

# How the Holy Spirit helps us as we pray

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon  
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*“<sup>26</sup>In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. <sup>27</sup>And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.”*  
(Romans 8.26 - 27)

## Introduction

In these verses the apostle Paul speaks about how the Holy Spirit helps us as we pray. We are weak, and we do not know how to pray in the way that we ought, but the Holy Spirit helps us, and acts as an advocate for us as we pray to God.

If you are a Christian this morning I hope that you will find these verses very encouraging. I doubt that there is any Christian who does not struggle with his prayer life. I certainly do. But we see from these verses that God knows that we find prayer difficult, and he has given us the Holy Spirit to help us. If you are not yet a Christian, I hope that God might use these verses to show you your need of Christ.

We shall think about these verses under four headings.

1. The link with the previous verses
2. The difficulty that we have in prayer
3. How the Holy Spirit helps us
4. The effect of the Holy Spirit's help

## **1. The link with the previous verses**

Verse 26 starts with the word "Likewise". This is referring back to something that the apostle has been saying in previous verses.

Different views have been expressed as to what it is in previous verses that the apostle is referring back to.

One view is that the apostle is referring back to what he has been saying in preceding verses about how we suffer in this world, and how the hope that we have as believers strengthens us and comforts us. According to this view, the apostle says that, just as we are helped by this hope when we suffer in this world, so we are helped by the Holy Spirit as we experience the results of the Fall in our prayer lives.

Another view is to see a reference to how we groan as we live in this fallen world. Just as we groan as we live in these bodies, so the Holy Spirit groans on our behalf as we pray.

Another view is that the apostle is linking back with what he said a few verses back, in verses 15 and 16, where the apostle said, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." According to this view, the apostle is saying that just as the Holy Spirit speaks to us to assure us that we are the children of God, so he speaks to God on our behalf when we pray, and conveys to the Father what it is that we are trying to say to God. This view sees verses 18 to 25 as a parenthesis, as a mini-digression on suffering, before the apostle continues his theme of the work of the Spirit in our lives.

How are we to decide between these views? I think I would lean towards the last view. In almost every verse from verse 1 to verse 17 there is a reference to the Holy Spirit. It is almost as if the apostle in this chapter is giving a mini-theology of the work of the Holy Spirit in believers. So it would seem to make sense that he is here returning to this theme that was so strong in the earlier part of the chapter.

## **2. The difficulty that we have in prayer**

The apostle says in verse 26, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

The apostle here speaks about our "weakness". What is he talking about here? The word weakness is as a word which is often used in the

New Testament to speak of illness, or of physical weakness. It is used in Matthew chapter 8 and verse 17, where it is said that Jesus fulfilled what Isaiah said, “He took up our **infirmities** and carried our diseases.” It is used three times by the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12 verses 9 – 10, where he says, after he asked God three times to remove his “thorn in the flesh”,

“But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in **weakness**.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my **weaknesses**, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in **weaknesses**, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong”

We experience illness, weakness and frailty as a result of Adam's fall into sin. This weakness is physical weakness, mental weakness, and also spiritual weakness.

This general weakness and frailty that we have in our bodies also extends to our prayer life. The apostle goes on, “We do not know what we ought to pray for”. The literal translation is “We do not know the things that we should pray for as we must.” There are things that we are under an obligation to pray for. But we are weak. We are dull in our spiritual understanding, and so, either we do not pray at all, or we pray for the wrong things.

There is an example of this in James chapter 4 and verses 1 to 3, where the apostle says,

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

James says that the reason why believers do not receive the things that they desire is that they do not ask God, or if they do ask, they do not receive because they ask with wrong motives.

Probably all of us who are believers would acknowledge that we struggle with prayer. We so easily get preoccupied with other things, and often do not pray at all. When we do set aside time for prayer, we are easily distracted, and tend to daydream. Or we fall asleep, as did the disciples at Gethsemane. If we do actually pray, we tend often to

pray for the wrong things, praying often about our physical wants rather than our spiritual needs, and the spiritual needs of others. Even if we do pray for the things that we should pray about, we tend very easily to pray in a cold way, without real concern, and with not much faith.

For many of us, prayer is, perhaps, the most difficult thing we can ever do. We find anything easier to do than prayer. Many of us are able to work hard. We can play hard. We enjoy socialising. But all too often we find prayer very difficult. We know that we should love to pray. We know it is a tremendous privilege to pray to the Almighty God, our loving heavenly Father. But all too often we find it very difficult to sustain a life of prayer.

So we see that, in various ways, we are weak, and not good at praying, due to the effects of the Fall upon us.

### **3. How the Holy Spirit helps us**

Hear again what the apostle says in verse 26: "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

The apostle says that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. The Greek word that is translated "helps" in this verse is a word which is in fact the combination of three words, which mean "take hold of", "opposite" and "with". Imagine that you have a very heavy object that you need to lift into a vehicle. You cannot possibly lift it on your own. So you ask a friend to help you. You grab hold of the object on one side of it, and he grabs hold of it on the other side, and together you lift it up. Between the two of you, you are able to lift it into the vehicle, whereas on your own you would not have been able to.

The word is used in the story of Mary and Martha, as recorded in Luke's Gospel chapter 10. Mary and Martha had invited Jesus and his apostles to come to dinner at the house. Mary sat at Jesus's feet, listening to him, but Martha was preoccupied with getting the dinner ready. Martha came to Jesus and said, as recorded in verse 40, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to **help** me!" This is the same word that is used here in Romans 8.

So the Holy Spirit helps us, as it were, to lift the "burden" of prayer. By ourselves we would be unable to carry it. We are too weak. But with his help we are enabled to engage in real prayer.

It is not that the Holy Spirit prays instead of us. It is rather that as we pray, he comes alongside us and assists us.

Have you ever had the experience of coming to a prayer meeting, and at the start of that prayer meeting you are dull and lifeless? The things of God seem to be very distant to you. You are weary and cold in your heart. But then you start to pray, and you ask God to warm your heart, and as the prayer meeting continues your concern for the spiritual wellbeing of others increases, and you remember more and more people who need prayer. The time rushes by, and, when the time comes for the meeting to close, you wish it could last longer because there is more that you wanted to pray for. What is that? That is, I suggest, exactly what the apostle is talking about here, how the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness, and invigorates our prayer lives.

I believe that another example of what the apostle is speaking about here is that Christians will often experience what they often call a “burden” for particular individuals or situations come upon them. They feel that they must pray for them. In our natural selves we do not know the things that we should pray for, but the Holy Spirit leads us. He awakens our spiritual senses, and brings to our minds relevant Scriptural truth. He also gives us concern for others, and reminds us of their needs, which then leads us to pray.

We may liken this to a lawyer who gives legal advice. Suppose you get a summons to Court, to answer a charge that has been brought against you. You are thrown by it. You have no idea what you should do, or how you should answer. So you go and see a solicitor. The solicitor talks you through it, and gives you advice about what you should say at different points in the proceedings. So it is with the Holy Spirit. He guides us and leads us as we pray. He puts concerns in our hearts, and moves us to pray for these things.

But the apostle then says something else. Not only does the Holy Spirit move us and help us to pray, he also prays on our behalf, as we pray! He speaks on our behalf to the Father. The apostle says that the Holy Spirit “himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.” There are various ways in which this has been interpreted, but I take it to mean that as we pray, the Holy Spirit speaks on our behalf, and conveys to the Father what we are trying to say to God.

The apostle says that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. He acts as a sort of barrister. A barrister does two things for his client. Firstly, he gives advice to the client as to how he is to speak in court. Secondly, the barrister speaks on behalf of his client. Where the client is not very

good at expressing himself, the barrister says to the judge, “My Lord, my client wishes to say that...”

The Holy Spirit is not the only one who intercedes for us. Jesus also intercedes for us. The apostle speaks about this later on in this chapter, in verse 34, where he says, “Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” The writer to the Hebrews also speaks about this, in chapter 7 of that letter, verse 25, where he says, “Therefore he [Jesus] is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”

There is a difference, though, between the intercession of Jesus, and the intercession of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus intercedes for us, he is in heaven, standing before the throne of the Father, constantly pointing to the sacrifice that he made for our sins, and calling upon the Father not to condemn us but to show us his mercy. When the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, he is crying out to the Father on our behalf, presenting our requests to the Father in a way which is acceptable to him. The intercession of Christ is to secure our salvation. The intercession of the Holy Spirit is to make our own prayers effective with the Father.

The apostle speaks about how the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with “groans that words cannot express”. The literal translation is that he groans “without words”. As we pray, there is a communication from God the Holy Spirit, who is within us, to God the Father who is in heaven.

Some suggest that the apostle cannot be saying that the Holy Spirit himself groans, because as God, the Holy Spirit cannot feel pain, and so the word “groan” cannot be a fitting word for the Holy Spirit. They suggest that it is we who are doing the groaning. To this I would answer, firstly, the apostle Paul does speak in Ephesians chapter 5 about how, if we sin, we will “grieve” the Holy Spirit, so groaning may not be an inappropriate word for the way the Holy Spirit communicates. Secondly, the pain, or the groaning, that the Holy Spirit expresses to the Father is our pain and our concern that we have for those for whom we are praying. What he is doing is communicating, on our behalf, the passion and concern that we have, and which we are trying, falteringly and inadequately, to express to God the Father.

There is a doctrinal lesson we can learn from this verse, which is that it teaches us about the Trinity. We see from this verse that the Holy Spirit is a person. The group known as “Jehovah’s Witnesses” teaches that only the Father is God, and that Jesus is merely a created angel, and

also that the Holy Spirit the impersonal force, or power, of God. But the apostle here teaches that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, and also that he groans. Only a person can intercede and “groan”. So the Holy Spirit is not a merely the power of the Father. He is a person who is residing in us and intercedes on our behalf, and brings our requests to the Father.

We also see from this verse that the Holy Spirit is a person who is distinct from the Father. He is living inside us, and helping us with our prayers, while the Father is in heaven, listening to our prayers, and the groaning of the Holy Spirit on our behalf. You may be aware that there is a view of God which says that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three different modes, or phases, of the one God. This teaching also says that baptism should be in Jesus’ name only, and not in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This teaching is known as “Modalism”, or “Sabellianism”, after teacher in the early church called Sabellius who taught it, or because of the link with the teaching on baptism, “Jesus only” teaching.

But this verse is one of the many verses in Scripture that shows that Modalism is false. The Holy Spirit is spoken of here as a person, living inside believers, and interceding and “groaning” on their behalf, and as distinct from the Father, who is in heaven. God is one God, yes, but he consists of three distinct persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who exist at the same time, and relate with each other.

So, what we have seen in this section is how the Holy Spirit helps us when we pray.

#### **4. The effect of the Holy Spirit’s help**

The apostle says in verse 27, “And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.”

This teaches us two things about the intercession of the Holy Spirit on our behalf as we pray:

Firstly, the prayers of the Holy Spirit on our behalf are heard by God the Father. The Father understands what the Holy Spirit is communicating to him as he groans. The apostle says that God is the one who searches our hearts. He knows what we are thinking. This is something which is taught at many points in Scripture. The point is this, if God knows what we, as his creatures, are thinking, of course he is able to interpret the groans of the Holy Spirit, the second person of the Trinity.

The second thing we learn about the intercession of the Holy Spirit on our behalf is that it is according to the will of God. The word that is translated “because” in this verse can be translated “that”, and this translation would seem to me to make better sense. So we can translate the verse “And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, **that** the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.”

This is the answer to the problem that was identified by the apostle. The problem with our own prayers is that they are often off target. We often pray for the wrong things, because of selfish reasons, or because of unspiritual thinking. But there is no such problem with the praying that the Holy Spirit does on our behalf. The Holy Spirit, as the third person of the Trinity, is only going to pray for things that are in line with the will of God.

These two things, the fact that the intercession of the Holy Spirit is heard and understood by the Father, and the fact that it is according to the will of God, must mean that the intercession of the Holy Spirit that goes on when we pray is always effective. We know from Scripture that there are two conditions for prayers to be answered. One is that we are heard by God, and the other is that our prayers are according to his will. If these two conditions are fulfilled, then our prayers will be answered positively. John says this very clearly in his first letter, chapter 5 and verses 14 and 15, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us — whatever we ask — we know that we have what we asked of him.” So the prayers of the Holy Spirit on our behalf will be effective, because these prayers are heard by God, and they are according to the will of God.

But we should notice there is one condition: and that is that we are “saints”. The apostle says, “And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes **for the saints** in accordance with God's will.”

Who are the “saints”? The word “saint” means those who are “holy”. What does “holy” mean? The answer is, separated from sin, and made completely clean in God's sight. Who are those who have been separated from sin? The answer is, those who have placed their trust in Christ. Those who have trusted in Christ have had their sins placed upon Jesus, and are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. The apostle says in Colossians chapter 1 and verse 21 and 22,

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation

It is true believers in Christ who are the “saints”, and they alone. It is only they who have the Holy Spirit living inside them. It is only them for whom the Holy Spirit intercedes.

## **Conclusion**

What a wonderful gift to us the Holy Spirit is! As well as bringing us to salvation and empowering us to live the Christian life, he also helps us in our prayer life. He prompts us and motivates us to pray; also, as we pray, he prays as well, bringing acceptable prayers to the Father, that are according to the will of God. Because they are prayers that are according to God's will they will be heard.

What lessons for our lives should we take from this?

First of all, any of us who are not yet Christians should come to Christ for salvation. If you are not a true Christian, your prayers will not be heard. Come to Christ. Ask him to give you eternal life. Trust him for salvation. Then you will have the Holy Spirit, and you will be enabled by God to truly pray.

Secondly, for those of us who are Christians, the lesson is that we should pray. We might sometimes be tempted to think to ourselves, “What good will my poor feeble prayers do? I am not like other believers who are really good at praying. My prayers are so weak and so inadequate. How can they do any good?” The answer is that they can do great good, because as you pray, the Holy Spirit inside you is also praying, and offering acceptable prayers to God. So be encouraged. Devote yourself to prayer, both privately and corporately.

*These are the notes that were prepared for a sermon that was preached on this verse, slightly edited prior to publication. A recording of the actual sermon that was preached may be found at*

*<https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=32617321116>*

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