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Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith
Message: The Spirit's Help in Prayer

Transcribed Message
May 23, 2021
Romans 8:26-27

I came across this article not too long ago called "Prayer Nightmares". No doubt, he says, you've experienced this. You're in a setting with Christian friends, a Bible study, a community group, some meeting where that brother or sister says, "I'll pray for us." And the next thing you know you're trapped in a prayer nightmare. "Dear Lord," they start, "we just want to thank you for this day, for who you are – immutable, eternal, transcendent, eminent, impassable, impeccable, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, righteous, just, and sovereign. And oh yeah, a consuming fire. We just want to thank you for this time and for bringing Fred back into our small group after he just disappeared for months and wouldn't return our phone calls. Father, help us all to remember your goodness and to be at church by 8:45 AM this Sunday to help set up chairs in both the gym and in the youth groups. And oh, I just want to lift up my neighbor. She has a cat who has been coughing up the worst stuff. Be with the vet when they go down her throat to get that nasty furball out. Now bless our time. Amen." I suppose we've all been caught in a prayer nightmare. To a greater or lesser extent maybe we've been caught in our own prayer nightmare on occasion as well. I don't know too many Christians who won't readily agree that when it comes to prayer and to this discipline that the Scriptures speak of so often, I don't know of too many who don't readily acknowledge that they will take all the help that they can get, that there is in this venture a constant struggle and a constant battle that is part of the praying life. So this morning, pray and don't lose heart. It's the Spirit who helps us to reach the ear of God with just the request we need.

A quick review. As you read the Bible, one of the principles that is so important is to realize that we don't just come to the Word of God and pull verses out of books and chapters and just read them and then dive in and try to understand what they are. We do that, but it's always best to do it within the context in which those verses are written

and never more so than in this section that we're in in Romans chapter 8. What we're seeing week after week is just how each of these passages is tied together. As we review this morning, it is important for us to see that there's a lot of groaning going on in this 8th chapter. We've already noted that, but we remind ourselves that there's the groaning of creation. We looked at that last week.

If you've been here these last number of Sundays beginning at about verse 17 all the way to the end of the chapter, Paul has been developing for us a theology of suffering. We've talked extensively about the need for Christians of all people to have a theology of suffering, but if you want one you can find it here in Romans 8:17 to 39. What Paul tells us is the reason that we have the suffering going on in our world is because the world is under the judgment of sin. You're not going to get that answer from any other worldview or any other philosophy of life. In fact, a lot of people even who call themselves Christians aren't terribly excited about the idea of God calling all of us sinners and the fact that all of us have fallen short of His glory. It is one 3-letter word that really a lot of people don't want to spend a lot of time thinking and talking about, but here it is. It tells us what's wrong with our world and that our world is under the judgment of God because of sin, that the impact of sin has had cosmic consequences. That was verse 22 last Sunday. The idea that all of creation, if we could hear it, is groaning. All of it is eagerly waiting, Paul says, to be released from the impact that sin has had.

Here's what is so amazing. The drama of redemption is being played out on this planet. The drama of redemption is being played out on this planet. All of this planet has been impacted, Paul says, by the fall of man in to sin. Creation groans. The other thing that groans – Christians. The groaning of Christians. You say okay, I get this one. Every morning when I get up, I'm groaning. Well, that's not exactly what we're talking about here, but it's related. It is related because of what we just said. It is related by the very fact that we are all impacted by sin and so yes, we do groan. We groan physically. We groan spiritually. We groan emotionally. there is this wonderful truth that within the Christian experiences we are on this life journey and suffering and hardship and trials are a part of our experience. We're living in the "already" and the "not yet". The "already" idea being that we've already been blessed beyond comprehension with this amazing salvation, but it's not yet all been made available to us. We're living in this

“already/not yet”. We already have a whole bunch of it but there's a whole bunch more that's coming and we have not yet received that. In this time where creation is groaning and we're groaning along with creation.

Now there's another groan in this passage and it comes to us in verses 26 and 27. It is the Spirit's intercessory ministry for us. Let's look this morning at the Spirit's intercessory ministry. The first thing we see is simply the need for it, the need for the Spirit's intercession. In that 26th verse, the first thing that Paul tells us is that we need the Spirit's intercession and the first thing he tells us is the Spirit is there for us. Look at verse 26 again: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness.” What's the connection? The reason I'm asking what's the connection is because the very first word of verse 26 requires that we stop before we get very far in to this verse and realize what this connection is. The very first word of verse 26 is the word “likewise”. Or we could translate that and simply say “in the same way”. So, we're reading along and we come to verse 26 and he says in the same way or likewise and we say in the same way as what? How is this connected with what you just said? I think you just go right back and that first word ties us in to the previous groanings. The idea that creation is groaning under the weight of sin. The idea that Christians, yes, even Christians, have hardship. We have trials. We suffer in this life. We have the answer but we also realize that suffering is a part of God's work in our life as well. There's a connection here. The connection is going to unfold before us.

But the Holy Spirit also groans. That's why he starts off verse 26 and he says likewise. There is a connection here. Why is this reassuring to us at this point? What is Paul's basic point in starting this verse off this way? I think it is to say to us we're here waiting with eager patience. Remember that last week when we talked about this patient eagerness that we're to have. Here we are. We're waiting in the midst of suffering with this eager patience and Paul says in the midst of this hang on to this truth. Hang on to these truths. Don't lose sight of the fact that the Spirit is there for you. The Spirit is there with you. you're not alone in this. One of the hard things for us to get a hold of is when you're in the Upper Room Discourse and Jesus has been with these 12 men for over three years. He says to them I am leaving you and they're not even processing what all He is saying there. He says I'm leaving you. What you need to know

is it's going to be good that I leave you. You're going to be better off if I leave you. Of course, they don't understand what He means by that. They don't understand that until around Pentecost. But He was saying to them I'm going to send you someone who is going to be with you and He will never leave you. Jesus was with these men. When they were together, they were all together. When they weren't together, He wasn't with them. But now He says to them I will never leave you. I will never forsake you.

I think that's a part of the underscoring truth that Paul is going to step into here with regard to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He is going first of all to remind us that whatever it is that we're going through we're never alone in that experience. I think sometimes when we go through really hard stuff one of the things that we want to know is that we're not all alone in this. Sometimes it is just reassuring to know that other people are walking a similar path or have walked a similar path and they're experiencing similar things to what we are. But we're not alone.

The Spirit, he says secondly, is there to help us. The Spirit is there and He is with us, but now notice secondly, he says the Spirit is there to help us. This first point is really just kind of a fun point, because I'm calling this a very big word. A very big word. Now when I say this is a very big word you say how big a word is it? Helps. You look at that word and you go why would he say this word "helps" is a really big word? It looks like about five letters to me. In my world that's a small to medium word. Helps. Here's why this is kind of fun. In the Greek text, this word helps is 17 letters long. It is the verb with two prefixes added onto it so it literally is probably one of the longest words in the New Testament. *Sunantilambanetai*. It is 17 letters long. What you have is Paul basically saying in this word "helps", the Spirit is there to help us in our weakness. He is basically saying you can take in your Bible and you can put this word in bold print, you can capitalize this word "helps", you may want to underline, you may want to get out your yellow highlighter because he's focusing on this word in connection with the Spirit being there for us to draw attention to what it is that the Spirit does.

What does this word mean? It's a big word and has a very significant meaning. The significance of this word is this. The root word of this word "helps" is the idea of grabbing ahold of something with the idea of carrying it. So you grab ahold of something and you're going to carry it. And then Paul adds two prefixes to this word. He adds the

prefix “with” and he adds the prefix “in place of” or “for”. Put all of this together, that one little word helps in our English translation basically is to be understood in this way. It is to come alongside someone to carry a burden with them. You're helping to carry the load that they're obviously under, this weight that they're carrying. You come alongside them and you help them to carry it.

Some of you that have been at Covenant for a little while will remember years ago a couple of times a year we would go and we would take that great big grand piano. We would lift that thing and we would carry it offstage down to the floor. Remember that? Those of you that are still getting back treatments? I would say give me 8 or 10 guys after the service to come and we're going to move this piano off the stage. I would also appeal to their sense of how they looked. I would say I need 8 to 10 really handsome strong men and I'd get a whole crowd down here and I'd have to weed them out. No, I didn't. But we'd get 8 or 10 guys and I remember the very first time we did this I was scared. I thought this thing weighs 1000 pounds. This is going to be drama. I remember many of you stayed just to watch this happen. We would carry that thing off and I would position myself in between two great big guys and I would be carrying this thing and I would realize I'm not even holding this piano. I'm hardly carrying anything. It just underscores that when you've got a whole bunch of people even a thousand pound piano isn't all that heavy for guys that are capable of lifting a lot of weight. That's the word that Paul uses here. It's the very same word that is used in in Luke's gospel when he talks about Jesus going to the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Remember Martha was the busy one. Remember Martha comes to Jesus and says could you possibly get my sister to help me? Could she come and carry some of this burden with me, some of this load of all that I'm doing to get ready for the fact that you're here. The Holy Spirit comes alongside us, grabs a hold of us if you will, and He pulls us along. Remember in this context of suffering and hardship and difficulty that we may be going through.

What is the reason for doing that? He tells us as that verse goes on because he says likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. So thirdly, the Spirit helps with our weakness. Before we get any further than that, did you notice just the way Paul made that statement? Look at what he says there. He includes himself in that. Likewise the

Spirit helps us in our weakness. He doesn't say I'm an apostle. I've got this prayer thing handled. I don't really need help from the Holy Spirit but I know you guys do. You're not apostles and I'm sure you're struggling. No, he says I'm struggling just like you are. I need the Holy Spirit's help. I need the Holy Spirit's ministry. He just includes himself in that. It just reminds me that admitting our need in the Bible is never seen as a negative. Admitting our need in terms of spiritual help is never seen as a negative in Scripture. In fact, it's seen as a prerequisite. that's why when what Jesus says in Matthew 11 come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you for I am meek and lowly in heart and you shall find rest for your soul. What is the one requirement? It is that we admit our need. That's what's happening here.

What is our weakness? I think we could look at this in two ways. I think there is a general principle here in defining what this weakness is, and that probably is reflective of this chapter. It's the impact of sin upon creation, the impact of sin upon humanity, the impact of sin and the fall upon all of us so that we are, as we've already seen, all groaning under the weight of this fallenness, physically, emotionally, spiritually. But I think Paul has something much more specific in mind. Could we say it in a general sense there is this weakness? Of course we can. But I think he's zeroing in on something very particular here and I think what he's going to be looking at is our prayer life. He is saying to us in effect there is a weakness within our prayer life that requires the help and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Look again at that statement: "for we do not know what to pray for as we ought."

Think about that sentence for a moment. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought. If you were in a little group and you are interacting over this verse as you may be later, what would be a question that you would want to press into when you think about that statement? For we do not know how to pray as we ought. I would want to ask the question when. When are you talking about our weakness with regard to prayer? Paul, do you mean that sometimes when we're praying there is a weakness because we don't know what to pray for? Paul, do you mean by that that on special occasions when we're really trying to discern some big life issue, well of course we don't know what to pray for. We don't know what to pray for because we don't know what to ask God about in particular on that point. Paul, is this kind of an isolated hard case situation

so that in my prayer life when I'm up against some unusual thing, what is that he has in mind? I think the answer is this.

We come back again where in the context of suffering he is giving us a biblical doctrine of suffering. Now he's adding to what we've already learned from these different weeks another component to how it is that we walk as a believer in the midst of suffering. He is touching on the core area of our prayer life in the midst of that. I think he would say to us one of the most challenging aspects of suffering is to come to a point when you're trying to pray and you don't even know what to pray for. You're at such a point that through the tears and the sadness, through the loss and the sorrow, through the heartache and the frustration and the anger and all of that. You're just spent. and you can't see clearly to even formulate what is it I'm supposed to be even praying for and asking at this time. I'm just confused. I don't know what you're doing, God. Clearly that would be an application I think of what he's saying here.

But I think beyond suffering, unless we're praying in exact concurrence with the revealed will of God, I would offer to you that this is a broader statement that says to us even in those situations we do not know exactly how to pray. When we're praying in exact concurrence with the will of God, absolutely. I know that as a husband God wants me to love my wife the way Christ loved the church. I can pray that prayer with great confidence that I am right in the will of God where He wants me to be. He wants me to be kind and considerate and compassionate and speak tenderly to Bonnie. I can pray prayers like that all day long and be absolutely confident that I'm in the will of God because he's told me that. Flee from sexual immorality. He's told me that. I can pray that with confidence. I would suggest to you that every other prayer that I offer that is not an absolute concurrence with the will of God I really do not know for sure what to pray. That falls within this category of weakness. We do not know because we do not understand what God is doing in the present time.

Some of you are walking through things right now and you're saying to yourself what is God doing in my life right now. Why these events? Why these circumstances? Why these difficulties? Why these broken relationships? Why these hardships? You would love to know what God is doing right now in the present moment. We don't always know. If we don't know what He's doing in the present moment, we surely don't

know what He's doing with regard to the future. We can expand that to say we don't know what He's doing at present in our life. We don't know for sure what He's wanting to do with regard to the future in our life. If you want to add just a little bit more to it, the truth of the matter is we don't know what we truly need. We don't. We don't know what we truly need. We think we know. We're very confident sometimes that we know what we need, but we don't really know what it is that we need.

All of us as parents are always praying for our children. We're always praying for our grandchildren. We want them to walk with God. We want them to walk this path of wisdom. As we watch them navigate, whether they're little guys in elementary or whether they've grown and left our home, all of these different choices and things that they face. As a parent and through the eyes of an earthly father, I think I know what my child needs, but I don't really don't. It is just through my eyes. It's through my perspective. I'm praying for God to do this or do that, or don't let that happen. I don't know what He is doing in the present moment. I don't know what His future for that person is. I don't truly know what they need at that moment, do I?

I think a Biblical example of this is let's just step into the story of a man in the Bible named Joseph. If you're not familiar with that story, Joseph was a young boy raised in a family with a lot of other brothers. They hated him. Plain and simple. They hated him. His father showed favoritism towards him all of his growing up years so they didn't like him. They literally sold him to slave traders and down to Egypt he went. Down there, every success was met with some other unexpected failure. It just was a hard, hard life. I look at Joseph's life and I think if I'm Jacob at that point, I'm praying for my son. I'm praying for all kinds of things that from my vantage point would turn out a lot better. Joseph at the end of it all could stand before his brothers and say to them you meant this for evil in my life but God meant it all for good. I say to you at any given point if we would have stepped into that man's experience we would pray God no, no, don't let him be sold as a slave to Egypt. Oh God, no, not in Potiphar's home! There's a woman and she's got evil intentions. Lord, get him out of prison. Yet at the end of the day, God puts His glory on display and Joseph is the man who he is because of the things that God allowed in his life. When I come to this, the point is I seldom see or understand the big picture of what God is doing. Desperate is my need and gratefully I

accept the presence of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of intercession that the Holy Spirit is doing in my life.

Now look thirdly. The nature of the Spirit's intercession. The next part of verse 26 "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." Again, before we even go further in the outline, what is the very first word of that next sentence? It is the adversative. It's the contrast "but". He just said you don't know what to pray. You don't know how to pray as you should, but... So pay attention. Here is somebody who does. That's the whole point.

The first thing he says is the advocacy of the Holy Spirit is personal. The advocacy of the Holy Spirit is personal. Notice Paul says it is the Spirit Himself who intercedes for us. It's the Spirit Himself. He doesn't give this assignment to anybody else. He keeps it for himself. He's the one who intercedes. This is the only reference in the New Testament for the Holy Spirit as our advocate. This Holy Spirit is the one who intercedes on our behalf. It is a continuing ministry of the Holy Spirit of God for us. Whatever circumstance that we're in, we are absolutely confident that we are never alone. In fact, we have two intercessors, don't we? We have two advocates. Hebrews 7:25 says that Jesus ever lives to make intercession for us and now here we hear that the Holy Spirit is doing the same thing.

His advocacy is not only personal, notice secondly His advocacy is inexpressible. His advocacy is inexpressible. With groanings too deep for words. What in the world does that mean? His groanings are too deep for words. There isn't any other statement like that in the New Testament so we can't go somewhere else and say I wonder if it means this because over here it says this. This is the only time this statement is ever mentioned in the New Testament. Some say that we are the ones who are groaning. But the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words and we are the ones who are groaning. Most of the commentators who say that say that because they simply don't know what to do with the idea that the Holy Spirit of God would be offering up inarticulate groanings. They say that can't be a reference to the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit doesn't offer inarticulate groanings. Well, how do they know that for sure? Maybe it is to be understood that way. That's the way it reads most naturally.

It may be better just to step back and acknowledge that there might very well be here the mystery of inter-Trinitarian communication. Isn't that what's happening here? Isn't this a picture of the communication that is happening within the mystery of the Godhead? The Father. The Son who is our advocate and intercessor. And now the Holy Spirit. This language between the members of the Godhead could very well be described as it is here as inarticulate groanings. There is a mystery but there's also a great encouragement. We're praying because we're weak and we're ignorant and we don't even know what to pray. Then we get word that the Holy Spirit is taking our prayers and He is taking them directly to the Father. J.I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom in their book *Praying* say, "It is as if the Holy Spirit fixes our prayers all the way up to heaven." So we don't know what to pray. We're asking for this when in fact we need that. We're asking for that when in fact what we really need is this. The Holy Spirit takes those prayers that we lift up and He fixes them on the way up and He brings them into the presence of the Father.

Look at the effectiveness of the Spirit's intercession in that last verse. Verse 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." The very first thing you see it is always according to God's will. The Holy Spirit intercedes for us and He intercedes for us in accordance with the will of God. He searches the hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit. I take it that's the work of the Father. It is the Father who is searching the hearts. As the Father is searching the hearts, the Spirit's groanings, which may be inexpressible and unexplainable to us, are known by the Father. The Spirit always is praying in harmony with the will of the Father. They're always in agreement. There's never disagreement within the Godhead. Whether it's the Father and the Son, or the Father and the Spirit, there's always harmony. There's always unity. There's always agreement.

Then lastly, the Holy Spirit's prayers are always answered by the Father. They're always answered by the Father. He who searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. Every prayer that the Spirit offers on our behalf is right on the mark, is in full agreement with the Father's will and it is just exactly what we need. No one ever prays for us the way

the Holy Spirit does. The Holy Spirit prays for us in full agreement with the will of the Father. Here's this picture. Within this context of prayer, there is the ministry of the Father, the ministry of the Son, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

What do we take away from these verses? I think it's so basic. It is simply an encouragement to us to just pray. Just pray. James says we don't have because we don't even ask. We don't have because we don't even ask. Here is the promise of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit to say to us we're all engaged in this ministry of prayer together with you. So, pray even when you don't fully understand. Pray even when it's not easy, when in fact it is very hard. Pray even when you don't feel like it. Just pray knowing the Spirit lines our prayers with the Father's will.

To be a child of God by faith in Christ is to have stepped into this amazing wonderful privilege to where we can call God our Father because of what Jesus His Son has done for us in His life and His death on the cross. That brings us when we believe this glorious gospel. The book of Romans is the story of the gospel. What it says to us is this gospel is the power of God unto salvation. If you want to experience what it is that these verses are unfolding for us, if you want to know the abiding presence of God in your life, if you want the assurance that the Spirit of God Himself is praying for you every day as you pray to the father, there's only one way that is possible. It isn't through human effort. It isn't by human works. It isn't by denying that there's anything wrong in your life. It is just the opposite of that. It's agreeing that we've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It's agreeing to what Jesus did on the cross was in payment for sin – mine and yours. It's in agreement with this gospel that all God asked me to do is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to experience eternal life. That is our heart and our desire and prayer for each of us.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, what an amazing thing it is that right now as I lift my voice in prayer the Spirit of God makes intercession and takes my feeble thoughts and my uncertain requests and brings them into Your very presence and aligns them with Your will and purpose. Lord, we are confident of this one thing – that You're not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. We pray this morning for the work of Your Spirit to be strong, to open hearts and minds and eyes to understand what this gospel is all about that You have given us by grace, this gift that is eternal life.

Lord, we pray that it would be embraced and welcomed and believed. We give You praise and thanksgiving for it. In Jesus's name, amen.