

4. Hope in Prayer (8:26–27)

8:26 Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

8:27 Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

“Likewise” (ὡσαύτως— *hosautos*) is literally “in the same way,” that is, in the same way that hope sustains us while we await our redemption (8:24–25), so does the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit sustains us by helping us bear the burden of our weakness as we live in the frailty of our “already/not yet” existence (see discussion on 8:18–25).

The word “help” in Greek (συναντιλαμβάνομαι) means to take part in a burden, or to aid (Hodge, 278, cf. Lk. 10:40). The Holy Spirit, whom Jesus called the Comforter, the “Helper whom He would send,” (Jn. 15:26; 16:7), takes upon Himself a portion of our sorrows (i.e. weaknesses, infirmities), as it were, to relieve us of the pressure (Hodge, 278).

The particular way that the Spirit helps us is by guiding our prayer since we often don’t know *what* we should pray (i.e. the content of our prayer), what is really best for us, or what the will of God is. Our inability to “know what we should pray for” is an example of the weakness that we experience living in this stage of redemptive history (8:26a). Paul doesn’t suggest a way that we can overcome our inability; instead, he tells us that the Spirit will overcome this weakness for us.

Heathen philosophers saw human ignorance as a reason why men ought not to pray. But “instead of ignorance putting a seal upon our lips and leaving our hearts to break, the Spirit gives our desires a language heard and understood by God” (Hodge, 278).

The part in verse 26, “the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” has received several different interpretations. Some see this as a reference to speaking in tongues, but this makes no sense in the context at all. First, what is spoken of here is a promise for all believers; the gift of tongues is not (1 Cor. 12:30). Secondly, “tongues” have a different purpose (1 Cor. 14:22). Thirdly, “tongues” are known languages (Acts 2:4–11) that were spoken audibly. By contrast, the word “groanings” in Greek has the idea of “without vocalization” or “silent.” And lastly, there is no mention of spiritual gifts in chapter 8. It is better to understand this as a reference to the *Spirit’s* groanings (His silent intercession) on our behalf. We don’t know what to pray (8:26) so He acts as our advocate and takes over when our own words, desires, aspirations, or knowledge fail us (see notes on 8:23). Both believers and creation groan because of their present state of imperfection and longing for redemption (8:22, 23; cf. 2 Cor. 5:2); the Holy Spirit identifies with us; He shares in the longing of our redemption; He groans with us and intercedes for us (Stott, 245), turning sighs into prayers.¹

Verse 27 clarifies verse 26. We don’t know what to pray (8:26), but the Holy Spirit overcomes our handicap in prayer by interceding for us. Because the Spirit’s mind is always in agreement with the Father, He always prays according to the will of the Father. Because God searches our heart (8:27a; Jer.

17:10; Psa. 139; 7:9; Rev. 2:23) and knows the Spirit's mind, our heart's longings will be heard by God and God will respond according to His perfect will. Knowing this fortifies us while we await the redemption of our bodies.

5. The New Knowledge (8:28–30)

In verses 28–30 Paul sweeps over the whole plan of God's redemptive purposes from eternity past to an eternity yet to come. He focuses on two arguments that show that even though we presently groan we are secure in our salvation. (1) We are secure because the process of salvation which involves our glorification is pre-ordained by God (8:28–30). (2) We are secure because our lives rest in the love of God (8:31–39).

8:28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

We don't know what to pray for but we do know that God works for the good of His people.

By God's grace, all things in the lives of believers work together for good. "All things" include those things we normally call "bad" things. In the context alone, some of the things mentioned that work for "good" are suffering (8:17, 18), tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and sword (8:35). In other words, Paul is not saying that God turns all bad situations into happy ones. Rather, he is saying that all things work toward the final goal—our glorification.

**29 For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;
30 and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.**

We are foreknown

The idea of *selection* is present in the word foreknowledge. As Murray states, "Many times in Scripture 'know' has a pregnant meaning which goes beyond that of mere cognition. It is used in a sense practically synonymous with 'love,' to set regard upon, to know with peculiar interest, delight, affection, and action" (cf. Gen. 18:19; Exod. 2:25; Psalm 1:6; 144:3; Jer. 1:5; Amos 3:2; Hosea 13:5; Matt. 7:23; 1 Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9; II Tim. 2:19; 1 John 3:1; Murray, 317). "Thus, to foreknow is to forelove. That God foreknew us is but another way of saying that He set his gracious and merciful regard upon us, that He knew us from eternity past with a sovereign and distinguishing delight" (Sam Storms). When verse 29 says, "those whom He foreknew," it means that God saw fallen humanity and then fixed His mind on those whom He predestined for salvation.

Some think that foreknowledge means merely that God knows who will believe and that this is the basis of whom He predestines. This makes little sense. If people believe prior to being predestined, why would they need to be predestined at all? Furthermore, if "foreknew" only meant that God knows who would be saved, the question of where faith comes from still remains. The only biblical answer is that faith is generated by God (cf. Jn. 3:3–8; 6:44, 45, 65; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29; I Pet. 1:2). Even in the present

context, God is the active agent in our salvation, not man. God predestines, God justifies, and God glorifies. Lastly, if the future can be seen then it must be determined. If it is not God that determines the future, who or what does?

We are predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son

If something is predestined, it is determined in the mind of God to come to pass (Acts 4:28; Eph. 1:5, 11). When God selected those He would save, we call it foreknowledge. Then when He causes those who are selected to come to faith and arrive at an appointed end (conformity to the image of His Son), we call it predestination. “This is just another way of saying what Romans 8:28 says in the words ‘called according to His purpose’ . . . according to God’s purpose means according to the goal of God’s predestination. In other words, God did not call us without a specific aim or purpose in mind. He had a ‘destiny’ in mind for us and He called us according to [that] purpose” (Piper, *Future Grace*, 126). And that purpose is spelled out in verse 28; namely, that we are “conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren.” We will be like Jesus to glorify Him.

Just as we bear the likeness of Adam (cf. Gen. 5:3; Ro. 5), so shall we bear the likeness of our glorified Lord (1 Cor. 15:49; Phi. 3:21; I Jn. 3:2). We shall experience His sufferings, be conformed to His character, develop His values, and share His destiny. The image (eikon—εἰκών) of God in man (Gen. 1:26–28) that has been marred by sin will be restored when it is conformed into the image (eikon—εἰκών) of Christ—the perfect image bearer of God. This is the goal of our salvation (I Cor. 15:49; Phil. 3:21; I Jn. 3:2).

In the middle of verse 29 there is a common Greek idiom that indicates purpose (“so that”—εἰς τὸ εἶναι eis to einai RWP). The purpose behind each person’s salvation is that Christ “might be the first born among many brethren.” “First born” can literally mean the first one born, or it can be first in order, but here it refers to priority, supremacy, one who has a prominent position, or is the head, the premier one of a class (cf. Col. 1:15, 18; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:5). Jesus *is* the supreme one over a whole brotherhood of people who are predestined to be conformed to His likeness; He is head over the countless multitudes who have been made sons of God through Him.

So first we must notice that our glorification is said to consist of conformity to the image of the Son. Of course, our conformity to Christ is in relation to conformity to His body (Phil. 3:21), not to His image as the eternal and only-begotten Son. This is the highest end conceivable for creation. . . . “the highest end conceivable not only by men but also by God Himself. God Himself could not contemplate or determine a higher destiny for his creatures” (Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol 2, Systematic Theology*, 316).

But there is also a final end that is more glorious than this. The supreme glory of God will be manifested in the glorifying of the Son as the Preeminent One! We are not just predestined for our happiness, but through our glorification the preeminence of Christ will be displayed to all creation for all eternity.

What is amazing is that though He will be supreme, we will be part of the family of God and will be bestowed with such dignity that He will call us brethren (cf. Heb. 2:11). Our glory is only enhanced by

the relationship we hold to Him. As Murray says, the fact that we will be called “brethren” “is the deepest mystery of community. . . This means that the preeminence of the Son as the firstborn carries with it a correlative eminence of the children of God. The unique dignity of the Son enhances the dignity bestowed upon the many sons who are brought to glory. Hebrews 2:11: ‘For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren’” (Murray, *ibid*, 316, 317).

We are called

Paul continues to explain the unbroken chain of God’s saving purposes for us. Those whom God predestined He also called. To be called speaks of more than an invitation. It is the act of God whereby men are brought to salvation (Ro. 9:12; Eph. 4:4; I Thess. 2:12). All whom God calls are saved.

“We deny ourselves such deep and wonderful assurances when we do not embrace the doctrine of God's sovereign, effectual call. There is such strength that comes into the walk of a Christian when he knows how it is that he came to be a beneficiary of this incomparable promise. And as though it were not enough to reassure us that we became beneficiaries of this promise by God's effectual call, Paul adds the words, “according to His purpose.” All things work together for good to those who love God, to those that are called according to His purpose.” (sermon by John Piper, Ro 8:28-30, October 13, 1985 - John Piper. © Desiring God. Website: desiringGod.org)

We are justified and will be glorified

Those whom He called He also justified, and of course, God will bring the whole process to completion when the believer is glorified. The process that leads to our glorification is so certain that Paul uses past tense verbs to describe future events (like the prophetic past tense in Hebrew). He sees it as history before it occurs. There is no need for a believer to worry about his final destiny. In God’s eyes our complete glorification has already happened. All is secure in the hands of God who will not fail to complete the good work which He began.

We thus see how in the final realization of the goal of sanctification, there is exemplified and vindicated to the fullest extent, an extent that staggers our thought by reason of its stupendous reality, the truth inscribed upon the whole process of redemption, from its inception of the electing grace of the Father (cf. Eph. 1:4; Ro. 8:29) to its consummation in the adoption (cf. Ro. 8:23; Eph. 1:5), that Christ in all His offices of Redeemer is never to be conceived of apart from the church, and the church is not to be conceived of apart from Christ. . . This is the goal of sanctification; this is the hope it enshrines, and thereby its demands upon us are invested with sanctions of surpassing glory (Murray, *ibid*, 317).

NOTE 1. “SIGHING” in ROMANS 8

Schneider in TDNT VII on pages 600 and 603 explains how the term “sigh” is used in the Bible. In the OT (LXX) the verb in its various compounds speaks of the sighing in childbirth, in mortal conflict, for the dead, for personal suffering, and over the affliction at God’s judgment. In particular it expresses a deep

distress of spirit. However, in Hebrews 13:17, leaders are told to do their task with joy and not sighing. In James 5:9 Christians are to order their relationships with each other so that they have no cause of sighing against one another. And in Mark 7:34, in the story of the curing of the deaf mute, it says that Jesus sighed and then healed the man. In the last three instances the sighing is more of a sigh of grief or complaint or, in Jesus' case, it is used of His deep emotional involvement.

Then on pages 601–602 he summarizes the “groaning” in Romans 8:22–27. He states:

In Romans 8:22–27 the apostle speaks of a triple sighing, that of all creation, that of Christians and that of the Spirit. This sequence is a crescendo. In verse 22 Paul declares that all creation up to this present sighs together and with pain awaits regeneration. The reason for the sighing is that through the fall of Adam creation is subject to bondage (v. 20). It waits with longing for the day when the glory of the children of God will be manifested. But Christians sigh too, v. 23. To be sure, their situation differs from that of the rest of creation. For they are already a new creation in Christ and as first-fruits of eschatological being they possess the Spirit. Yet their body is still subject to corruption. Because they wait for the redemption of their body, namely, the transforming of their earthly body into the body of glory, they sigh. To the sighing of creation and the children of God there then corresponds the sighing of the Spirit, v. 26f. Since the reference is not to something which takes place in us, the apostle cannot be thinking of the sighing of Christians in prayer. He is referring rather to times when we are unable to pray, when because of our “weakness” we do not know what we ought to pray for. . . What he is saying is rather that the Spirit acts in our place and intercedes for us, performing the function of a Paraclete and helping us in our weakness in prayer. The process which Paul has in view is thus a process in the heavenly and divine sphere. Hence the στεναγμοὶ ἀλαλήτοι [groanings too deep for words] (v.26) are not unspoken, wordless sighs but sighs which cannot be grasped in words, like the ἄρρητα ῥήματα [inexpressible words] of 2 Corinthians 12:4. But God understands the language of the Spirit, “because He intercedes for the saints in a way which corresponds to the will of God,” v. 27.