

The Spirit's Intercession

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[0 : 00] Amen. Open up your Bibles.

If you have a Bible, open up to Romans chapter 8. chapter, verses 26 and 27 this morning. And so as you turn there, I know you've just sat down as you turn there, though, I'd like you to stand in honor of God's word and we'll read his word together.

The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8, 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. 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.

We are in desperate need of this great ministry of the spirit, Father. And so we ask you to give us insight into how the spirit works and helps us this morning. We're asking you, to instruct us by your word so that we might be a more faithful, more fervently prayerful people.

We pray this in Jesus name. Amen. You know, one of the realities that we face as Christians is that prayer, which ought to be central to the life of every Christian, of every follower of Christ, prayer can at times be very difficult. It can be hard sometimes to be regular and continuous in prayer.

Sometimes we begin to pray and we find ourselves either distracted or just not knowing what to say or not knowing how to say the right things. And so we struggle at times with prayer. It has been said that prayer ought to be or is as natural for a Christian as is crying for a newborn baby. As soon as a baby is born and takes their first breath, they begin to cry. And that ought to also be the case with followers of Christ, that the cry of our hearts ought to automatically be a cry of prayer to our new heavenly father whom we have been now adopted by through Jesus. And yet, despite that reality, the truth is that we we struggle to pray sometimes. Sometimes it's just because of busyness, because we live very busy lives. We live very fast paced lives and we're always going to the next event or getting ready for the next thing or recovering from what we just finished doing. And so sometimes the busyness of our lives tends to choke out our prayer lives. I remember reading a little anecdote about Martin Luther as he was commenting to someone when they asked him about about his very busy, very difficult schedule. And his comment was, yes, tomorrow I'm I'm going to be so busy. My day is so full of activities that I think

[3 : 09] I shall have to start my day with three hours of prayer. And I thought three hours of prayer. But that was his mindset that the busier he became, the more necessary prayer became for him and the more prayer he needed. And yet the realities of life is that we find it's often the opposite. The busier we are, the less we pray so that sometimes in that respect, prayer is similar to tithing. Sometimes the more we struggle with money, the less we give. And yet the thing that we need to do in order to be faithful with our money and to practice the spiritual discipline of managing our money well is to begin to give regularly. And yet it becomes a cycle. Well, prayer is similar because we get so wrapped up in the things that are happening around us. We forget to pray. And yet in order to prevent us becoming wrapped up, we we need to pray. So prayer is difficult. Sometimes it's not our busyness, though.

Sometimes it's just our distractedness. I don't know about you, but I do find it difficult. I think of someone praying for three hours at a time and I think, boy, my mind wanders after about two or three minutes and I'm having to reconnect myself, get back on track. I mean, my mind just wanders very easily when I'm when I'm in the middle of praying. And I know that happens to us sometimes as a group when we pray as groups together. Sometimes our minds will wander while others are praying when we're supposed to be praying along with them.

They're just all kinds of challenges that we face when it comes to something that ought to be as natural and enjoyable as conversing with our heavenly father. But when we're honest, we say sometimes, maybe most of the time, prayer is hard and it's difficult. It's difficult because of a lot of

things.

Paul addresses at least one of the difficulties, though, in prayer in the text that we're looking at this morning. If you look, he says in verse 26 that the spirit helps us in our weakness for we do not know what to pray for as we ought. We do not know what to pray for as we ought. So Paul here is not addressing the issue of not having enough time to pray, nor is he addressing the issue of being distracted, nor is he addressing the issue of not knowing how to pray, though some translations render it that way. The word here is most most commonly means simply what Paul is saying here that one of the difficulties that we do face in life as we try to pray is that sometimes we just don't know what to say. Sometimes we just don't know what we ought to pray for. In fact, Paul describes that that problem as a as a weakness. The spirit helps us in our weakness because we don't know what to pray.

Our weakness leads to our inability to know what we should pray at any given time. Now, the word weakness is an interesting word because it's used a lot of times to refer to physical ailments, which you might expect because we can use the English word weakness in that way. We can use it to refer to some sort of physical deficiency in someone. So if somebody is not physically strong, we say that they're weak or sometimes when somebody is is very, very sick, we'll say they're growing more and more weak. And so we use it in that way. And throughout the Gospels, the word weakness is used over and over to refer to various kinds of illnesses and diseases that Jesus heals. But the Apostle Paul, though he uses it to refer to physical infirmities occasionally, most of the time this word weakness in Paul's writings does not necessarily refer to a a physical weakness or at least it's not limited to physical weaknesses and illnesses. It's broader that it would include the physical, but it would be much broader than that to to really describe what it's like to live in a fallen world, particularly to live as those who have been redeemed by Christ and are looking forward to future glory. And yet right now presently are dealing with pain and suffering and heartache and struggling with sin and all the things that are common to life in a fallen world for redeemed people. In fact, he uses it that way.

[7 : 05] A couple of times in his letters to the Corinthians, I want you to hold your place there in Romans chapter eight and turn over to second Corinthians. We'll just look at a couple of places here where Paul uses the word this way in second Corinthians chapter 12. We see Paul use the word weakness to include physical ailments, but also to move beyond those physical ailments to general problems we face in the fallen world so that he speaks of his thorn in the flesh at the beginning of chapter 12. And then by the time you get down to verse nine, Paul says that Jesus replies to him that my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness. Of course, that means Paul's thorn in the flesh, a physical problem that Paul is facing. However, he goes on to say, therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me for the sake of Christ. And I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for when I am weak, then I am strong. So weaknesses is used at the beginning of this list as one among the several things that Paul describes. But then he describes all those things as being weak. So being insulted for Christ or hardships in general or persecutions, calamities. All these things are various forms of what it means sometimes in this world to be weak. In fact, a chapter later in chapter 13, Paul says in verse four that Christ was crucified in weakness. What does he mean by that? He means that Christ was crucified and he died as a member of humanity, that he was here in weakness, that he experienced all the things that we experience in a fallen world. The writer of Hebrews says something really, really similar in that regard.

Hebrews chapter four, it'll be on the screen if you don't want to turn there. In Hebrews chapter four, verse 15, we're told that we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our same word weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are yet without sin. So I think that this term weakness is a good catch all term, particularly for Paul, but for other New Testament writers as well, for life in a fallen world, the difficulties that we face in general. And because of that weakness, because we live in a fallen world, sometimes we don't know what to say to God when we come before him in prayer. Why is that the case? I think that's the case because we recognize that as a follower of Christ in a fallen world, we are going to suffer. We're going to endure weakness. But our suffering is not always something that we should want to be set free from, or at least not in every respect. Look back in Romans chapter eight to passages that we've already covered, that we've already considered. Verse 17 says that if we are children, we

are heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. So suffering here guarantees or is a or shows us that we will experience glory someday. So that suffering for followers of Christ is not always something bad. It's not even always something that we should want to have removed from us. So when we recognize that suffering is something that God uses to sanctify us, to make us holy, suffering is something that God uses to strengthen our future hope in something better down the road, then we may want to pause and ask, do I always want to pray that God will relieve me of these various kinds of suffering? What if this path of suffering is the means that God is going to use to do great and wonderful things in my life? Should I pray that God would relieve the suffering or should I pray that God would give me the suffering? How should we pray? What should we pray?

I think that that's the circumstance primarily that Paul has in mind as he uses the word weakness. It describes the tension that we face as those who have been promised future glory, but future glory that only comes to those who suffer with Christ in a fallen world. So in one sense we want to suffer, we want to be with Christ in solidarity in our suffering, but on the other hand we're human and we want to be set free from it. And in any given circumstance we do not know if this suffering is God's means of sanctifying me or is this suffering something that I ought to plead to be set free from because it serves some other purpose. Perhaps it's Satan's way of distracting me from what God has for me. And the fact that we don't know, the fact that God has not revealed all the details of his sovereign plan for the world or for our lives means that sometimes we just don't know what to say. We don't know what to pray sometimes because we don't know with all the detail, we don't know what God's will is for us.

[12:16] And Paul tells us that that is indeed the problem because he says here down in verse 27 that the spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. So that is our issue.

The issue is, is that we don't know. And when we are faced with our own weakness in the manifold forms in which we face our weakness, we don't always know whether we should pray for deliverance, whether we should pray simply that God would help us endure, or whether we should thank God in the moment for the sanctification that he's working through the weakness that we face. We don't know God's will and all its detail. Therefore, we, we don't know how we don't know what to pray sometimes.

But the good news of these two verses here is that God doesn't just leave us in that. He doesn't resolve that difficulty by saying, okay, well, fine, I will tell you all of my plans for your life so that you'll know specifically when I'm using suffering to sanctify you or to place your hope and help you place your hope in me. No, he doesn't do that. Instead, he does something better than that because we don't, we don't need a detailed layout of what our lives are going to look like. We don't need to know all the plans that God has in store for us. No, rather in the midst of our confusion, we need help. We need someone to come alongside of us and help us to pray and help us to endure, which is exactly what God provides. Look what our text says.

Verse 26. Likewise, the spirit helps us in our weakness. And then verse 27, the spirit intercedes for the saints. So God has met this great need. He has met our lack of knowledge in prayer, not by giving us the detailed information that we sometimes want, but instead by sending the spirit to help us in the midst of those difficult seasons of prayer for us, the spirit comes along to help us. But before we look at how the spirit helps us, I need to sort of deal with one side issue in this text, and then we'll get back to the main point. And that is that Paul mentions these groanings. The spirit himself, he says, intercedes for us with groanings, two deep four words. And there's been a lot of debate over, what does he mean by groanings? What's he talking about here? Are these groanings something that the spirit says alone? Or is this something that the Holy Spirit, does the Holy Spirit groan through us so that we're actually the ones groaning? And if that's the case, is this many, many interpreters believe that this is a reference to the act of speaking in tongues. And so you'll find many times in debates and in discussions about speaking in tongues that this passage is often brought in as support for saying that all believers ought to speak in tongues or ought to try to speak in tongues. And yet, I don't think that that's what this text is about, regardless of what your views on that particular issue happen to be. You may you may believe that tongues ceased with the closing of the canon of Scripture. You may believe that tongues is available to all Christians today throughout the world and throughout church history. Regardless of that particular issue, I don't think that this text is dealing with speaking in tongues at all. And I'll give you a couple of reasons why. For one, we know from from Paul's letters to the Corinthians, particularly first Corinthians, we know that

speaking in tongues is not something that every Christian is going to experience. In fact, hold your place in Romans and this time turn over to first Corinthians rather than second Corinthians. In first Corinthians chapter 12, Paul speaks to the issue of spiritual gifts and he speaks very clearly. He says in verse one of chapter 12. Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed or ignorant. He says, you know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore, I want you to understand that no one speaking in the spirit of God ever says Jesus is a curse. No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. So I don't want you to be uninformed. I don't want you to worship in ignorance the way the pagans do sometimes. So in regards to these spiritual gifts, he says in verse four. Now, there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit. There are varieties of service, but the same Lord. And there are varieties of activities, but it's the same God who empowers them all and everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good.

[16:43] And then he begins to list the gifts that are given differently and separately to different individuals within the church. So he says to one is given the spirit, the utterance of wisdom to another, the utterance of knowledge to another faith in verse nine and verse 10 to another, the working of miracles. And finally, we get down to the middle of verse 10 to another various kinds of tongues to another interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one in the same spirit who apportions to each one individually as he wills. So according to Paul in first Corinthians chapter 12, whether you believe in tongues or not is irrelevant, because in the context of the New Testament, when tongues was around, Paul says not everybody is given this gift. The spirit sovereignly distributes the gifts to those to whom he sees fit. The Holy Spirit apportions to each one and to some are given these gifts to another is given these gifts. And among the gifts that are given out here at this point in church history is the gift of tongues, but not everybody receives it.

Whereas in Romans chapter eight, the help that the spirit offers here is available to all believers. There's no qualification here in Romans chapter eight. This is a help that the Holy Spirit gives to all the saints. He intercedes verse 27 for the saints, which is just another word for Christians. So so I don't think, one, that this is a reference to tongues, because speaking in tongues is a gift that is reserved for only some within the church. Whereas the help that the Holy Spirit offers here, these groanings are groanings available for all believers. And it's a universal experience of Christians, of the saints of God. But there's another reason that comes straight from our text, and we don't have to turn anywhere to see it. And it has to do with how we translate this passage. These groanings in the ESV are called groanings too deep for words. But that's really a translation. That phrase too deep for words is a translation of one single word in Greek, the language in which this letter was originally written. It's a translation of one word, which is a combination. It is a word that that simply means speaking or speech, speaking. And then it has a little prefix in front of it that sort of corresponds to our prefix, you in or I in. You know, so if I want to say someone is something is understandable, I would say that it's intelligible. But I want to say you can't understand it. I would say it's unintelligible. Well, the same thing is similar as happening here. Paul is taking the word speak, which refers to normal speaking, normal language that we would use, and he's attaching the un to it. It's an a in Greek, but he's attaching the un to it. So it's the spirit speaks or the spirit intercedes with groanings that are unspeakable or or that cannot be spoken, that they don't correspond to any spoken word at all. So that I think what Paul is indicating here is that these groanings are not audible sounds at all. After all, it is the Holy Spirit making the sounds. He's a spirit. He doesn't have vocal cords, right? It makes sense that these would be inaudible. These are not normal. This is not the normal type of groaning that we see. In fact, he's using the word groaning in a similar way to the way he's used it before in Romans eight as a metaphorical way of describing a calling out or a yearning or a longing. He says that the creation itself groans. Well, none of us pictures the creation, the universe actually audibly groaning, do we? When we read that, no, we know that it's an expression of of a cry of longing. Well, that's what the spirit is doing here. The spirit with with with unspoken words is groaning for us. So this is not about speaking in tongues. If it were about speaking in tongues, that would only create a problem while Paul is trying to solve a problem. It would only give us anxiety if we don't have the gift of tongues. When Paul is trying to remove anxiety by saying the spirit is here to help not to put another burden on you or a desire for something that you don't have. So this has nothing to do with speaking in tongues. This is about something more universal than that and far, far more precious and helpful than that. So what is it that the Holy Spirit does?

What are these groanings? What is the help that the Holy Spirit offers? There's two things that I want you to know about the kind of help that the Holy Spirit offers us in prayer. The first thing that I want you to recognize this morning, you can jot this down if you're taking notes, is the Spirit's help is personal. It's a personal kind of helping. It's not from a distance. This isn't something he does at a distance from us, but this is something he does in and through us. In fact, the word that is translated help is really kind of as a word that Paul, I think Paul probably invented it because I cannot find this word anywhere else in the New Testament, nor am I aware of this word anywhere else in other ancient Greek literature. I think he might have invented it. It's a combination of a word with a couple of prefixes on it. And so it basically means to to grab hold of or take up something along with someone. So this idea of of helping someone coming alongside someone and helping them grab something, helping them grasp something or helping them to to lift something up. That's the picture that we have here. It's not impersonal. It's very personal. He's involving himself in our struggle and coming alongside us to take hold of the thing that we are struggling with. This is personal reminds me of field day when I was a kid. I don't know how many of you did field day as a kid in school. I mean,

I always I love field day. Not only did you not have to be in class, it was usually in those just couple of weeks out of the year in this part of Texas where it's actually comfortable to be outside and you were outside on the playground goofing off and playing games with the rest of your grade, not just your classroom, the rest of your grade all day. And it was just silly things, you know, carrying an egg on a spoon and having a race. But the by far for me, the most important event of the day was the tug of war, because with tug of war, it became clear which was the superior class in all of your grade. I mean, it was there's there's no either either you get pulled across the line or you pull them across the line. There's no doubt about which class is better and stronger after tug of war. And I I love tug of war. But the reality is, is that the team that usually won was the one that had the biggest, strongest kid looped around it in the back. I mean, that's really if you had a kid with sufficient girth and weight, all he needed to do was lean back and your team won.

[23 : 10] And we all knew that that was the secret. We all knew that it really mattered who was on the end of that rope, how big they were, how strong they were and how much they were willing to participate in the activity itself. And I think of the spirit's help like that, because we're sitting there struggling and pulling on a rope and there's nothing's happening. We're just ready to give up in our prayer lives. We're just nothing is happening. And yet the spirit comes alongside us and he and he grabs the rope along with us. And just by a simple tug of the rope, he begins to do things that we couldn't we couldn't fathom doing. He helps us in ways in our prayer life that we really would never be able to think of. So it's a personal kind of helping. It's not at a distance. He's right there with us. This is, in fact, the spirit who dwells within us. This is the same spirit who in verse two has set us free from the law of sin and death. The same spirit who does dwell within us in verse nine, who gives us life in verse 10 of this chapter, who will give life in the future to our bodies someday, who we have been told cries out within us and helps us to cry out, Abba, Father. He bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. This is the same spirit. So everything that he's been doing throughout chapter eight has been personal. And this is personal as well. He enters into our lives and he really begins to struggle with us and help us and aid us. So this is a personal help that he gives. And so we should treasure it and we should long for it. But more than that, his his work is not merely personal. His work is perfect. He doesn't fail when he intercedes for us. And the reason that the spirit doesn't fail is because he supplies what we are lacking. Remember, the thing in context that we are lacking here is knowledge of God's will in a certain in specific circumstances. We don't know his sovereign plan or sometimes we call it his will of decree. We don't know those things. He doesn't reveal those things to us. And yet the spirit knows them perfectly. Look at verse 27. First, we have a reference to the father, the searching one. And he who searches hearts, that's God, the father, 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. Literally, it says here that the spirit intercedes for the saints according to God.

It's the spirit's intercession. It's just it's in accordance with God, with with God's mind, with with God's ways and indeed with God's will. When the spirit intercedes for us, while we don't know what to pray, he knows exactly what God's plans are in every situation and in groanings that cannot be expressed in audible words. The spirit approaches the father on our behalf and praise that which we cannot pray.

If the suffering is intended to sanctify, then he pleads with the father to continue the suffering. If the plan of the father is to deliver us from the suffering and to cause us to hope and he'll be praise, he intercedes for us that we might be delivered. And in those times where we just don't know, he prays for us in exact accordance with what the father's plan is.

So that his prayers on our behalf are perfect prayers that are always fully answered for us. Perfect prayers. He never fails in his office of interceding on behalf of those in whom he lives and dwells. And that's good news for us. I can remember several years ago, years ago now, almost 15 years. I can remember when my dad was very, very sick in the hospital and and things did not look good at all. Kidneys were shutting down. Other things were happening. And and I didn't know what to pray because on the one hand, I want my dad. I mean, I wanted my dad to be I didn't have kids yet. I want him to be around. I'm not even married yet. I want him to be at my wedding and I want him to know my kids. I want I want him to I wanted that. And yet, on the other hand, he was sick and he'd been sick for a long time and he was miserable. And and I didn't know what to pray. How do you pray?

[27 : 35] And I can remember just laying down on my floor as my dad was sick. And I didn't know. I mean, I was just quiet. I had nothing to say. I didn't even know. What are you going to do here, God? You're going to take him or you're going to heal him? And I don't even know what to pray in this moment. And and that's when the spirit begins to intercede for us perfectly, personally interceding on our behalf so that when we come to pray, we don't always have to know what to say.

We don't always have to have everything mapped out in our prayers. We don't always have to know how and what and when to say certain things. We just need to come faithfully and trust that when we run out of words or when we don't have words, the spirit begins his work of intercession on behalf of us. If we know that, if we trust in that, I think that this will become an encouragement for us to be more of a praying people because we give up praying when we don't know what to say.

We give up praying when it becomes sort of rote memorization. We give up praying when we enter into the realm of distraction and boredom, not realizing that all along there, the spirit is coming alongside of us and he's he's groaning out to the father in ways that we could not comprehend, that we could not hear. And he helps us. It's an encouragement to be more fervent in prayer, not less fervent. It's an encouragement to know that even when we don't know, he knows.

And he intercedes on behalf all the saints, all those who have trusted in Christ, all those whose sins have been washed, all those who have in Jesus another intercessor, another mediator in place.

All of us have received also the spirit and he helps us. And I want to encourage you to remember this passage this week. I want to encourage you as you grow frustrated in your prayer life this week, or I want to encourage you when you get up early to pray and you find yourself dozing off and and you need another cup of coffee before you feel like you can say or do anything right in the presence of God.

[29 : 38] I want to encourage you to not despair in that moment, but to know the spirit is interceding for you in that moment. And I want you to know that when when you're suffering or when your loved ones are suffering and you have contradictory thoughts over what God might be doing in the midst of this suffering, you need to know that you don't have to resolve those contradictions. You can just silently lay before the father as a child and know the spirit is at work for you. If you belong to God, if you have trusted in Jesus, if you have become his child through adoption, if your sins have been washed away by the blood of Jesus, then not only do you have Jesus interceding to the father on your behalf, you now have a spirit within you crying out along with you and interceding for you. So be a person of prayer, not of many words, because you may have no words, but be a person of prayer because the spirit is praying with you. Let's pray.