

## Help for the Suffering

### Romans 8:26-27

*"The Spirit helps us in our weakness... the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words"*

**Introduction:** Living in Simi Valley, we know a thing or two about **wind**. I was back in New Hampshire last weekend and experienced a *Nor'easter*, a strong storm that hits the east coast between September and April, causing rough seas, flooding, and wind that knocks out power up and down the coast. It meant my flight was first delayed and then canceled, in preparation for the rain that would fall. However, in Dover, Mark Schwokert and I called it a *Nor'whisper*, since it did not come close to the wind that we experience here in Southern California. If you have lived here for any amount of time in the fall or winter, you have experienced the phenomena: wind that will shake houses, pick up roof shingles and yard furniture, and dry out the freshly watered hillsides, creating the perfect storm for fires. You can almost *feel* or *sense* when that dry wind is coming. Moisture is sucked out of the air and temperatures go in the wrong direction.

Though we know that they will come, and though we know *how* wind is created: by the uneven heating by the sun of the land, which heats quicker than the ocean, causing hot air to rise and leaving a void for cooler air, which is heavier and pushed by nearby high pressure, rushes in to fill the void. This movement of air is what we call **wind**. But where does it come from or go? It has great effect but cannot be seen. It can be harnessed but not created on a large scale. Throughout history, seafarers, farmers, and air travelers are dependent on knowing which way it is blowing, but with all of our advancements in technology, **we cannot be 100% accurate in predictions, nor dictate where it blows.**

It's fascinating that **Jesus Himself** commented on this phenomenon in **John 3:8**:

*"The **wind blows** where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. **So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.**"*

Jesus connects the *mystery* of the wind with the *work of the Holy Spirit*, which is obviously an appropriate picture. There IS an amount of mystery when it comes to the work of the Spirit, but He is also exceptionally powerful and effective. This is the point of the passage this morning, as we'll look at:

***the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of suffering Christians, who have HOPE in a future but still need HELP in the present.***

Before looking at the passage, let's answer a couple of key questions: 1) What is the Trinity and who is the Holy Spirit? 2) What is the ministry that He has in the life of a believer, especially as we've already seen in Romans 8?

**What do we mean when we use the word 'Trinity'?** The church has embraced this doctrine even though one will not find the word itself in the New Testament. The Council of Nicaea (325 A.D) did not come up with it, but rather affirmed it. The whole of Scripture speaks to this reality of the **Godhead** – three persons, one God:

*The doctrine of the Trinity means that there is one God who eternally exists as three distinct Persons — the **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**. Stated differently, God is one in **essence** and three in person. These*

*definitions express three crucial truths: (1) the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct **Persons**, (2) each **Person** is fully God, (3) there is only one God.<sup>1</sup>*

Of course, there is mystery here. But we embrace the mystery as it is laid out in Scripture (see pictorial at the end of the notes). When we talk about the Holy Spirit, then, we are talking about a Person who is in essence God very God, yet distinctly different from the Father and Son.

**What is the ministry of the Holy Spirit?** Romans 8 is exceptionally helpful to answer this question, as almost every sentence fleshes out the work of the unseen yet present Spirit in the life of a believer. For sake of review, let's look His particular ministry:

- The Spirit **sets us free** in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death (8:2)
- The Spirit **helps** us fulfill the just requirement of the law (8:4)
- The Spirit **helps** us set our minds of the things of the Spirit (8:5)
- The Spirit **gives** life and peace (8:6)
- The Spirit **dwells** in every true believer (8:9)
- The Spirit **will raise us** from the dead (8:11)
- The Spirit **empowers** us mortify our sin (8:13)
- The Spirit **leads** the Sons of God (8:14)
- The Spirit **bears witness** and brings assurance that we are adopted children of God (8:15-16)
- The Spirit is a **guarantee** or promise of our full adoption, the redemption of our bodies (8:23)

Often we can undervalue the work of the Spirit since we are unclear about *what He does*, but this list gives a much fuller picture of that, without a focus on the *gifting* that He brings.

Now, before looking at the verses, we remember the **context**. The present life of a believer is one of **suffering** (8:17b), whether that suffering comes from persecution, natural occurrence, others, Satan, disease or disaster. Within that suffering, we will both **wait AND groan**, just like creation (8:20-25), in both hopeful patience and painful reality. We know suffering has a shelf life, but that shelf will certainly be painful, pushing us to the limit of dependency and trust in God and our desire to magnify and worship Christ. If **hope** of a better future reality (8:18) is the remedy we need in the midst of suffering (*our future glory outshines our present suffering by a mile!*), God also knows that we need **HELP in the present. This is where the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit, though mysterious, is invaluable to our ability to trust God and bear up under our suffering.** Let's look at our text for the morning:

**Romans 8:26-27** *"Likewise the **Spirit helps us** in our weakness. For we do not know **what** to pray for as we ought, but the **Spirit himself intercedes** for us with groanings too deep for words.*

*<sup>27</sup> And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the **Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God**"*

### **The Holy Spirit HELPS us in OUR Prayer**

We can often overestimate our own strength. Most of us believe we can take on a massive amount, and by sheer hard work and determination, we can make it happen, accomplish, and conquer. The problem with this mentality is that we often fail to **ask for help, rely on grace, or trust in the strength that God alone supplies.** This is part of the reason why suffering is so valuable. How many of us have been devoid

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-is-the-doctrine-of-the-trinity>

of strength physically with prolonged illness or disease? How many have felt powerless to help our wayward children or grandchildren? Who has felt the sting of rejection or insult that has left us discouraged and unmotivated? We have all felt weakness at some point, where our strength has gone and **INABILITY to solve or move forward overwhelms**.

It is this kind of weakness that Paul addresses here, the kind of weakness brought on by prolonged suffering, leading to groaning as we wait patiently for Christ to make all things new. Notice that Paul describes this **weakness in suffering** as the *inability to know **what** to pray for as we ought*. When suffering hits, our weakness of understanding the will of God or how we are to glorify Christ in the midst of it will come through. We are not sure if we should pray for deliverance or continued strength, or to take us home (see Paul in Philippians 1:21-24). Weakness exposes the fact that we need help. A few considerations about our weaknesses:

1. We know we should pray, but we often don't pray at all or pray in a way that reveals a wrong view of prayer:
  - We can pray too **hastily**, merely running through a list without much thought
  - We can pray presumptuously, for **my will to be done**, rather than God's will (Matt. 6:10)
  - We can pray **selfishly**, for our own ultimate desires:

**James 4:2-3** *"You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, **because you do not ask**. 3 You ask and do not **receive**, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."*

- We can pray **proudly**, as the Pharisees did in comparison to the tax collector (Luke 18:9-11)
  - We can pray with **empty phrases**, with many words (Matt. 6:7)
  - We can pray **ceremoniously**, detached from a heart of worship (Mal. 2:13-16)
2. We have a difficult time separating out our desire for comfort and getting OUT of the pain rather than seeking to magnify Christ in all of life, either by our life or death.
  3. We do not know what to pray since we do not know the **SECRET will of God, though we absolutely should know the REVEALED will of God**. What is the difference between the two?

**Deuteronomy 29:29** *"The **secret** things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are **revealed** belong to us and to our children forever, **that** we may do all the words of this law."*

What is the difference between these two, and how does it affect the way we pray? We can and should pray according to the **revealed will of God**, which comes as we know our God in Scripture, but we will NOT know the **secret will**, that of His eternal decrees and unfolding of future events that He alone knows and determines according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11). What is the difference? Let's start with His REVEALED WILL.

We should pray according to God's will in:

- **Salvation – John 6:40** "For this is the **will of my Father**, that **everyone** who looks on the Son and **believes in him** should have **eternal life**, and I will raise him up on the last day." It is God's

desire that all would reach repentance, a gift that He gives to those He calls (2 Pet. 3:9; Acts 11:18)

- **Sanctification – 1 Thessalonians 4:3** *“For **this is the will of God, your sanctification**: that you abstain from sexual immorality”*
- **Submission – 1 Peter 2:13-15** *“Be **subject** for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, 14 or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. 15 **For this is the will of God**, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people”*
- **Thankful in all circumstances – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18** *“Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; **for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.***
- **Filled with knowledge of His will – Colossians 1:9-10** – *“And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with **the knowledge of his will** in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;*

In praying according to the **will of God**, we understand our propensity to be conformed to this world (Rom. 12:2) and can spend our time foolishly (Eph. 5:15-17). God does NOT want us to be ignorant, foolish, joyless, prayer-less, or thankless.

But what is the **secret will of God**? That is the part of Deuteronomy 29:29 which says are hidden and NOT disclosed to us. We will not know how long things will take (Psalm 13:1-2), why God does not take away our pain even though He has the ability to do so (2 Cor. 12:8-10), or when God will return to make everything right (Matt. 24:36). God does not reveal what career to choose, what specific person to marry, or whether we should move out of the state. God does not tell us what pathway to take to treat our cancer, or how far we should go medically in infertility, or whether to move a loved one into our home for care. This is why we can say that during suffering, for however long it lasts, we **know what God is doing** (accomplishing His will for our good and His glory), but **do not know exactly what He is doing**. This affects our prayer. But He has not left us alone.

The word for **‘HELP’** in Rom. 8:26 is a fantastic compound Greek word that combines the word for “together with”, “over against”, and “to take hold of”. Put together, it has the picture two people carrying a heavy load together. This means that the Spirit is NOT far off or an observer in our groaning, but one that is **present, with us, with deep understanding**. This means that when we feel all alone or isolated during our time of suffering, we have the God of the universe in the Person of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, **helping** lift the heavy load, particularly when we do not know **WHAT to pray**. Sometimes we are so overwhelmed and weak, the words won’t come. But just like a loving mother who knows her child so well she can distinguish the uncomfortable groans to determine severity, or the man who does not need to say anything to their spouse for her to understand his angst, the Spirit knows us inside and out. This is where our help comes from, as the Spirit **intercedes, or petitions on behalf of us to God the Father**.

### **The Holy Spirit INTERCEDES FOR us in Prayer**

If anyone has ever tried to navigate the health care system, you know that it is a good thing to have an advocate or someone to plead on your behalf, both with the doctors and the insurance company. Here

we see that the **Holy Spirit is just that on our behalf**, in our time of suffering and waiting, when we do not know what to pray. But what is this advocacy life:

**Wordless Groaning** – Some who want to see the Holy Spirit primarily or only through the lens of “speaking in tongues” or sign gifts have used 8:26 as evidence that believers can speak in tongues during prayer, our groaning such that mere words are not enough. But this is simply NOT what the text says. In fact, it says that the Spirit **intercedes FOR us in “unutterable” or “wordless groans”**. We groan, as creation, in ways that we cannot put words to. But the Spirit groans in ways that only God understands, in *intra-Trinitarian communion*. This either means that God the Spirit *translates* our groans to be understood, or, as Tom Schreiner argues, *“the Spirit is constantly interceding for us, and we are not conscious of his aid, nor are the groans specified here ours.”*<sup>2</sup> This is similar to the **intercession of Jesus on our behalf** (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1-2), regardless of our prayer. In other words, even in our weakness, groaning, and inability to know **what to pray for**, we have God the Holy Spirit praying for us. **But what is the advantage?**

**According to the Will of God** – We can have assurance that God will **hear the prayer of the Spirit because He always prays according to the will of God**. God searches our heart when our words fail, and knows the mind of the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:11), and the Spirit will be heard, understood, and answered. This means that God is always accomplishing His will, both revealed and hidden, in our lives, and we have the Spirit who helps us in our weakness.

#### Concluding thoughts:

If you are in the midst of suffering, the first thing we must do is remember the **hope we have in the future promises of God in Christ**. But we also must remember we have present **help** in the prayer of the Holy Spirit. We can take comfort that we are not expected to know every aspect of God’s secret will, but we also take stock in the fact that we want to glorify God in EVERY aspect in our lives. So the question is this: *do you pray when you are suffering? Do you pray according to the REVEALED will of God? Do you pray that Christ would be magnified in your suffering?* This is how Paul resolved to pray in the midst of trying to understand God’s will:

**Philippians 1:20b** *“...that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.*

We take comfort in the help of the Holy Spirit, for it won’t be long. God knows, helps, intercedes, and hears our prayer, even when we can’t put it into words.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *“Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary of the NT”*, p. 438

