

Introduction

Let me add my welcome to the ones you have already received. For those of you who are visiting for the first time, I will tell you that I am privileged to be one of the elders of this church and to share in the preaching ministry. I also teach chemistry at the university down the road from here.

As most of you know, we have been preaching through the book of Romans, or Paul's letter to the church at Rome, over the last several months.

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One of our missionaries, Tim Black, spoke last week, so the previous message in the series was two weeks ago when Jeff Highfield spoke on Romans 8:18-25. In this section Paul talks about our future glory and the fact that we have the firstfruits of the Spirit, but he also talks about the groaning of creation and our groaning as we wait eagerly and yet patiently for our adoption as sons and daughters. You probably remember Jeff's opening discussion of family car trips and the eternal question "Are we there yet?", and his challenge to Christ followers to wait with patience for what God has in store for us.

We now turn to the next section of this most challenging and encouraging chapter, which is Romans 8:26-30. In preparing for this message I was somewhat unnerved by the remark of one commentator, who called these verses "some of the most difficult in the entire book," and I confess that I struggled to understand everything that Paul is saying in them. But let us read them together. We will start with verse 22 to give us the context.

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Romans 8:22-30

22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

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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. 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.

28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. 29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

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Prayer

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I have titled this message "God's Purpose for Your Life". This may puzzle some of you who came expecting to hear a sermon about prayer or about God working everything for good, but stick with me. But in case I lose you halfway through, let me give you my take-home message right now: God's purpose for your life is that you become like Jesus Christ. Let me say this again; *God's purpose for your life is that you become like Jesus Christ.*

But before we can get to this conclusion, we need to recognize that the world we live in is in a mess; Paul tells us "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." And it does not take much knowledge of the world to see the truth of Paul's words. We read almost daily of both natural and man-caused groaning; of floods and earthquakes and volcanic eruptions and the threat of climate change, and of bombings by ISIS and others, of a nuclear North Korea and of turmoil in Washington, and of the persecution of Christians around the world. And then there are the personal groanings that we all face or will face; of sickness, of insecurity in our jobs, of the loss of loved ones or of loved ones who are not yet Christ-followers, of trials in

our marriages, or of wanting to be married but not being. Of struggles in raising our children, or our concern for children who are not following the Lord. Now ultimately we know that all these groanings and trials date back to the Fall, but we also know that they are all beyond our power to “fix”. So where does this leave us? It leaves us right where we need to be; 100% dependent on God, working through the Holy Spirit in our lives. Let us turn to what Paul tells us in Romans 8:26ff

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1. The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness.

Verse 26a reads “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.” “In the same way” probably refers back to the Spirit’s work in bring us His firstfruits from verse 23 “we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit”. So Paul is saying “the Holy Spirit brought you into your initial relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and in the same way he now deepens that relationship through helping you in your weakness”

And what is this weakness? I think that it goes back to the reasons for groaning that we just looked at; our sorrow over the sin in the world and our sorrow over our own disappointments and trials. As we consider the state of the world and the state of our own personal world, we are conscious of our own weakness, our own inability to do anything about these real and serious problems. And it is here that the Holy Spirit comes to help us, because sometimes we do not even know how to pray for ourselves, our loved ones, and the world.

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2. We do not know what we ought to pray for.

Paul writes “we do not know what we ought to pray for”. This may or may not be true for you, but I can assure you that for many believers this is the case, and it was true even for Paul himself on some occasions. Writing to the Philippians, Paul says that he does not know how to pray

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Phil 1:21-24 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

And Paul also prayed and was answered “no”

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2 Cor 12:7-9

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

And there are many other examples of people not knowing how to pray or what to pray for.

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Augustine of Hippo (354 - 430) was a playboy in Carthage in present day Tunisia who had a mistress and a son by her. He decided to move to Italy, but his Christian mother Monica prayed that that he would stay with her in Carthage. Her prayers were not answered, and Augustine moved to Rome where he became a Christian under the guidance of Ambrose, bishop of Milan. As Augustine later wrote, “God denied her special request to grant her life-long request.”

Many years ago I was on the chemistry faculty at SUNY Albany, coming up for the renewal of my contract prior to tenure. The university had a spectacular campus,

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and Beverly and I were in a great church. I prayed that my contract would be renewed and that I would then get tenure. God in His wisdom did not answer that prayer the way I wanted, and my contract was not renewed. After an agonizing year of uncertainty God miraculously opened a position for me at a university in a small town I had never heard of in SW Virginia. This was a double blessing, because this turned out to be a much better location for me, and the miraculous way the Lord brought me here gave me a wonderful demonstration of His love for me.

It may be that some of you are wrestling with how to pray. Should you take this job offer or that one? Should you pray for healing or for strength to endure your condition? Both are right and it is not wrong to pray for either, but we long to pray with great faith and we groan as we do not know how to pray. And let us not forget

our Christian brothers and sisters around the world who are in danger because of their faith. Should they stay and pray for protection, or should they pray for a safe escape?

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3. The Spirit himself prays for us

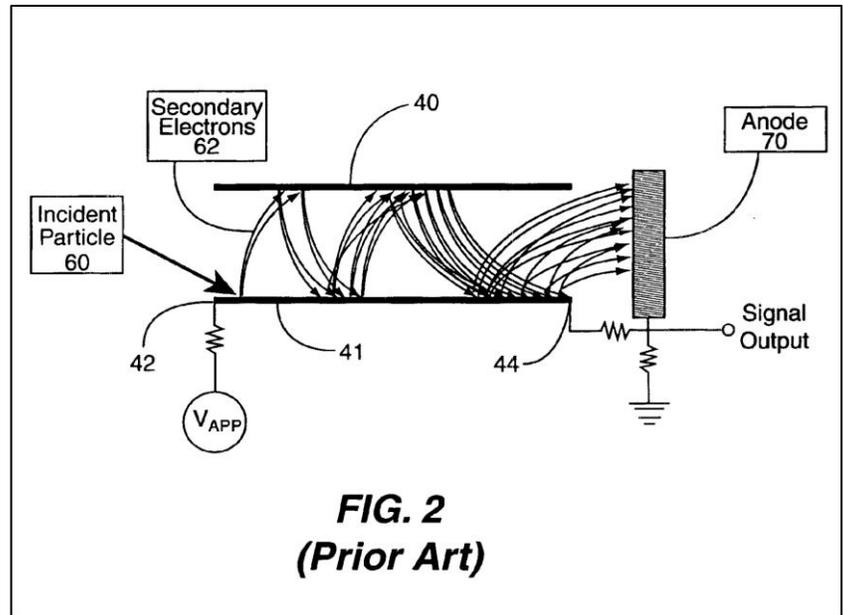
26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

Wow! That is amazing!! Talk about having friends in high places! Here we are, not always knowing exactly what to pray for or how to pray, and God the Holy Spirit is taking our prayers to God himself “with groans that words cannot express”.

How can we understand this? Let me try a scientific analogy. Many scientific instruments rely on detecting very small signals. One example is a thing called a mass spectrometer, which in effect can tell you the molecular weight of individual compounds – very useful information if you are looking for new drugs from plants and want to know what they are. The problem is that the signals from this instrument are very weak, so they have to be amplified by a thing called an electron multiplier.

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I thought you would like to see one! The point is that these things can take a tiny signal and amplify it ten million times or more. So if it helps, you can think of the Holy Spirit doing this to our prayers; the Holy Spirit is our prayer multiplier; he takes our weak little prayers and amplifies them ten million-fold. What a wonderful encouragement to our prayer life!



One example of the power of prayer comes from the life of George Müller

Things looked bleak for the children of George Müller's orphanage at Ashley Downs in England. It was time for breakfast, and there was no food. A small girl whose father was a close friend of Muller was visiting in the home. Müller took her hand and said, "Come and see what our Father will do." In the dining room, long tables were set with empty plates and empty mugs. Not only was there no food in the kitchen, but there was no money in the children home's account.

Müller prayed, "Dear Father, we thank Thee for what Thou art going to give us to eat." Immediately, they heard a knock at the door. When they opened it, there stood the local baker. "Mr. Müller," he said, "I couldn't sleep last night. Somehow I felt you had no bread for breakfast, so I got up at 2 o'clock and baked fresh bread. Here it is." Müller thanked him and gave praise to God.

Soon, a second knock was heard. It was the milkman. His cart had broken down in front of the orphanage. He said he would like to give the children the milk so he could empty the cart and repair it.

God answers prayer.

But there is a second teaching here. "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." Whose groans are they? I do not have the time to present all his arguments, but I agree with John Piper who says "[The Spirit] moves powerfully in our hearts to create groanings – his groanings experienced as our groanings – which are based on two things: 1) a deep desire and ache of heart that Christ be magnified in our lives, and 2) a weakness that leaves us baffled and unknowing as to how this is going to happen or should 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."

So we can pray in words, or we can pray with groans, or with sighs and tears or with unuttered thoughts. Paul's point is that when you groan with Christ-exalting desires but uncertainty how Christ might best be magnified, the Spirit prays for you and brings it to pass.

Do you groan today? Do you feel the sting of sin, or the hurt of a broken relationship? Is there the pain of an empty chair at your supper table, or the crushing defeat of loneliness? Is there the guilt of a conscience that refuses to be quieted, or the disappointment of unfaithfulness? What is the "groan" or "burden" or "weakness" you face today? Remember v 26 "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness."

This truth is illustrated by a hymn by a newspaperman named James Montgomery:

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1 Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Uttered, or unexpressed;
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.

2 Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear;
The upward glancing of an eye
When none but God is near.

3 Prayer is the simplest form of speech
That infant lips can try;
Prayer the sublimest strains that reach
The Majesty on high.

4 Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air;
His watchword at the gates of death;
He enters rest with prayer.

5. The saints in prayer appear as one,
In word, and deed, and mind;
While with the Father and the Son
Sweet fellowship they find.

6 O Thou, by whom we come to God,
The Life, the Truth, the Way,
The path of prayer Thyself hast trod—
Lord, teach us how to pray.

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4. The Spirit intercedes for us in accordance with God's will

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.

"He who searches the heart" must here refer to God himself, and so Paul tells us first of all that God knows the mind of the Spirit, and then that the Spirit intercedes for us in accordance with God's will. In other words, the Holy Spirit not only amplifies our prayers, but also takes them and aligns them with God's will.

There is a delightful true story about a young girl named Amy Carmichael. When she was very young, Amy had been taught that God answers prayer. Amy did not like what she considered to be her plain brown eyes. She wanted her eyes to be blue, like her mother's. So, this little girl asked God if he would change her brown eyes into blue ones. The next day, she confidently peered into the mirror expecting to admire her beautiful new blue eyes. Imagine her disappointment when two brown eyes stared back at her.

How could this be? Her mother had told her God heard and answered prayers. She had prayed for blue eyes and yet... her eyes remained that same hue of brown. It was then that a voice seemed to whisper these words softly to her. "Isn't no an answer?"

Years later, Amy became a missionary in India, and she found herself dyeing her skin to a dark brown in preparation to gain access to temples where there were child prostitutes. Amy's mission was to rescue these children from their horrible circumstances and to help them learn of the One who loves them so deeply, Jesus Christ.

As she prepared to get ready that first time, someone happened to mention her eye color. It was a good thing her eyes were brown instead of blue. The blue eyes would be a dead giveaway that she was a European in disguise. Amy's mind flashed back to that prayer so long ago. At last she understood why God had answered no.

Since the Holy Spirit takes our prayers and aligns them with God's will, this naturally leads us to the question "What is God's will?" Let's take another look at our Scripture:

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Romans 8:28-30

28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. 29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. NIV

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5. God's will is the good of those who love Him

28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Some of us will know this verse in the King James version

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Rom 8:28

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. KJV

But this cannot be correct reading, since "things" do not work; it is God who works. But what a wonderful way he works! In *all things* God works for the good of those who love him, of those who have been called according to His purpose.

I had a telephone call yesterday afternoon while I was working on this sermon that illustrates God's working for good. The call was from a woman who had been in our house group some 35 or so years ago. She is the sister of a man who was arrested and imprisoned on charges that were then dropped after he had spent almost 5 months in prison. She told me that he had committed his life to Christ while in prison, and had become like a pastor to other prisoners, giving out Bibles and sharing his testimony with them. So God worked for the good of this man, calling him to himself and then using his life as a witness to others.

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6. God's purpose is that we might be conformed to the likeness of His Son Jesus Christ

29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son

This is not the time to delve into the mysteries of predestination; that will come in the Fall when we tackle Romans 9-11. But John Stott quotes the words of the commentator C. J. Vaughan

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"Everyone who is eventually saved can only ascribe his salvation, from the first step to the last, to God's favour and act. Human merit must be excluded: and this can only be by tracing back the work far beyond the obedience which evidences, or even the faith which appropriates, salvation; even to an act of spontaneous favour on the part of that God who foresees and foreordains from eternity all his works."

But what is clear is that God's purpose in choosing us, God's purpose in filling us with the Holy Spirit, God's purpose in the Spirit helping us in our weakness, and God's purpose in working for the good of those who love Him are one and the same: that we will be conformed to the likeness of his Son. Wil Pounds writes

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"Though we all share the character of Jesus Christ, God is not stamping out little robots repeatedly. There is an infinite variety of expressions of the beauty of the character of the Lord Jesus Christ. The plan began in eternity

past and doesn't end until eternity in the future. As we grow in Christ there are some characteristics of Christ that will come clearly into focus. They are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

So to repeat: God's purpose in our weakness, God's purpose in our trials, God's purpose in our blessings, is that we might be conformed to the likeness of His Son Jesus Christ.

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7. So that Jesus Christ might be the firstborn among many brothers

29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, *that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

I must have read this verse hundreds of times, but only as I thought about it in preparing this message did it dawn on me that God's purpose is also so that His Son Jesus might have many brothers. To put this another way, God wants Jesus to have a huge family of men and women who have become his brothers and sisters through faith in Him. And so this is a call to us to invite others to join this family, to be witnesses to his love and grace towards us, and to seek their ultimate good through committing their lives to Him.

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8. Encouragements and Challenges

- God hears our prayers. In our weakness and sickness and disappointments and loss and hardship and danger the Holy Spirit is praying *for* us and not against us.
- The Holy Spirit amplifies our prayers
- God the Father hears the prayer of the Spirit. His prayer is *for* you. And it is always heard! Always answered. God does not reject the prayers of God.
- God's works for our good in all things
- God's purpose is that Jesus Christ might have many brothers and sisters
- God's purpose is that we become more and more like His Son Jesus. Are we on board with this?

9. Conclusion

The lovely hymn "May the mind of Christ my Saviour" is actually a prayer that beautifully expresses our desire to become more and more like Jesus. It was one of the hymns that Beverly and I chose for our wedding: here are the words to it. May it be my prayer and your prayer today.

May the mind of Christ my Savior

1 May the mind of Christ my Savior
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and pow'r controlling
All I do and say.

2 May the Word of Christ dwell richly
In my heart from hour to hour,
So that all may see I triumph
Only through His pow'r.

3 May the peace of Christ my Savior
Rule my life in every thing,
That I may be calm to comfort
Sick and sorrowing.

4 May the love of Jesus fill me,
As the waters fill the sea;
Him exalting, self abasing,
This is victory.

5 May I run the race before me,
Strong and brave to face the foe,
Looking only unto Jesus
As I onward go.

6 May His beauty rest upon me
As I seek the lost to win,
And may they forget the channel,
Seeing only Him.