

The Holy Spirit, Our Help in Prayer

Romans 8:26-27

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“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.”²⁷ 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.” – Romans 8:26-27, ESV

How can we wait patiently in hope in the midst of our struggles in this life? We “groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Yet we also “wait for it with patience.” How?

How can we suffer with Christ in hope and with patience when sometimes the suffering is overwhelming? We could quickly and easily give the proper Christian answer, “We pray, of course. When we suffer and life is difficult or waiting is hard, we pray.” And, of course, we do. But prayer is hard in these times, isn’t it?

If it’s hard to have hope and patience, it’s even harder when we can’t really seem to pray. Sometimes we’re just not sure how we can pray or what we should pray or we have a deep longing that we cannot express in words.

I. The Spirit Helps Us in Our Weakness

Paul’s answer is found in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit helps us in our weakness.

When we are weak, He is strong. In fact, when Paul was struggling with his “thorn in the flesh” in 2 Cor. 12, God’s answer to him was, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:9)

How does that work? Why does God work that way?

The word used here for the help of the Holy Spirit is a rare word, used only one other time in the New Testament. It literally means “to take hold of opposite together” and it pictures someone who comes alongside to help carry a load.

If you see me struggling with something too heavy for me to carry alone and you come to me to take the other end (the opposite end) and help me carry it, you’re doing this kind of helping that the Holy Spirit is said to do for us in our weakness.

The other place where this word is used in the New Testament is in Luke 10:40, when Martha asks Jesus, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve all alone. Tell her to help me.” Jesus and the disciples had stopped by Mary and Martha’s house unexpectedly and Martha was busy preparing a meal for them. It’s a lot of work to prepare a meal for 13 grown men, and Martha was left in the kitchen working all alone. She wanted Mary to come into the kitchen and help her, to come alongside her and carry the load of meal preparation with her.

Sometimes the burdens of this life are too heavy for us to bear:

- Some of you have adult children who are unbelievers or who are living in open rebellion against the Lord. That’s a load too heavy to carry by yourself.
- Some of you have had to deal with a life-threatening diagnosis given to someone you love dearly. That’s a load too heavy to carry by yourself.
- Many of us face temptations that are too heavy for us to face and overcome alone.

We are weak. We are not meant to go it alone and handle it ourselves. God gives us His Holy Spirit to be our helper in our weakness. Even when we are too weak to know how to pray.

I love the fact that Paul fully identifies himself with the Romans in their weakness. He doesn’t say, “The Spirit helps you in your weakness. For you do not know what to pray for as you ought . . .” No, even the Apostle Paul himself, so gifted with knowledge and insight into the will of God, was weak and did not always know how to pray, what to pray for.

Oh, sure, the Apostle Paul knew well how he should pray, in a formal and technical sense. He knew right and Biblical patterns of prayer and in the Book of Ephesians he shows us how to pray through his own prayers in Ephesians 1:15-23 and in Ephesians 3:14-19. When we get into our study of Ephesians in the fall, we’ll examine these prayers and seek to learn Paul’s pattern for prayer.

But knowing a good pattern for prayer and even praying well and faithfully as a normal pattern of life is far different from knowing what to pray for in a particular situation, especially an overwhelming one where we need the Spirit’s come-alongside help.

Sometimes we just don’t know what to pray for. We don’t know all things like God does. We don’t have perfect wisdom like God does. We don’t have pure and holy motives, like God does.

In this weakness, the Spirit helps us. The Spirit actually intercedes for us.

II. The Spirit Intercedes

“the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words”

Like the word for “helps” earlier in the verse, the word for “intercedes” here is rare. In fact, this is the only place where it is used in the New Testament. Of course, the verb “intercedes” and the concept of intercession are used elsewhere in the Bible, but this is the only place where this rare and intense form of the word for intercedes is used. I say it’s an intense form of the verb because Paul has added the prefix *huper* or *hyper-* to a normal verb for intercedes.

So, we could literally understand what Paul is saying here as “The Spirit himself hyper-intercedes or super-intercedes for us.” This is intercession that goes above and beyond. In fact, it literally goes beyond words, “with groanings too deep for words.”

The Spirit is our intercessor in all of our prayers, whether they are expressed in words or not. Later in verse 34, Paul will talk about how Jesus intercedes for us. So, the Bible gives us strong encouragement in prayer as we know that both the Spirit and the Son intercede for us. Jesus sits at God’s right hand in heaven, where Hebrews says “he ever lives to make intercession for us.” (Heb. 7:25) The Spirit dwells in us, making intercession from within us. With these two strong intercessors always praying for us, we can know that we have a sure and strong support in times of trouble and we cannot be lost.

But in this case, the Spirit’s intercession is hyper-intercession that goes beyond words, expressed in groanings. Paul has already spoken of the groaning of creation in verse 22, as it longs for freedom from its bondage to corruption. He has also spoken of our own groaning, the inward groaning of believers as we wait for our full redemption. Now he adds a third and unexpected groaning, the groaning of the Holy Spirit.

We can understand why the creation would groan; it is cursed and subjected to futility or frustration. We can understand why we groan; we have the firstfruits of the Spirit but we also have indwelling weakness and sin that are crippling at times and we live in bodies subject to weakness and sickness and death. But why would the Spirit groan?

Paul’s language is so unexpected and is such a shocking thing to say about God the Holy Spirit that many commentators have tried to dodge the full sense of what Paul is saying. They say that, even though Paul describes the Spirit as groaning, he’s really talking about our groaning. But Paul has already spoken about our groaning in verse 23. Here he is clearly moving from our groaning to the groaning of the Spirit.

Now the Spirit is not subject to weakness or frustration or sin or bondage. He is God, after all. But in Ephesians 4:30, Paul writes, “do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” God loves us, really and truly. That means that God

earnestly desires what is best for us and is grieved by our sin, rebellion and bondage to corruption.

Some people act like God has no emotions, but that's not the language of the Bible. Jesus wept over Jerusalem and wept at the death of Lazarus, being grieved both by sinful rebellion and by the curse of death. Now Jesus is fully human, and these tears do reflect His humanity, but His humanity is not divided from His divinity.

In Hosea 11:8, God is grieving over the sin of Israel and says,

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
 How can I hand you over, O Israel?
 How can I make you like Admah?
 How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
 My heart recoils within me;
 my compassion grows warm and tender. (ESV)

God created our emotions as part of His image in us, and we yearn and long and grieve as a reflection of His very own yearning, longing and grieving. Of course, God is not frustrated or helpless or a victim, as we often are. He is God Almighty.

But the Holy Spirit who dwells in us sympathizes with our struggles and longs to see us fully and finally redeemed, and the Holy Spirit who dwells in us intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words, or more literally with wordless groanings.

The Spirit's wordless groanings do take place within us, as He dwells in us. So, the wordless groaning Paul speaks of may often be uttered by our mouths as literal groaning. When we can't find the words and are feeling a deep longing within our hearts, an ache that is God-given and God-honoring but which we cannot express intelligently, this is the time when we need the intercession of the Holy Spirit the most and this is when the Holy Spirit helps us the most, with hyper-intercession beyond words.

III. He Who Searches Hearts

But how does such wordless intercession even work? After all, if even the Holy Spirit does not put our prayer into words, how does God the Father hear and respond?

“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.”

Just because there are no words doesn't mean that God doesn't hear or that the prayer is not being offered up according to the will of God. If God searches the hearts of people and knows our thoughts, surely He knows well the mind of His own Holy Spirit, right?

Consider how David prays in Psalm 139:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me!
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from afar.
 You search out my path and my lying down
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.

God knows what we're going to say before we say it; in fact, He knows it before we do because He knows our thoughts better than we do ourselves. Nothing is hidden from Him.

The Spirit gives us the right and holy longings of our hearts. He gives us the desires that come from Him and are offered up to God in prayer, whether spoken or unspoken.

Of course, sometimes we don't pray rightly. We pray according to our own foolish and selfish will and not according to the will of God. But even then the Holy Spirit intercedes for us according to God's will.

Carolyn Nystrom and J.I. Packer give us this advice in their book on prayer: "Don't fret; just pray. God fixes our prayers on the way up! If he does not answer the prayer we made, he will answer the prayer we should have made. That is all anyone needs to know."

Application:

So, what's our application? If we don't even need words and if we can trust the Holy Spirit to fix our prayers on the way up, then why even pray?

Well, on one level, we need to pray because we **need** to pray.

One of my favorite movies is *Shadowlands*, which tells the beautiful and painful love story of C.S. Lewis and his wife, Joy Davidman Lewis. If you're not familiar with the story, Lewis married his wife, Joy, after a long friendship while she was in the hospital with cancer. After some treatments, his wife's cancer goes into remission for a little while.

During one great scene in the movie, one of Lewis' friends, Harry, encourages him that his prayers are working, to which he responds:

“That's not why I pray, Harry. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God, it changes me.”

But we also pray because God, in His gracious love for us, really does use our prayers. God ordains the means as well as the ends. In other words, God's will includes how He will accomplish what He wants to accomplish, and one of the main things He chooses to use is our prayers.

James gives us stirring and true advice on prayer in James 5:13-20 –

¹³ Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

¹⁹ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (ESV)

Here James says that prayer can save the sick, can bring forgiveness of sins, can bring healing and can even bring a sinner back from his wandering. So, don't stop praying!

Paul's teaching about the intercessory help of the Holy Spirit should not discourage us from praying but should be a great encouragement to pray. Think about how wonderful God is to us in prayer:

1. God is pleased to teach us how to pray in His word, giving us instruction about prayer and model prayers to guide us.
2. God is pleased to give us His Holy Spirit, who gives us the desire to pray and the ability to pray rightly.
3. The Holy Spirit helps us when we are weak and intercedes for us according to the will of God.
4. God the Son, Jesus Christ our Redeemer, sits at God's right hand ever living to make intercession for us.

5. God uses our prayers – which He has taught us, which His Holy Spirit has prompted in us, which His Holy Spirit has offered up for us, which His Son has received and combined with His own – to accomplish His holy will. He could choose to work without our prayers, but He chooses to use them instead.
6. AND finally, God uses our prayers to shape our hearts to be more like His heart, our desires to be more like His desires, and our lives to be more filled with His life.

So, as Jesus taught His disciples in Luke 18:1, we ought always to pray and never lose heart. We struggle. We are weak. We don't know what to pray for as we should. We can't find the words. But that's okay. That's exactly when the Holy Spirit draws close, carries the load and groans in super-intercession for us.