

MBC – 2/20/2022 – Pastor Doug Thompson
“*The Spirit Who Helps Our Weakness*”
Romans 8:26-27

Last Lord’s day we saw in James ch.5, that we are to *pray* in every situation for ourselves, and for each other: we *pray* when we are suffering, we *pray* when we are rejoicing, we *pray* when we are weak and sick, we *pray* when we are struggling with sin. We do this everyday, all week long – don’t we? I know you do. Several times this week I was talking with someone face-to-face or on the phone, and we stopped and prayed.

And especially, we do that when gather together, as a family, to worship our God. Listen as I read the words to that hymn we sing that I love so much. It’s very serious—

Brethren we have met to worship and adore the Lord our God;
Will you *pray* with all your power, while we try to preach the Word?
All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down;
Brethren, *pray*, and holy manna will be showered all around.

Brethren, see poor sinners round you slumbering on the brink of woe;
Death is coming, hell is moving can you bear to let them go?
See our fathers and our mothers and our children sinking down;
Brethren, *pray*, and holy manna will be showered all around.

Sisters, will you join and help us? Moses’ sister aided him;
Will you help the trembling mourners who are struggling hard with sin?
Tell them all about the Savior tell them that He will be found;
Sisters, *pray*, and holy manna will be showered all around.

Let us love our God supremely, let us love each other too;
Let us love and *pray* for sinners till our God makes all things new.
Then He’ll call us home to heaven, at His table we’ll sit down;
Christ will gird Himself and serve us with sweet manna all around.

When we worship God together, like that, bathing everything we do in prayer – the devil and his demons tremble! Nothing can stop the church of Christ when we pray like that.

I will never forget what I heard as a baby Christian: “Prayer is not preparation for the battle – prayer *is* the battle.” So we should expect it: that when we commit to pray, all hell will come against us, to distract us and confuse us and cause us to doubt what we are asking – to cause us to doubt if God is even listening. I want us to look at a passage this morning that promises help from heaven when we pray. But before we do, will “*you pray with all your power, while I try to preach the Word?*” (Pray)

- Romans 8:18–27 ¹⁸For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³And not only

the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. ²⁶Likewise 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. ²⁷And 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.

I want you to look at v.26: Paul doesn't say that the Spirit helps our weaknesses, plural, he says *weakness*. I.e., Weakness is our human condition. It's where we live, this side of heaven. We don't just have lapses of weakness – weakness pervades our lives. All of our lives—

- We are *physically* weak: we're not as strong or as healthy as we wish we were. We're *mentally* weak: we don't think as clearly as we should, we struggle for words, and we struggle for wisdom. We are *emotionally* weak: we like to think that we're pretty stable, pretty chill, and then the pressure comes, and we have meltdowns and breakdowns and panic attacks.

We tend to think that the Apostle Paul was a spiritual super-hero and bullets bounced off his chest, but he was as weak as you and me—

- 1 Corinthians 2:3 [He said to the Corinthians]: ³And I was with you in *weakness* and in fear and much trembling.
- 2 Corinthians 10:10 [they said about him:] “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.”

But Paul *accepted* his all-pervasive weaknesses—

- 2 Corinthians 11:30 ³⁰If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.
- 1 Corinthians 9:22 ²²To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.

He figured if he was stuck with being weak he might as well turn it into ministry!

But you know where we're going with all of this: weakness is a good thing, the very best thing if we can say with Paul, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me!” Because—

“*The Spirit helps us in our weakness!*” Not when we're at the top of our game, bursting with self-confidence – and of course, that's when we don't pray! No, it's when we're out of cards, busted. Groaning and groveling. That's when the Spirit of God rushes to our side with comfort and power.

- The word for “help” here is the same word Martha used when she asked Jesus to make Mary come and *help* her get dinner ready!

*So let me talk to you: This means that God is not *against* you in your weakness. God is *for* you. He sends His Holy Spirit to be *with you* in your weakness, right *beside you* in your weakness. That's what *Paraclete* means, right – One who comes alongside. I think sometimes we think of the Holy Spirit as a

spy who searches out our sins and reports back to God. No, when He finds you weak and struggling, He helps you, and then He goes to the Father *for* you.

So let's see how He does it—

I. We groan in our weakness.

Let's put our passage in context—In vv.18-25, Paul is describing the contrast between our present suffering and our future glory. The two aren't to be compared, are they? Our future glory far surpasses our present suffering. But for now, we suffer – we *groan*.

- Now Paul isn't talking here about the everyday suffering that's common to every person. We all groan because of the consequences of Adam's sin. Christians and non-Christians lose their homes in California fires. Christians and non-Christians get COVID. We all groan over our aches and pains; and Alzheimer's and arthritis.

But there is a huge difference between the world's groaning and ours: the world groans on its way to death, but we groan on the way to *life*. Jesus is making all things new, and when He returns, God will birth a new creation – so our groanings now don't compare with the *glory* to come! And all of creation groans with us for that day—

- Romans 8:22–23 ²²For we know that the whole creation has been *groaning* together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, *groan inwardly* as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Creation groans for the same reason that God's children groan, because we aren't completely saved yet! Our souls are redeemed, but not our bodies – and creation groans under the curse. And it won't get its *extreme makeover* until we get ours. So until that day we all groan.

- But Christians groan for another reason: look at what Paul says in v.23: “*we ourselves who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly.*”

We groan because we have a piece of heaven in our hearts, and we want more! Lord bring us to Beulah Land! The Holy Spirit in you is the down payment on the glory to come, and that's a bittersweet thing: We've tasted and seen that the Lord is good, but we cry out with the Psalmist “*O Lord-- how long?*” Don't you literally groan sometimes? I do. It's not just my sore shoulder – it's because my heart is in heaven, but my body's in *Middletown!*

But right in the middle of our groanings and our weakness – here's the promise in v.26: that the Holy Spirit is *for* us, *with* us and *in* us to help us in our weakness while we wait for heaven. Praise God!

- The word here for *help* is so good. It's a long Gk. word: *sunantilambanomai*. The root is *lambano* – to take hold of, and then it has two prefixes in front: *sun* = together with, and *anti* = facing. So it's the picture of you trying to move a heavy log. Along comes a strong friend who takes hold of the other end of that log – facing you – and helps you move it. That's what the Holy Spirit does for us when we are weak and struggling: He comes along and grabs an end. He helps our weakness and bears our burden.

What is more amazing than knowing that God the Holy Spirit wants to help you in your weakness? He doesn't want you to bear your burdens alone. He doesn't expect you to bear them alone. And the specific weakness the Spirit helps us with here is our **prayer life**—

II. We do not know what to pray for.

- Romans 8:26 . . . For we do not know what to pray for as we ought. . .

Isn't that where you really sense your weakness? When we need God's help the most, that's when we don't know how to pray as we should. We feel like we're frantically dialing 911 and the line is busy! God invites us to come into His presence, He extends His scepter – He says, "Ask, seek, and knock, and I will answer!" and our minds go blank. we babble and stammer and don't know what to say!

- I heard about a well-known speaker who was at a huge conference. He was asked to pray before the next speaker came up and he was so tired that he said, "Heavenly Father, bless this food to our bodies, and our bodies for Your use. . ."
- And this is a true story from my seminary days: a guy noticed the student next to him had fallen asleep in the middle of a lecture, so he shook him, and whispered, "The prof just asked you to close in prayer!" So the guy stands up, "Uh Father, thank you for this class, and for the riches from Your Word" – and the whole class is staring!
- John Bunyan spent 12 years in prison for preaching the Gospel. You would think that at least he could pray while he was there. But he wrote: "I find that my heart is slow to go to God; and when it does go to Him it does not seem to want to stay with Him; so that very often I am forced in my prayers, first to beg of God that He would take my heart and set it on Himself, and then when it is there, that He would keep it there."

That's the weakness the Spirit helps us with, and specifically, when Paul says "*we don't know what to pray for as we ought*," he's talking about the *content* of our prayers: we don't know what to ask for—

Let me explain: we know what we want – but we don't know what God ultimately wants! And isn't that why we're praying? I mean, we're hoping that what He wants is the same as what we want! But we don't know, so we cry out to God, just what Jesus, in His hour in the Garden cried out to His Father, "Not my will but Your will be done." Jesus knew what His Father's will was. He knew how He would answer His cries. But we don't know what God's *sovereign will* is when we cry out.

This is the weakness in prayer that you and I face every day.

- A few years ago an urgent prayer request came over the prayer chain for a young mom who was in terrible pain, critically ill, and she was not expected to live. How do you pray for a person like that? Of course we prayed for her salvation, but do you pray that God would heal her miraculously? Or that He would take her quickly and end her suffering? Neither of those are wrong to pray. As it turned out, she passed away that night. And I thought: for some folks that was a merciful yes from God, and to others it was a no. We don't know what to pray for.

So we groan in our prayers, trying to pray in faith, while sensing our weakness and ignorance. This passage has changed forever the way I pray: I think it was Amy Carmichael who said we shouldn't give

advice to God in our prayers, and I find myself constantly doing that: “God, do this, or that, here’s the way it should be done . . . “And then I realize what I’m doing, and I just groan: “Lord, You know! You are God! You have the perfect plan, the perfect end, and the perfect means to that end. . . Abba, Father, not my will, but Your will be done!”

- Parents you pray constantly that God would protect your children. You never want to see them suffer, but you also know that they will never grow up and become mature adults without getting some bumps and bruises. So how do you pray? You groan.
- I think about people I pray for who have drifted away from Christ, and they’re in deep weeds due to their sins. And I wonder if that’s the discipline of God in their lives for their good. So do I really want to pray that God takes away their suffering, if He put it there to begin with? I don’t want to be working against God! But I don’t know. So I groan. Oh, I need help.

And Paul included himself in everything he says here: it’s “our weakness,” “we don’t know what to pray for as we ought.” You know, he expressed that perplexity when he wrote in—

- Philippians 1:21–23 ²¹For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²²If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. *Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.* ²³I am hard pressed between the two. . .

I.e., “Lord, should I stay or should I go?” Even Paul didn’t know how to pray as he should. So he groaned.

*So how does the Holy Spirit help us in our weak, ignorant, groaning prayers?

III. The Spirit joins us in our groanings.

Look at v.27: “*the Spirit Himself intercedes for us*” – i.e., on our behalf – He stands between us and God, and He prays! – “*with groanings*” – literally, “wordless utterances,” and jump down to the end of v.27 – “*according to the will of God.*”

I want you to put this all together: It’s so deep, but it’s so good: During your weakest moments, you sense how helpless you really are. You aren’t strong enough, wise enough, godly enough to handle what you are going through. And on top of it, your body is tired, your brain is tired and distracted. You want to pray to God. You need to pray. But you don’t know how! How often are you in that place?

- Beloved, this is exactly where God wants you to be! God hears the cries of the humble and the weak; the afflicted and the brokenhearted. And this when the Holy Spirit comes alongside you to bear your burdens to God! He doesn’t criticize you or judge you – He helps you!

So as you groan to God in your weakness, seeking His will, but not knowing what it is – the Spirit is groaning along with you, *but while you are groaning in ignorance, He is groaning according to the will of God!* He carries these intercessions to the Father so that – are you ready? **Your prayers ascend to heaven as God praying to God according to the will of God. Wow!**

*The point here isn’t whether we are groaning with words or without words – remember how Hannah prayed in the tabernacle but her lips weren’t moving? When all we can do is stutter and stammer or just lift up our hands in silence, the Holy Spirit of God is there for us, groaning *with* us and interceding *for* us

- isn't that what it says? He replaces our weakness with His strength, and our emptiness with His fullness. Oh, don't you love the Holy Spirit?

***The connection with 1 Corinthians 2:10–12—**

Now I want to make a connection here, and you have to follow me. Look again at—

- Romans 8:27 ²⁷And He [the Father] who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Now I want you to see some very similar wording back in—

- 1 Corinthians 2:10–12 . . . For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹²Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.

Paul says that the Holy Spirit *searches* (same word as in Rom. 8:27) and knows the depths of God and then opens up our hearts to understand His Word. In Rom.8.27, the Spirit *searches* the depths of our hearts, and intercedes for us to take our groanings to God.

- *Let me put this together, it's mind-boggling: the same Holy Spirit who reveals God's thoughts to us through His Word, reveals our thoughts to God through our prayers! Amazing! Do you see how the Holy Spirit works from both directions to bring us together with God? And what comes next is incredible—*

IV. God hears and answers those prayers.

- Romans 8:27 ²⁷And he who searches hearts (God) knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

When you pray and groan *in the Spirit*, those prayers are prompted by God the Holy Spirit. They are according to His will, because they come from His own work in your heart! So those groaning, stumbling, weak prayers of yours – those prayers originate in heaven, and they are heard in heaven – do you get that?

- John Calvin said, “The Spirit stirs up in our hearts those desires which we ought to entertain; and He also affects our hearts in such a way that these desires by their fervency penetrate into heaven itself.”

They penetrate into heaven! And don't you think the Father will *answer* prayers that have originated from His Spirit, and are offered up by His Spirit, according to His will? Absolutely! God will never turn down a request from His own Spirit.

It's just like what we read down in v.34, that Christ Jesus is at the right hand of God, interceding for us before His Father. Does God hear and answer the prayers of His Son? We sang earlier that He does —

*The Father hears Him pray, His dear anointed One;
He cannot turn away, the presence of His Son;*

If God hears and answers the intercessions of His Son in heaven, we know that He hears and answers the intercessions of His Spirit on earth! Don't you love the Holy Spirit?

- Now His answer isn't always 'yes,' – have you noticed? But when we're praying in the Spirit, He is conforming our desires to His, so that what we really want is the will of the Father and the glory of His Son.

When we groaned in prayer over that sick mom, our *desire* was for Christ to be glorified whether she lived or died. In His weak humanity, Jesus groaned to His Father: *"Abba! Father! All things are possible for you. Remove this cup from Me! Yet, not what I will, but what You will."* And God answered His Son's desire.

- We always need to remember that "No" is an answer too. And if God gives it, then it's the very best answer! We need to thank God for the "No" answers, don't we?
- And then there are other times when God answers our groanings by doing even—*"far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us!"* Is that OK with you?

What is Paul's whole point in this passage? To give us confidence when we come to our heavenly Father in prayer: When you and I pray, we don't need to stress and obsess over getting our prayers just right, with just the right words, with the precise requests, or God won't hear. No! We come humbly, we come sincerely, and we *always* come in ignorance and in weakness, but as we do, the Holy Spirit is interceding for us *according to the will of God!* And you and I can have the confidence that our weak praying is not the limit of God's acting. God isn't limited by our limited prayers!

- Beloved, be encouraged: you are not expected to know the will of God in everything. This text says it's OK not to know. Don't add to your burdens the worry that you don't know the sovereign will of God. There is One who knows – and He prays with you!

So while you're groaning, He's praying. You don't have to worry about your grammar, or getting every theological jot and tittle just right. He will make sure it gets to God according to His will.

- You just groan - He'll *"fix it on the way up!"*

****The connection with 2 Corinthians 12:7–10—***

Now I want to show you a connection in Paul's life that's puts all of this together. About a year before he wrote this passage in Romans, he wrote about an experience he had, while he was weak and struggling in prayer. He wrote about it in—

- 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 ⁷So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. [Paul was weak! And God wanted him to know how weak he was.] ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. [Paul didn't know

how to pray! But the Holy Spirit helped Paul and interceded for him according to the will of God. And God answered:] ⁹But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with *weaknesses*, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am *weak*, then I am strong.

God answered Paul’s prayer by giving him something much better than *thorn-removal*: It’s not what he asked for, but the Holy Spirit interceded and God answered by giving Paul what he most desired – “*that the power of Christ will rest on me!*”

Isn’t that what you want more than anything? What more could you possibly need than that?

- *Back to our passage in Romans, there is a condition here: Will you admit that you are weak? That “apart from Christ you can do nothing?” Will you admit that you are ignorant of what is best for you, and others you pray for? The Spirit will help those who are weak. He fills those who are empty and helps the helpless. Don’t quench the Spirit by your pride and self-sufficiency.

*And will you groan? Will you pray? Remember what James said, “You have not because you ask not?” Well Paul would say, “And the Spirit intercedes not, if you groan not!” “Oh, what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear! All because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer.” So “take it to the Lord in prayer,” and watch Him work.

* * *

I preached on this passage to a large room full of pastors at the Exalting Christ Conference on September 11th, 2015. I had no idea that just 2 days later, the Valley Fire would sweep through our community and we would groan like some of us had never groaned before. This is what I said to those men, and I didn’t know how true they would prove to be—

- “A moment is coming *very soon* in your life – in your ministry – when you will be stripped of every resource. Nothing to lean on, nothing to fall back on. Weak and empty. And *at that moment*, rejoice! The Spirit will be there, to help you in your weakness, to work His desires into your heart, and then to join with you as you groan to your heavenly Father. Your Father will hear and answer your groanings, and the power of Christ will rest on you.”

And think back to the many, many incredible ways God came to us in the days and months afterwards: We were weak. We groaned, and the Spirit was right there. He came alongside us, and lifted our burdens up to our Father. God praying to God according to the will of God, and how He answered!