed in them. Moreover, they have not yet entered into glory, and so they still *see dimly* and *know in part* (1 Corinthians 13:9-12; 2 Corinthians 3:18). Believers are marked by weakness in the present age, and their prayer reflects that weakness.
 - Finally, Paul qualified his statement by adding that Christians do not know how to pray “*as they should,*” or more literally, *as it is necessary*. At their best, the most mature believers are finite and do not know as God knows. They have true faith in God and they do live in hope of His promise (8:24-25), but the very fact that what they hope for is not seen means that their praying will not be in perfect accord with “what is necessary.” This does not mean that believers always pray *wrongly*, though sometimes this is the case. Paul simply meant that their communion with God – which is presently through the vehicle of prayer – lacks the perfection it will have in their glorification.
- 4) This weakness is present in all believers, and the Spirit comes to their aid and helps them in it. Specifically, He “*intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words*” (8:26c).

The Holy Spirit’s ministry to the Christian’s weakness in prayer takes the form of *intercession*. He comes alongside him in his weakness and pleads for him on his behalf. But how, exactly, does this intercession take place and who are the parties in it? Given that Paul’s statement has a mystical quality, it is not surprising that Christians interpret his words differently.

There are two general ways in which this intercession is understood, the point of difference being the presence or absence of the believer's participation in it. How one understands Paul's qualification that the Spirit intercedes "*with groanings too deep for words*" is fundamental to which view is embraced.

- Those who understand these groanings as referring to the believer tend to conclude that the Spirit's intercession occurs in connection with and simultaneous to the Christian's prayers. Paul's meaning, then, is as follows: in the context of their prayers, believers are often unsure how to pray. As a result they are left "speechless," and pray with inward, unutterable groanings. They are unable to articulate the sentiments of their hearts, and this is where the Spirit steps in. He takes what they cannot express in words and "carries" their burden to God on their behalf. In this way the Spirit makes coherent what the praying believer cannot articulate himself.
- The second view attributes these groanings to the Spirit. As such, the Spirit's intercession need not be directly tied to the believer's prayers. Even when a Christian is not praying, the indwelling Spirit can still intercede for him on his behalf. In this view, Paul's point was that the Spirit helps our weakness by interceding for us *with His own groanings* when we cannot pray as we ought.

Having said all this, the issue is resolved by a careful consideration of the text itself. Paul's grammar indicates it is the Spirit who groans rather than the believer. For he did not write that the Spirit intercedes with *our* groanings, but simply that He intercedes "with groanings." This being the case, the implication is that the groaning must be attributed to the one doing the interceding.

But if the Holy Spirit is the One who groans in His intercession for believers, what did Paul mean by saying that these groanings are "*too deep for words*"? The Greek adjective refers to that which is unutterable or incapable of being expressed in words. Not surprisingly, this verse is used by some Charismatics to substantiate their claim of a "prayer language" that is a particular manifestation of the gift of tongues. But in that this unutterable groaning applies to the Spirit and not the believer, the idea of a personal prayer language must be rejected.

In context, it is likely that Paul simply meant to communicate that these groanings of the Spirit are not expressed in words. As part of His ministry to those He indwells, the Spirit intercedes for them *without words* – that is, without their conscious participation in His intercession. At the same time, because He bears their burden with them – which burden Paul has expressed as a groaning (8:23) – the Spirit also groans in His intercession.

In the larger context Paul has emphasized the solidarity between the Spirit, redeemed men, and the creation. The Spirit is the agency of renewal and adoption, and the creation looks forward to its own future renewal in connection with “the revealing of the sons of God.” The present renewal of men’s spirits by the Holy Spirit is the promise of His future renewal of the whole physical creation, both human and non-human. And as the entirety of the created order shares solidarity in Christ’s redeeming work, so everything shares the angst of the “already but not yet” state of redemption: along with the rest of the creation, redeemed men *groan* as they wait eagerly for the day of consummation. *This groaning is evidence of the solidarity between all created things, and Paul’s ascribing of groaning to the Spirit indicates His true solidarity with them.* His presence and power were the basis of the first creation, and they are equally the basis of the second creation whose completion is soon to come.

Thus, when Paul referred to the groaning of the Spirit, he was not implying that He is incapable of putting the burdens of the saints into words; that He suffers in the same way that they do; or even that communication within the Godhead takes an ineffable, unutterable form. Rather, his intention was to testify to the depth of the intimacy that exists between the Holy Spirit and those He indwells. As believers groan in their eager longing for the consummation to come, so the Spirit shares in and ministers to them in their groaning; their longing is His longing.

- 5) Paul has insisted that the Spirit comes to our aid in our present weakness, and that He does so by interceding for us. In verse 8:27, then, he explains *why* it is that the Spirit’s intercession serves to help us in our infirmity. Stated most simply, it is because the Spirit is *deity*: because He is a member of the Godhead, “*He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is.*”

Throughout the Scripture it is God who searches out and knows the hearts of men (cf. Psalm 11:4-5, 26:2, 33:13-15, 139:1-4, 23-24; 1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Jeremiah 17:10; Ezekiel 11:5; etc.). So it is here; even though Paul did not explicitly identify God as the One who searches the hearts, the context makes this obvious. And this God who knows the hearts of men also knows the mind of the Spirit, for the Holy Spirit is Himself God. Being equal members of the triune Godhead, The Father, Son, and Spirit all share the same mind.

The implication of this is that the Spirit also searches the hearts of men. Although Paul clearly distinguished in this verse between God and the Spirit, their mutual deity implies that the knowledge possessed by the former is shared by the latter. This is especially true of the Spirit’s knowledge of the hearts of *believers*, for He Himself indwells them and is in the process of transforming them into the likeness of the divine Son.

The Spirit's "searching out" of the hearts of believers is also implied by the very fact that He intercedes for them. For how could He possibly share their groaning and carry their innermost burdens before the Father unless He knows the depths of their being? The truth is that the Spirit knows the hearts and minds of the saints *in a way and to an extent that they do not*.

But Paul also affirmed to the Romans that the Spirit knows the mind of God perfectly: His intercession for the saints is *according to God* (8:27b). The NASB inserts the idea of God's will, rendering Paul's statement as the Spirit interceding for the saints "according to the will of God." This addition is not inappropriate, although it may be argued that it potentially fails to recognize the extent of the unity between God and His Spirit that is inherent in Paul's statement. For he constructed his syntax and grammar so as to emphasize the exhaustive harmony between Father and Spirit: *The one who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes according to God*.

Paul's point was that the Father (who searches the hearts of His children) knows the mind of the Spirit – in other words, He knows what the Spirit is intending and accomplishing by His intercession – precisely because the Spirit is interceding according to the Father's own design. By His intercession the Holy Spirit is simply making manifest and accomplishing in the lives of believers the eternal purpose of God.

With amazing depth of insight, Paul revealed to the Romans the glorious and encouraging truth that the Father knows the weakness of His children, and He has given them His Spirit – the Spirit of His Son – for the express purpose of helping them in their infirmity.

Therefore, when the Spirit helps the saints in their weakness and carries their burdens, the Father knows the Spirit's intention, concern and labor for them, precisely because He is acting on the Father's behalf.

The Holy Spirit does not mediate a strained relationship between God and men; He does not intercede for sinful Christians in order for them to gain access through Him to an aloof or angry God. *He is Himself the indwelling presence of God*, and His intercession for them is the expression of the Father's intimate communion with His beloved children.

And so the Spirit's intercession brings the mind and heart of the believer together with the mind and heart of his Father. The Spirit makes perfect and glorious the weakness and imperfection of Christian prayer. He secures even now the unqualified communion between Father and sons that will mark their relationship in the consummation to come. *Once again the Spirit is shown to be the binding element between the "already" and the "not yet."* He makes real and present what is still lacking in the existing imperfection and incompleteness of the "not yet."

Paul's instruction in these two short verses is vitally important and infinitely practical. For there is arguably no aspect of the Christian life that is more discouraging than prayer. Perhaps more than in any other spiritual exercise, our present weakness is clearly evident in our communion with our heavenly Father. Not only is our prayer anemic because of our distracted, temporally preoccupied lives, when we do pray we often experience a sense of awkwardness or distance that can lead to paralysis in our prayer. All too often we feel disconnected from our Father, earth-bound, and undiscerning of what it is that He is doing in our lives and the lives of others. We do not know how to pray according to what is needful; as a result, we are unable to pray as we ought.

These struggles are the property of every believer, and cause many to lose hope. And yet Paul's insistence is that, even in the weakness of their prayer, Christians are to be full of confident hope. Once again, the reason for this hope is that it has nothing to do with them. Paul recognized the universal Christian weakness that manifests itself in a feeble prayer life. He himself was subject to it (note his use of "we"). *And yet he did not instruct the Romans to remedy their anemia in prayer by trying harder, studying more, or applying themselves to more carefully discern the will of God.* He well understood that such a remedy would, in the end, **rob** them of hope, not **secure** them in it.

Without exception, God's children are infirmed in themselves – as they are all too painfully aware – and yet their communion with their Father is not thereby hindered or made empty. *The reason is that **the Spirit** mediates and makes full the communion between their souls and the heart of the Father who loves them.* He is the Spirit of God as well as the Spirit of Christ. Therefore, as surely as He is *Christ* in them (8:9-10), He is also the *Father* in them (John 14:23).

"Here is one potent source for that 'patient fortitude' with which we are to await our glory; that our failure to understand God's purposes and plans, to see 'the beginning from the end,' does not mean that effective, powerful prayer for our specific needs is absent." (Moo)

"Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' And to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring My sons from afar, and My daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory, whom I have formed, even whom I have made...But now listen, O Jacob, My servant; and Israel, whom I have chosen: thus says the Lord who made you and formed you from the womb, who will help you, 'Do not fear, O Jacob My servant; and you Jeshurun whom I have chosen. For I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring, and My blessing on your descendants; and they will spring up among the grass like poplars by streams of water. This one will say, 'I am the Lord's'; and that one will call on the name of Jacob; and another will write on his hand, 'Belonging to the Lord,' and will name Israel's name with honor.'"

- e. The Spirit is the *Spirit of Glory*, first of all because He is the first fruits of the believer's salvation, and therefore Christ's pledge to him by which his future inheritance in glory is secured. But secondly, the Spirit also testifies to the believer's status as a son and heir by His ongoing intercessory role on his behalf. As the saints groan within themselves in eager anticipation of the consummation to come, the Spirit shares their burden and groans together with them, carrying them forward in their weakness until the day of Christ Jesus.

In verse 8:27 Paul declared that the Spirit's intercession is in accordance with the loving purpose and will of the Father. The Father has appointed and given the Spirit to His children for the express purpose of helping them in their weakness. Moreover, He does so not by delivering them from their infirmity, but by carrying them in it. For the Father knows that the faith of His children – and so also the firmness of their *hope* – is strengthened by their continuance in weakness, not their deliverance from it. The saints' own resolve and resource are antithetical to hope, for hope depends upon *assurance*, assurance depends upon *certainty*, and certainty depends upon invincible *power*. Such power is unknown to human beings; only divine power allows for certainty, and therefore also the assurance and hope that proceed out of it. And this divine power, as it respects God's children, is perfected in the context of their weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

The larger context is concerned with Christian hope, and Paul understood that believers' inherent and abiding weakness can cause in them a crisis of hope. This being so, he wanted the Romans to grasp the truth that, far from assaulting their hope, their weakness ought to strengthen it. For present infirmity testifies to the "not yet" state of their salvation, but the "not yet" itself testifies to the "already." ***Every Christian's present weakness is God's promise to him of future glory.***

- This is why Paul likened the believer's affliction in this life to the pain of *childbirth* (8:22-23). What is to come is being brought forth in travail.
- It is also the reason Paul regarded the believer's anxious longing to be the marrow of his present suffering; like the rest of the creation, he groans in his own infirmity, waiting eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God (8:18-25). The "already" provokes an agonizing for the "not yet."

While Christians groan in the pains of this birthing process, the Spirit continually ministers to them in their weakness. He performs this ministry on behalf of the Father, and He does so toward the ultimate goal of their receipt of the inheritance the Father has promised to them as His sons (8:14-17). The promised inheritance is their final glorification as human beings in union with the true Man. It is their participation in the "summing up" of all things in Christ, which is the reason that their glorification is inseparable from the renewal of the rest of the creation. The entire material creation has a *Christological destiny*, and this destiny was eternally purposed and determined by the triune God. It is that grand, comprehensive plan and its outworking to which Paul turned his attention in verses 8:28-30.