

THE ROAD OF THE RIGHTEOUS

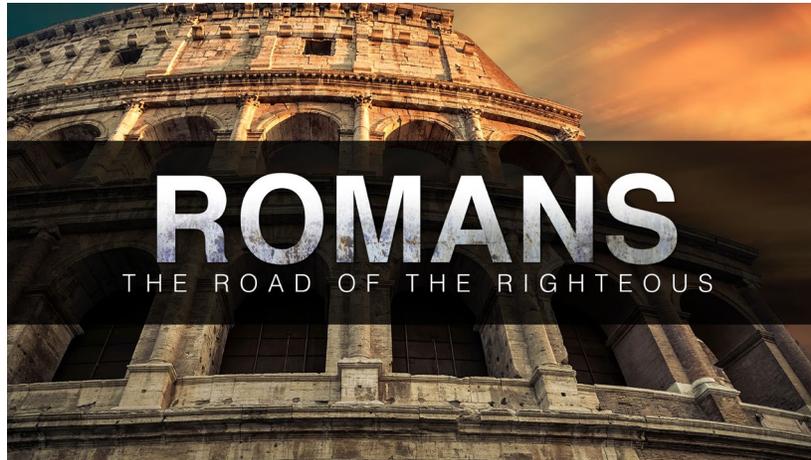
Expositional Study Of Romans

Romans 8:26-27

Written By

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When it comes to praying, the Bible is full of principles we are to actively apply if we desire to be effective in our Christian walks. Here is a sampling:

- Do not be hypocritical. As Jesus says in Matthew 6:6, “but you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.” Hypocrites like to pray public, making people think they are really godly when they are not. Jesus hates this kind of action. When praying, it is far more important for you to be actively engaged in talking with God in private.
- Do not repeat yourself too often with vain repetitions. In Matthew 6:7, our Lord observes: “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.” Pharisees had prayer down pat, saying all the right things over and over again, thinking this robotic speech meant something to God. It does not. He wants prayer to be from your heart. He desires new words not canned words.
- Do not forget that unconfessed sin will adversely affect your prayer life. Isaiah, the great prophet of God, once said, “Behold, the LORD’s hand is not so short that it cannot save; neither is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. [And here is the key] But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God” (Isa. 59:1-2).
- Do remember to pray with a spirit of thanksgiving. Paul talks about this in Philippians 4:6, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

There is no room for grumbling before God. A thankful spirit in prayer shows a heart of someone who trusts in God's absolute sovereign leadership.

- Do remember to have an open line with God and use it frequently. Speaking to the fearful Thessalonians, Paul commanded, "Pray without ceasing," (1 Thess. 5:17). Of course, this does not mean you are on your knees all of the time. It does, however, mean you should be on your knees with your inner man more often than not.

As you can see, there are plenty of directives in Scripture regarding how to pray as a saint. Understanding these concepts is vitally important for adherence will mean the difference between being spiritually effective or non-effective.

But beyond the concept of how to pray, have you ever wondered what happens within the Godhead, the Holy Trinity, as you pray? Paul acquaints us with this important answer in Romans 8:26 through 27. His words are worth quoting, analyzing, and applying.

²⁶ And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; 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*. (Rom. 8:26-27).

These words, of course, part of Paul's contextual argument in Romans 8:18 through 39. Here he develops one main motif:

Stay Hopeful In The Fight With The Flesh (Rom. 8:18-30)

Thus far, Paul has given us three reasons which validate his main premise:

- *Reason #1: Trials Lead To Triumph (Rom. 8:18)*. The afflictions we experience here must be understood in light of the wonder and glory of what awaits us when we see Christ face-to-face. This in and of itself breeds great hope for life in the here and now.
- *Reason #2: Cosmic Degradation Leads To Cosmic Transformation (Rom. 8:19-22)*. The fact that God will one day transform this sin stained world into the paradise it once was also gives the believer hope in the hardness he faces from day-to-day.
- *Reason #3: Personal Consternation Leads to Personal Transformation (Rom. 8:23-25)*. Even though we face personal difficulties which are tied to sin in this life, we, who possess the Holy Spirit, know that one day our redemption will be fully realized as we stand and glory before God. Once more, this instills hope as we make our earthly pilgrimage in a body tainted by sin.

In verses 26 through 27, Paul introduces a somewhat mysterious fourth reason why believers should be hopeful as they wait for eschatological fulfillment of God's divine kingdom plan.

Reason #4: Your Praying Is Buttressed By His Praying (Rom. 8:26-27)

Even though you might identify with Elijah in feeling you are quite alone in your daily fight against the power of the world, the flesh, and the Devil, even though you might erroneously conclude you must be the only righteous person alive as the world embraces moral and spiritual insanity (1 Kings 19:14), God loves you enough to remind you that not only are there other believers who stand courageously for truth (1 Kings 19:15-18), but He has given you, as He promised (John 14:16), His Comforter, His Holy Spirit, to assist you on life's perilous path. As we learn here from the pen of Paul, one of the ways our heavenly resident helps us is in the area of prayer. His presence not only gives us access to power for daily living and victory over sin, it also serves to remind us that no matter how difficult the day is, or how troublesome the trial for our faith, we are never alone. This concept, by itself, should instill much hope in your heart and mind.

Just what is our heavenly visitor up to in our lives in order to increase our hope so we can walk worthy of Jesus before he comes for us? He is, as Paul says, actively working in our prayer lives. Let's dissect how He works in our prayer lives.

Paul's words open our minds to the inner workings of prayer, especially in relation to the holy Trinity:

²⁶ And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words;

The apostle's opening adverbial statement "*And in the same way*" (NASB; NIV), and "*Likewise*" (KJV), which is from *hosautos* (ὡσαύτως . . . it is, by the way, a favorite pivotal word of Paul, 1 Cor. 11:25; 1 Tim. 2:9; 3:8, 11; 5:26; Titus 2:3, 6) links what he is about to say about the Spirit's work in our prayer lives with he has just taught. The point should not be missed: Since we already have three sound reasons why we should have hope in this world stained by sin, this forth concept should also cause hope to germinate and flower in our lives. In relation to this divinely designed hope, which is wedded to the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are acquainted with His divinely ordained job description.

This is most instructive: *The Holy Spirit helps us with our inadequacy* (Rom. 8:26). The Greek word for *helps* is a long one, viz., *synantilambanomai* (συναντιλαμβάνεται). Literally, it is a combination of three words: two prepositions and a verb, viz., "with" (*sun*), "because of" (*anti*), and "to take or receive (*lamvano*). When stapled together it can be loosely translated "to come alongside of an order to assist." Note, as I have said on other occasions, the presence of a preposition wedded to a verb intensifies its meaning. Hence, the presence of two prepositions wedded to a verb makes the word extremely emphatic in Greek. Concerning this beautiful, descriptive word, Kenneth Wuest offers this thought,

The word speaks of the action of a person coming to another's aid by taking hold over against that person, of the load he is carrying. [And note well] The person helping does not take the entire load he is carrying.¹

Pragmatically, this means that when we pray, especially about something which deeply troubles us, the Spirit of God shows up and helps us carry with heavy load. Hence, if you are praying

¹ Kenneth Wuest, *Romans in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 140.

earnestly about a wayward child, a difficult spouse, a debilitating disease, or something which weighs heavy on your soul, please realize you will never carry that load by yourself. When, for instance, you stand grieving over the graveside of a loved one and you articulate to God you do not know how you are going to process, this is when He shows up and grabs the heavy load and helps you carry it to the Father's glory. When your husband deserts you and the children, when you do not see how you will ever see your way clear with his absence, and you cry out to God, this is when the Spirit lovingly steps in and softly says, "Here, child, let me help you with your burden." And since He is here to help us when we pray, what is there to fear? How can we not have abiding hope that all will be well based on His activity when we pray?

To put a finer point on the Spirit's super-abundant help we must see that it is in relation to what Paul calls our *weakness*. Douglas Moo, a Greek Scholar, defines the word in this fashion,

The Spirit joins with us in bearing the burdens imposed by our "weakness." This weakness may be specific—inability in prayer or external sufferings (v. 18)—but is probably general: the "totality of the human condition" (Dunn), the "creatureliness" that characterizes even the child of God in this period of overlap between the old age and the new²

It is true. We know we are morally, spiritually, emotionally, and mentally weak, by nature, and we are weak all of the time, which is denoted by the present tense verb denoting the Spirit who helps us (*συναντιλαμβάνεται*, present middle indicative). He perpetually helps us because we are perpetually weak. Even the strongest among us, the most well-trained, well-disciplined, and best educated must admit that weakness comes with the human packaging.

Thankfully, Paul gives us a clearer understanding of what he means by weakness when he states, "*for we do not know how to pray as we should.*" Here weakness is cognitive and speaks of our utter inability, as finite creatures, to fully understand all of the ups and downs, trials and temptations, and triumphs and tragedies of life. We definitely know *how* to pray. Jesus taught us that much in his Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:9). Conversely, knowing really what to pray, exactly, sometimes (most times?) eludes us because our thinking is so limited, so self-focused, and so easily led to the wrong conclusions about how we perceive life events. Regarding our weakness in this area, I like the way that William Barclay puts it,

First, we cannot pray aright because we cannot foresee the future. We cannot see a year or even an hour ahead; and we may well pray, therefore, to be saved from things which are for our good, and we may well pray for things which would be to our ultimate harm. Second, we cannot pray aright because in any given situation we do not know what is best for us. We are often in the position of children who want something which would be bound only to hurt them; and God is often in the position of parents who have to refuse their children's requests or compel them to do something they do not want to do, because the parents know what is good for them far better than the children themselves.³

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 523.

³ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, 3rd ed. fully rev. & updated., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 132.

While shopping at Costco once when Nathan, my son, was a child, he excitedly informed me that he wanted to take his entire allowance and purchase a *case*, yes you read that right, of *Skittles*. Go big or go home was his life motto at that point. I, as the father, however, knew that a case of *Skittles* would not be in the best interests of his blood-stream or oral hygiene. As you can guess, we did not walk out of the store with any of those candies in our basket.

This is, in a more profound fashion, the way the Spirit is with us. We pray for various things in life, however, if we are honest, we must admit we simply do not understand what God is after in this particular situation. That doesn't keep us from asking for what is on our hearts, but, in reality, our requests cannot possibly take into account God's divine plans and purposes for us.

Take Moses as a case study. Remember what the weather-beaten, sand-blasted, and faithful saint prayed in his old age as he stared at the Promised Land from the mountains of Moab?

²³ And I pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying, ²⁴ 'O Lord GOD, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yours? ²⁵ Please let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon' (Deut. 3).

God, on the other hand, felt and reacted differently.

²⁶ But the LORD was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me. And the LORD said to me, 'Enough from you; do not speak to me of this matter again. ²⁷ Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes westward and northward and southward and eastward, and look at it with your eyes, for you shall not go over this Jordan.

From our limited prayer perspective we wonder why God just did not give Moses a break and allow him in the Promised Land despite his earlier sin of striking the rock twice to miraculously obtain water as opposed to speaking to it (Num. 20:8-12). God, conversely, is all about us following His commands to the letter with no deviation, especially if we are the leader His people look to. God's judgment and discipline of Moses was, therefore, inexorable no matter what Moses said or did. And here we learn that Moses said a lot, as the *Bible Knowledge Commentary* notes,

3:26–29. God **would not listen to** Moses, that is, He would not grant his request. In fact the Hebrew sentence implies that Moses had kept on asking God for permission, and that God became "furious" (an intensive form of '*ābar*') with him (NIV has a milder word, **angry**; cf. 1:37; 4:21). This conversation reveals something of the intimacy of Moses' relationship with God. It also heightens the feeling of tragedy in the experience of a man who devoted his life to fulfilling God's promise for Israel but knew he would never see its completion. But Moses could at least **look at the land** from the peak of Mount **Pisgah**.⁴

⁴Jack S. Deere, "Deuteronomy," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 268.

True, we are counseled, at times, to ask, seek, and knock in prayer (Matt. 7:7), however, with our limited thinking we are sometimes clueless that in some instances we should be quiet and accept what God has decreed. How can we know what we are to do because of this cognitive weakness? That is where the Spirit of God rushes in. He comes in to give us much needed wisdom, insight, and understanding regarding the content of our prayer lives.

Paul is another classic model. Remember how he prayed in 2 Corinthians concerning the eye malady he endured each day?

⁸ Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

⁹ And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ 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 (2 Cor. 12).

Like Moses, Paul repeatedly asked God to do something specific for him, but God never moved a healing finger? Why? Paul came to learn that God used the affliction to teach him about the sufficiency of His great grace for daily living, and it also served to humble the gifted apostle so his pride would not negatively hamstring his ministry. Here is how Paul puts this flash of insight:

⁷ And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me-- to keep me from exalting myself (2 Cor. 12)!

Paul prayed to the best of his ability, but it was the Spirit residing in him who ultimately helped him as he worked through this emotional, painful situation. This is what He does for all of us. He helps us as we pray.

How does the Spirit help? I think we find the answer in the last part of this powerful verse:

²⁶ And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words;

When we like Moses and Paul struggle with tough, trying things in our prayer lives, when we do not understand why God won't answer or why He has answered in a contrary fashion, is when out of love and concern for us He steps in and identifies with the depths of our despair, frustration, fear, and/or anxiety. Our groaning over attempting to live a godly life in a godless world while living in a body with sinful desires, becomes His groaning. He intercedes, constantly, which means He steps in and identifies what we are facing and enduring so that the Father, in turn, is well aware of what is going on in our lives.

And, as we see in the lives of Moses and Paul, His intercession is not static but dynamic, leading quite often to a deeper understanding of God's ways as we pray. Concerning the Spirit's work in this capacity, Richard Foster makes this insightful remark in his book *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*,

The Holy Spirit of God, the third member of the Trinity, himself accompanies us in our prayers. When we stumble over our words, the spirit straightens out the syntax. When we pray with muddy motives, the spirit purifies the stream. When we see through a glass darkly, the spirit adjusts and focuses what we are asking until it corresponds to the will of God.

The point is that we do not have to have everything perfect when we pray. The Spirit reshapes, refines, and reinterprets our feeble, ego driven prayers. We can rest in this work of the Spirit on our behalf. ⁵

What a great way to look at how the Spirit helps us when we pray. Emotionally, He is right there with us, sharing in the depth of our difficulties. When you do not have any words to express what you are going through, He identifies with your plight.

- He understands your dismay at the loss of your job.
- He understands your fear at the latest diagnosis.
- He understands your frustration with your complex work environment.
- He understands the deep sorrow you have over a marriage which is not optimal.
- He understands the loneliness you feel now that your spouse is gone.

But when all is said and done, He is not just there to feel your pain. No, He is there to there to guide your prayer life, to give you wisdom and insight, to deepen your thinking, to give you understanding of the Father's plan and purpose for your life, much like He did with Paul and his thorn in the flesh.

Just to know we are not alone as we battle the world, the flesh, and the Devil is comforting and gives us hope when we need it most. Just to know that our heavenly visitor is with us in a way He understands what we are going through as we wrestle in prayer breeds hope. But there is more as we learn in verse 27:

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*. (Rom. 8:26-27).

God, the Father, of course, is the One who knows what is in our hearts (1 Sam. 16:7; Heb. 4:13). Translated, He knows the depths of everything we are thinking, feeling, and facing. God also knows the mind of the Spirit, and the Spirit knows the mind of the Father (1 Cor. 1:1-16). This omniscient knowledge of the Trinity enables the Spirit to take our weak, sometimes short-sighted prayers and present them to the Father so that, at the end of the day, our prayers will dovetail with the perfect will of God Almighty.

Is this not what occurred when Paul prayed about his thorn in the flesh? Indeed. As he worked through the malady in prayer, the Spirit, I'm sure, presented those heartfelt prayers to the Father. The Father, in turn, working with the Spirit, and of course, the Lord Jesus, enabled Paul to eventually understand that their perfect will had everything to do with using this disease to accomplish loftier goals in the apostle's eventful and influential life.

Personally, Liz and I understand and embrace this work of the Spirit, especially as we deal with her mother's failing heart and her step-father's dementia. When my mother-in-law asked me this week, "Why am I still here? Why won't God let me die?" In my humanness I do not have

⁵Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 98-99.

the answer. I do know, however, I can approach God's throne. I can ask for healing. I can ask for mercy. I can ask for His perfect provision. I can ask for many things, and we do, but we know that our "weak" prayers will be taken by the Spirit and laid out before the Father. And somewhere down the road of life, God's perfect will will be displayed in the complexity of this personal life issue. When this occurs, the insight and understanding will be sweet for we will know God has spoken in light of what we have prayed.

I do not know what you are praying for right now, but you do. Please, do not lose hope as you pray for the Spirit of God is with you and He is going before you into the presence of the Father, as it were. Together, the Trinity is arduously working to make sure your prayers line up with God's perfect will. When that alignment occurs you will have great peace, but in the meantime, may the reality of the Spirit's work in you before the Father give you much hope.