

## I. Introduction

This week a sister in Christ wrote to me and a couple of our elders to let us know about a tragedy that had happened. And “tragedy” is the right word. What had taken place was (and still is) deeply painful. And after she relayed the facts and asked us to pray, she ended by saying: “I am at a loss for words.” I’m betting that most of us can immediately empathize with that feeling. Right? When you all-too-suddenly find the edges of your capacities. When you have nothing in your playbook to fall back on. Ray Ortlund writes, “We come inevitably to those moments in life when nothing will suffice but what is directly and immediately of God. We come to the end of ourselves - no more answers, no more cleverness, *nothing but need*. Even our faith struggles. And there God meets us.”<sup>1</sup>

In our study of Romans 8 one of the most prominent themes tying the chapter together is the work of the Holy Spirit. We’ve said a Christian lives by the Spirit, the Spirit testifies to the believer that we are children of God, the Spirit’s ministry is like a spotlight - he loves to reveal and glorify the person and work of Jesus. One way that we can think about it - and this is important for today - is that the Holy Spirit lives within a Christian and *applies* the finished work of Christ to our lives. Like, there is this objective reality that the cross of Christ has paid for the sin of God’s people and purchased new life for us. And the Holy Spirit takes that objective truth and translates the work of Christ into our personal experience. I said a couple of weeks ago that Romans 8 is so beautiful because it is a concentrated dose of everything that is real and really available to us in the Christian life. Christianity is not merely a change in our status before God. It is a change in status before God that translates into our experience. When I purchased my home I went to the title office and signed about 45 different documents and when I walked out of that title office Dana and I were homeowners. But there was a moment when home ownership was applied to our experience, when we unlocked the front door and walked into our house for the first time. And in the Christian life the Holy Spirit is the one who takes you by the hand and walks you through the front door into everything that Christ has purchased for you in the gospel.

In the first part of Romans 8 Paul spends time teaching about life in the Spirit and walking in the Spirit. Then, in verse 16 and 17 Paul makes the connection that the Holy Spirit is testifying that we are children of God. And if we are God’s children, that means we have an inheritance in Christ! And that’s important because in verses 18-25, Paul shifts into acknowledging our suffering here and now. And he says that the future glory of our inheritance in Christ is so weighty and amazing that our present sufferings can be endured like a woman who endures the pain of childbirth with patience knowing that something wonderful is coming on the other side of all her groaning. And that assurance - that there is glory on the other side of groaning - is our hope. Our hope helps us to endure suffering.

And today, as we come to verse 26-27, Paul comes back to the work of the Holy Spirit and he says our future hope isn’t our only help as we endure suffering. Our hope helps us and “likewise” - in the same way... the Spirit helps us. We have a *present* help when we suffer and come to the end of ourselves. A help right now. And is the direct help of God who loves us and wants us to know he loves us.

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<sup>1</sup> Ortlund, Ray. *Supernatural Living for Natural People: The Life Giving Message of Romans 8* (Ross-shire, Scotland, U.K.: Christian Focus Publications, 2013) chap. 10, Kindle.

Friends, all too often we exist in the foothills of our faith, and Romans 8 is here to remind us of mountain peaks of God's love for us. It is here to exhort us toward the "more" that is available to us in Christ. And it does that by relentlessly reassuring us of what is real and really available to us in the gospel. And today we are being reassured of this: **in our weakness God the Holy Spirit helps us.** So for the rest of our time today, we're going to look at the help that the Spirit gives. But before we walk through the passage let's pray.

*Father, even when we feel strong we are weak. And I know that many of us don't even feel strong today. Including me. So Father, would you send your Spirit to bear witness to us about Christ and to help us see him and savor him and experience his gospel in our lives. "As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God."<sup>2</sup> Amen.*

## II. Help In Our Weakness

Verse 26 begins: **Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness.**

We've already said that Paul has been saying, "your future hope helps you in suffering." Now he's saying, in the same way - "Likewise - the Spirit helps you. And Paul is about to explain why the Spirit helps us and how the Spirit helps us. But before we get into the why and the how, I want to pause for a moment to dwell on how this sentence preaches the gospel to us. "...the Spirit helps us in our weakness."

We would like people to think that we are strong. Sometimes we believe our own press and build up a pretty high view of our ability to influence outcomes and hold it all together, but Rich Mullins said it best, **"we are not as strong as we think we are."** The reality of my weakness hit home to me every time my wife, Dana, was pregnant with any of our four children. When we found out Dana was pregnant with our oldest daughter for whatever reason I was nervous about miscarriage. And I remember realizing for the first time that I could learn everything there was to learn about pregnancy, and we could employ every wellness technique, and Dana could make wise choices in how she lived her life, but I also knew that countless people have done all those things and been unable to stop miscarriage. The only thing I could do was surrender my children to the Lord because I was totally powerless. Totally weak.

And the same powerlessness is a reality in all of life. We like to think we are in control until those things happen that remind us we aren't. A few months ago I got a jury duty summons in the mail and I was so frustrated at that reminder that I had no power. I was at the mercy of someone else's authority. And when we are met with our brokenness, our unmet needs, our sense of emptiness, our limited ability to understand, our weariness, our anxieties, our worries, our depression, our addiction.<sup>3</sup> When our livelihood is taken away. When natural disasters occur. When the diagnosis comes. When death comes for all of us... we are not as strong as we think we are.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 40:17

<sup>3</sup> Ortlund, *Supernatural Living for Natural People*, chap. 10

So what will we do with our weakness? A worldview without God says that when we're backed into the corner of our own weakness all we are is stuck. The strong survive and the weak perish, so we better be strong. If you were to ask a typical vaguely christian-ish spiritual person in Livingston County how to get to heaven, odds are they would answer that you should try hard to be a good person. What do you do with your weakness when the plan of the program is "try hard"? Islam teaches that all will be judged based on their intentions and deeds.<sup>4</sup> In other words, based on the strength of your performance. It's said that the last words of Buddah were "Strive without ceasing." So what do you do with your weakness in systems like that? All you can do is strive to overcome it and how can you overcome it when you are already weak?

But friends, Buddha might have said, "strive without ceasing," but before he died Jesus said, "it is finished." All the religions of the world save one pile on burdens, but the God of Christianity relieves them.<sup>5</sup> And not only does he relieve our burdens in such a way that we are saved by his grace, but he sends his Holy Spirit so that in our weakness we might know his strength and kindness not only in a future, someday sense, but right now in the midst of our trials. We don't serve a God who requires us to get our act together before he loves us. We worship a God who helps us in our weakness! That is the good news of the gospel. Some of us need to simply take hold of that truth and rest in the gospel today.

### III. Help In Our Groaning

Let's look back at verse 26 in its entirety: "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."

So not only are we Christians weak people, but Paul is highlighting a particular aspect of our weakness: we don't know what to pray. And here we arrive back where we started, with our sister's email: "I'm at a loss for words."

Back in verse 15, Paul said we have received the Spirit of adoption who helps us cry out "Abba Father." We've been given this instinct by the Holy Spirit to run to our Heavenly Father in our need, but sometimes we are so overwhelmed by the weight of our struggles that we just don't know what to ask our Father for. We don't know the right choice to make. Every angle we can see looks like being stuck between a rock and a hard place. We can't see the path toward redemption in a situation. We are choked by our fear. We're too hot with anger. We are too exhausted by our pain. We don't know how to pray! Sometimes we are so weak that we can't even pull ourselves together enough to utter a word to God. But we need to pray! God is our Father! If we can't go to him in our neediness, who can we go to? One book I read says prayer is like breathing. Without it a Christian suffocates.<sup>6</sup> We need to pray. Especially when we are at our weakest! And Romans 8:26 is telling us that when we are reduced to this kind of helplessness the Holy Spirit helps us. Isn't he kind?!

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/library/islam/beliefs>

<sup>5</sup> Scott Sauls, x.com

<sup>6</sup> Onwuchekwa, John. *Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church* (Crossway, Wheaton, IL) pg 17.

And how does the Spirit help us? It says he helps us by interceding for us. Someone who intercedes is someone who asks, even begs on behalf of someone else. Another word for an intercessor is a “mediator” who steps in the middle and says, “I’ll bring your need before God for you.” So when we are so overwhelmed that we don’t know how to pray to our Father as we should, when all the words we’ve prayed are tired out and flat, when all we can do is groan, the Holy Spirit brings our need before the Father on our behalf.

Now, you remember back at the beginning I said that it would be important for today’s message for us to know that the Spirit applies the work of Christ to our lives so that not only is the gospel objectively true, but it is experientially true? Here is where that becomes important.

In another part of the NT, the book of Hebrews makes the case that Jesus Christ is our true and better mediator. It says that Jesus is our go-between who takes our needs and lays them before God. In Hebrews 7:25 it says, “[Jesus]...always lives to make intercession for [those he has saved].” In another part of the NT, in 1 Timothy 2:5, the apostle Paul says, “...There is one mediator [one intercessor!] between God and men, the man Christ Jesus...” So what is happening here in Romans 8? Did Paul have a typo? Did he mean to write, “likewise Jesus helps us in our weakness”? No. What’s happening here in Romans 8 is that the Holy Spirit is doing what he loves to do. He is bringing the interceding work of Christ to bear on our lives here and now. The Holy Spirit who indwells us is taking the intercession of Christ who is seated in heaven, and applying it to our lives by his power.

#### **IV. Help According to God’s Will**

Now notice, it says that “the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” That’s the third time in Romans 8 that we have seen the word groaning. In verse 22 all creation is groaning. In verse 23 we ourselves are groaning as we wait for the redemption of our bodies. And now in verse 26 it says the Spirit intercedes for us with groans. Why would the Spirit groan? He has no reason to groan, he is God. He knows the plan of redemption from beginning to end. He sees exactly how the suffering of the world is producing glory. Why would he groan?

Friends, the Spirit has no reason to groan, but since we are children of God, God has sent the Spirit of Christ to dwell in our hearts and the Spirit empowers us to cry out to God as our Father. Because of our union with Christ, our spirit has been joined with God’s Spirit. So in verse 23 we groan and here in verse 26, the Spirit groans because he is in our struggles with us. He is aiming our wordless, overwhelmed, groaning prayers to the Father. And even though we don’t know what to pray for, through his interceding for us the Spirit is taking our groaning prayers and sanctifying them. We don’t know what to pray, but the Spirit knows exactly what to pray for and he translates our groans into prayers in alignment with the will of God. That’s what it means when it says in verse 27, “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.” There is no barrier of understanding in the Trinity. The Father knows the mind of the Spirit and the Spirit prays for us according to the will of the Father.

Now that’s all theoretical, but let me get practical with how the Spirit cares for us. Every Christian encounters times when they do not know how to pray as they should. Even Paul!

In Philippians 1 Paul says, I don't know whether I should keep living or I should die and be with Christ. He says, "I'm hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary." He doesn't know what to pray as he sits in chains in a Roman prison, with his body broken from all the beatings and hard travel he's endured. He just wants to be with Jesus, but his heart is heavy for the church. And so he groans in prayer. And the Holy Spirit intercedes for him. And the Spirit isn't hard pressed between the two. He is God, so he knows the will of the Father and he prays for it to be accomplished.

It's the same for you! When you're paralyzed in prayer. You don't know what to pray when your depressed and it seems like darkness is your only friend. You don't know what to pray for when your very elderly family member who loves Jesus is suffering from disease. Do you pray for healing? Or do you pray for them to go home to be with Christ? You don't know what to pray for over the world and all it's suffering and layers and layers of complexity. We don't know how to pray. And so we groan. And we are being given assurance that those groaning prayers are not just a release of our grief before God. They are that. And they are more. The Spirit groans with us and intercedes the will of God over every situation. And when God prays to himself, you can be sure that that prayer will be answered! And all of that is why we can take joy in verse 28: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

"**We do not know** what to pray for as we ought..." but **we know**... that God the Spirit is praying for the will of the Father to be done, so **we know** that for those who love God all things will work together for our good and his glory.

## V. Application & Conclusion

So what does all this mean? How do Romans 8:26-27 come to bear on our life with God? This message was really helped and shaped a by a book called, "Supernatural Living for Natural People" - a whole book on Romans 8 by Ray Ortlund. If you want to keep meditating on our study in this chapter I highly recommend it to you. And in the book, there are five<sup>7</sup> really valuable points of application in response to these verses that I just want to relay to you:

**First, the Christian Life is not getting saved and then doing the best you can.** We live a life of recognizing our weakness and depending on God from beginning to end. The hope of the gospel is that God loves us and helps us in our weakness and we never graduate from the gospel! And that should give you freedom, friends. Freedom to stop hiding your frailty and to live honestly with God and with one another. We are not a people who always have it together, we are a people who depend on the power of God to be on display in our weakness.

**Second, do not expect God to wait until you have enough understanding before he stretches you.** Some of us will have tried to reassure ourselves with the common axiom, "God won't give you more than you can handle." That is a distortion of a verse taken out of context. God will give you more than you can handle. He will lead you out past the borders of your comfort zone, past the limit of your understanding. Do not be surprised when you realize that he has led you outside the scope of your

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<sup>7</sup> Ortlund, *Supernatural Living for Natural People*, chap. 10

ability to pray. But the sweet assurance when we are beyond the borders of our comfort and understanding is that God is there with us in our suffering. His Spirit dwells in you and he is lifting all of our blindness and infirmity and frustration and interceding on your behalf. And when you are there in that place of utter helplessness you will get to say with Job, “I had heard of you, God, but now I see you.” (42:5).

**Third, don't worry about finding the right words to pray meaningfully to God.** If the Holy Spirit has given you the instincts of the children of God, to run to him in your neediness then all you need to do is groan. Prayer is not bringing our technique before God in order to affect outcomes. That's witchcraft, that's not christianity. You don't need just the right words. You don't even need to know what to pray for. You bring your nothing to the Father and you can be assured that God is near, God hears, and God is working according to his will.

**Fourth, you can be encouraged that your heavenly Father knows you and understands you.** Sometimes I can't even understand myself, let alone the broken people and situations surrounding me. But our understanding is not a prerequisite for prayer. God is the one who searches hearts. He understands all things. Nothing is hidden from him. All the movements of our hearts are fully known to him and the weakest prayers are used by him. So when you are trapped in a body that is broken, if you ever lose your capacity to speak, if your mind deteriorates, if you find yourself unable to communicate with the people you love most - even at those moments, when all you can do is moan in your pain and brokenness, God will understand your prayer and discern the longings of your heart and subdue all your sorrow and pain to his glorious purpose.

**Finally, prayer is not changing God's mind.** Prayer is bringing our need to our Father, knowing that even when we feel clever, even when we think we know the right strategy, even when we have opinions about the right path forward, even when we feel we are strong, we are weak. And in our weakness, when we have nothing left, when we are at a loss for words, God the Spirit meets us there, God the Spirit groans with us, God the Spirit translates all our groanings into prayers for God's will to be accomplished and transforms all our sufferings into graces for our good and his glory.

Let me end with one more quote from the book I've been referencing: “So if all you can do is lift your heart-cry to God, that does not prove that you are not a saint. Just the opposite. This is God's way with 'the saints.' It is hypocrites who always have the answers and always have something to say and think they know everything. But it is the saints who are led by the Spirit (v. 14) out into the extremities of life, where all they have left is empty hands lifted before God, all they have left is the anguish of their hearts, all they have left is nothing but need - it is helpless people like that whom the Holy Spirit helps lay hold of God, even more than they know. Such believers are not failing to live the victorious life. They are, in fact, more than conquerors, even when they do not even know what to pray. They are God's saints, living out his plan not only in its glorious outcome but even in its agonizing process.”<sup>8</sup>

**In our weakness God the Holy Spirit helps us.** Oh what glorious news that is!

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<sup>8</sup> Ortlund, *Supernatural Living for Natural People*, chap. 10