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Romans #34
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Sermon Summary #34

Spiritual Help for Weak People

Romans 8:26-27

Yet another survey of professing Christians was recently conducted. And once again the results are terribly disappointing. The survey was conducted by the Cultural Research Center of Arizona Christian University in its recently released American Worldview Inventory, an annual survey that evaluates the worldview of the U.S. adult population. Conducted in February, the survey included a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults. What did the survey reveal? ***Some 62% of self-identified born-again Christians contend that the Holy Spirit is not a real, living being but is merely a symbol of God's power, presence or purity.***

One need only read Romans 8 to see how horribly misguided is the thinking of these professing born-again Christians. Let's briefly review what the Holy Spirit does for us as described in this one chapter. I identify no fewer than 15 activities or ministries or blessings that are ours because of the Spirit's presence in our lives.

- (1) The Spirit has set us free in Christ from the law of sin and death (v. 2).
- (2) The Spirit enables us to walk or live in righteousness (v. 4).
- (3) We live according to the Spirit and set our minds on the things of the Spirit (v. 5).
- (4) The Spirit brings life and peace to those who've trusted Jesus (v. 6).
- (5) We are in the Spirit (v. 9).
- (6) The Spirit is in us (v. 9).
- (7) To have the Spirit is to belong to Christ (v. 9).
- (8) The Spirit brings us life because of the righteousness of Christ (v. 10).
- (9) Since the Spirit raised Christ from the dead, he will also raise us up (v. 11).
- (10) It is by the power of the Spirit that we put to death the deeds of the body (v. 13).
- (11) The Spirit leads us (v. 14).
- (12) The Spirit is responsible for our adoption as the children of God (v. 15).
- (13) The Spirit enables us to understand our adoption and enables us to cry, Abba! Father! (v. 15).

(14) The Spirit bears witness to our spirits that we are the children of God (v. 16).

(15) The Spirit is the firstfruits in our lives of the promised consummate redemption (v. 23).

Now, in addition to these 15 ministries that the *person* of the Holy Spirit exerts in our lives, we learn from vv. 26-27 how he helps us in prayer. When I talk about Romans 8:26-27 I never have to worry about whether or not people will find it relevant to their lives. Application is never a problem here! I have no hesitation in saying that all of you struggle to pray as you should. Me too! All of us feel weak at times and wish that there were a way in which our unspoken requests could be made known to God. All of us, at various times, find ourselves not knowing how to pray in some particular situation. Simply put, we all need the help of the Holy Spirit. And these two verses explain what it is that he does.

The Context

The word “likewise” at the beginning of verse 26 connects what he’s about to say with what has gone before. He reminded us in v. 18 of the great and incalculable disproportion between the sufferings we experience in this life and the glory and beauty and joy and satisfaction that awaits us when Christ returns. Paul said this hoping to encourage us to endure in the face of suffering.

Similarly, in vv. 19-25 he again hopes to encourage us to persevere by pointing to the fact that even the material creation is groaning in anxious anticipation of our redemption, because when we receive our glorified bodies at the return of Jesus, the material creation will also experience its final redemption and the curse of futility imposed on it because of Adam’s sin will be lifted. The earth and everything in it will be renewed (see Rev. 21-22).

So, vv. 18-27 are one long exhortation in which Paul is saying, “Yes, I know it’s hard. Yes, I know you feel weak. Yes, I know you’re tempted to quit, but don’t. Your suffering will not last forever. A day is coming when your weak and broken bodies will be wonderfully and permanently resurrected and glorified. A day is coming when the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption. And now, on top of all that, I want you to know that even when you feel weak and wordless and helpless in your prayer life, the Holy Spirit himself intercedes on your behalf to make certain that your deepest desires and needs are brought to the Father in heaven.”

That is what is happening in this paragraph. And today we look specifically at vv. 26-27 and the Spirit’s role in our prayer lives.

Our Weakness (v. 26)

What does Paul mean when he refers to our “*weakness*”? I don’t think he’s talking about physical weakness, as if to say that the primary problem we face when praying is falling asleep or something else having to do with our bodies. All of us have experienced a lack of focus when we pray. We all know what it’s like for our minds to wander during times of prayer. We have all suffered from headaches or backaches or hurting knees when we kneel to pray. We have all experienced fatigue when we pray. We get

tired, even exhausted, and stop to take a nap or drink something to keep ourselves alert. That is not what Paul means by “weakness” in this verse.

Neither is Paul saying that we don’t know “how” to pray, as some translations suggest. He’s not talking about what posture we should assume, be it standing or kneeling or on our faces on the ground. He’s not talking about when or how often we should pray.

I’m convinced that he identifies our weakness in the second half of the verse. We are weak in the sense that “we do not know *what* to pray for as we ought.” We know we *ought* to pray. We know there are many people and circumstances and pressing needs that should be brought to the throne of grace. But our minds are limited. We simply run out of words. We are verbally crippled. We sense that there is much more that needs to be articulated but we can’t figure out precisely what it is. There are hidden things in the spiritual realm, mysteries, that baffle us and frustrate us when it comes to prayer. Indecision paralyzes us.

There are many times when we come to the end of ourselves. We’ve got nothing left to say, nothing left to give, nowhere else to go, no one to whom we can turn. It is precisely in those moments that someone will say to us, “Well, just pray more.” But not even that is helpful, because as Paul says, we don’t know what to pray for. We need a friend, a helper, someone with infinite knowledge and power to partner with us. And that friend is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Triune Godhead.

There are many things that we *do* know we should make a focus of prayer. Everything that is revealed to us in Scripture is a topic for prayer. Jesus tells us in Matthew 6 that we should pray that God’s name be “hallowed” or sanctified, and that his “kingdom” would come and his “will be done” on earth as it is in heaven. We are told by Jesus to pray for our daily provision of food and drink and that God would give us strength not to succumb to the temptations of Satan. We are undoubtedly instructed in Scripture to pray that the fruit of the Holy Spirit would be more evident in our lives. We are to pray for the salvation of the lost.

So, clearly Paul does not have in mind here *the revealed will of God* as set forth in the Bible. I know how to pray for those things. They are right there in front of me, in black and white, in the inspired text of Scripture. I don’t need help in knowing how to articulate my requests for such things. But there are many things in the Christian life that are not spelled out explicitly in Scripture, things that I would love to pray about, but I don’t know whether I should or even how. Words escape me.

Now, having said that, even with truths explicitly stated in Scripture, there are many occasions when I don’t know how to pray for them in my life or in the lives of others. For example:

Consider the circumstances of our brothers and sisters in Afghanistan. Do we pray that God would deliver them from the Taliban? Do we pray for their survival? Or do we pray for courage in the face of death? Do we pray for boldness in sharing the gospel? Or do we pray for wisdom in knowing where to hide lest they be found and martyred? Or do we pray for all of these for all of them?

Or take Paul and his thorn in the flesh, as described in 2 Corinthians 12. He obviously believed that he should pray that God would take it away. But as it turned out, his prayer was misguided, as God's design was for Paul to be humbled by the thorn and to learn how to trust in the sufficiency of God's grace while he endured it.

Another example from Paul's life would be his imprisonment as described in Philippians 1. There he says that he's ready to die and be with Christ, but he also is prepared to remain alive and serve and minister to the Philippians. He says, "I am hard pressed between the two" (Phil. 1:23). He knows that both are legitimate options, but which he should pray for is uncertain. He says in v. 22, "yet which I shall choose I cannot tell." Quite simply, he didn't know what to pray for.

You know that you should work hard and provide for yourself and your family. But you don't always know which career path to pursue or which of two or more job offers you should accept.

Or consider Paul's request of the Christians in Rome where he asked them "to strive together" with him in their prayers, "so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company" (Rom. 15:32). Paul doesn't know what God's "will" is in this case. He wants to visit Rome, but he also knows that God may will otherwise. So pray for me, he says, that I may know which is the purpose of God for my life.

My point is that there are many instances where we may know God's revealed will in terms of what is right and wrong, but we don't know how to make a decision between two equally valid options. We may sense that God is leading us in a certain direction, but there appear to be several possibilities, all of which are good and spiritually healthy. Or you may be in relationship with a person who is terminally ill and is suffering greatly, perhaps at the end of their life. Do you pray for healing, or do you pray for God to take them home to heaven? Or do you pray for both?

All of this is a good reminder that ***it's not necessarily a bad thing that we don't know God's will in every occasion or crisis in life.*** We are limited and finite, but the good thing is the truth that there is one who does know God's will: the Holy Spirit!

I'm also greatly encouraged to know that my limitations, my lack of knowledge, my inability to decipher precisely how and for what I should pray is no reflection on God's power. Let us never forget what Paul said about God at the close of his prayer in Ephesians 3: "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Eph. 3:20-21). You may not find the words to "ask" God for things in prayer. You may not even be able to "think" or imagine what your greatest and most pressing need is at the moment. But that is no problem for God. He does not suffer from the same limitations that you and I do.

So, when Paul says that in our present condition we often do not know what to pray for, he is not talking about style or posture or manner or length but of ***content*** in prayer. We are ignorant of what we or others may need, ignorant of what God has promised, and unable to put into words the cry of our hearts. But be encouraged, says Paul, because the Holy Spirit takes up where we, because of weakness, leave off. If we do not know what to pray for, the Spirit does. He intercedes for us "with groanings too deep for words."

This is incredibly encouraging news, to know that the Holy Spirit is always present, right smack dab in the middle of your struggle. He is not offended by your weakness. He does not mock you for not knowing

what to pray for. He joyfully joins you in this battle. Never forget the promise Jesus made to us all, that after his departure he will ask the Father to send us “*another Helper*, to be with” us forever, the Holy Spirit. And one of the primary ways in which he supplies us with help is when we reach the end of our rope in prayer.

Perhaps you have been told that so-called “victorious Christian living” is when we are able to do everything in our own strength. No. True victory in the Christian life often comes when we acknowledge our weakness and turn in trust and confident reliance to what the Holy Spirit alone can do through us. As my friend Ray Ortlund put it, “We never graduate out of weakness, even in prayer” (130).

What Does it Mean to Pray “in the Spirit”?

This statement in vv. 26-27 is one way in which we are to pray “in the Spirit.” You may recall that on two occasions we are exhorted to pray in the Spirit.

“praying at all times *in the Spirit*, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints . . .” (Eph. 6:18).

“But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying *in the Holy Spirit*, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life” (Jude 20-21).

There are a few other texts that use the same phrase, “in the Spirit.” We are told in Luke 10:21 that Jesus “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit.” Mark refers to King David as declaring “in the Holy Spirit” the truth of Psalm 110 (Mark 12:36). And Paul reminds the Corinthians (1 Cor. 12:3) that “no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says, ‘Jesus is accursed!’” And again, in the same verse, “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord except in the Holy Spirit.” To write Scripture “in the Spirit” (Mark 12:36) or to rejoice and worship “in the Spirit” (Luke 10:21) or to declare “by the Spirit of God” that “Jesus is Lord” clearly means to do so *under the Spirit’s influence or by virtue of the Spirit’s empowering presence*. It should be taken in contrast with any exercise that is done in the power of one’s own human flesh or will power alone.

We pray “in the Spirit” when we trust the Spirit to bring to mind the things for which we should make supplication. To “pray in the Spirit” is to bring requests and supplications to God in the strength the Holy Spirit provides. Or the Spirit is the one at whose prompting or urging one is to pray. Or the Spirit is the one whom we trust to accurately represent us at the throne of grace. Or the Spirit is the one who supplies the endurance and energy to persevere in prayer rather than so quickly giving up, as we are prone to do. John Owen, 17th century Puritan theologian, sums it up by saying that the Spirit “creates in us a rugged insistence that our God is a mighty fortress. He deepens our faith with fresh insight into God’s promises. He shows us how desperate our need for God really is. He stirs up God-ward desires and prompts in us frequent, if inarticulate, visits to the throne of grace” (cited by Ray Ortlund, 129).

Does Romans 8:26-27 refer to the Gift of Tongues?

There are some who insist that praying in tongues is *not at all* what Paul describes in these two verses. Then there are some who insist that the *only* thing Paul describes in these two verses is praying in tongues. And I am convinced that they are both wrong. So let's explore this issue more deeply.

The reason this issue comes up is that when Paul portrays his own practice of both praying and singing in tongues, he describes it as taking place "with my spirit" (1 Cor. 14:15). Paul's use of the personal possessive pronoun "my" indicates his human spirit is in view. But in Ephesians 6:18 and Jude 20 it is clearly God the Holy Spirit. It's important to note that in 1 Corinthians 14 there is a movement back and forth, as it were, between references to the Holy Spirit and the human spirit. Often Paul speaks as if both are in view, which is to say, that the "human" spirit is empowered by the Holy Spirit to give expression to some spiritual gift.

Let's look at several of these. In 1 Corinthians 14:2 Paul says that the person who speaks in a tongue "utters mysteries *in the Spirit*." Is this the Holy Spirit of God or the human spirit? My inclination is to say, Yes! As already noted, a bit farther down, in v. 14, Paul refers to his regular practice of praying in tongues and describes it as praying "with my spirit." This likely points to his human spirit, but not without the empowering manifestation of the Holy Spirit who is behind and responsible for the exercise of all spiritual gifts, tongues included.

So I would suggest, first of all, that any and all Christians can pray "in the Spirit" whether or not they have the gift of praying in tongues. Thus praying "in the Spirit" is certainly *more than* merely praying in tongues. But it is assuredly *not less than* praying in tongues. In other words, could it be that both Paul's (Eph. 6:18) and Jude's (Jude 20) exhortation to "pray in the Spirit" can *include* praying in tongues (for those who have the gift) but need not refer exclusively to doing so (as if the exhortation does not apply to those who lack the gift)? I think the answer is Yes.

What I'm suggesting, then, is this. For someone like me, every time I pray in tongues I am praying "with my [human] spirit" by means of or "in the [Holy] Spirit." But for someone else who does not have this spiritual gift, they can pray "in the Spirit" while making use of their native language. My primary reason for saying this is that both Ephesians 6:18 and Jude 20 appear to be exhortations that extend to all Christian men and women. Since we know that not all believers speak in tongues (see 1 Cor. 12:30; 14:5), aside from the question of whether all could or should do so, all are responsible to take steps to ensure that their devotion to and practice of prayer is sustained and empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit of God.

How does the Spirit "help" us in Prayer?

Instead of our weakness in prayer bringing discouragement to our hearts, Paul reminds us that "the Spirit *helps* us in our weakness" (Rom. 8:26a). It's interesting to know that the only other place in the entire NT where this verb "help" is used is in Luke 10:40 where Martha asks Jesus to tell Mary to "help" her in the kitchen! So, how does the Spirit "help" us in prayer? What does he do that overcomes our ignorance and weakness in knowing what to pray for? The answer is found in vv. 26-27.

Remember the context in which these two verses occur. Paul has been talking about the suffering that we endure while we wait in this life for the final redemption or glorification of our bodies (vv. 18-25). In fact, there is a great deal of “groaning” going on! The material creation, having been subjected to the curse incurred by Adam, “has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (v. 22). But it doesn’t groan alone! Indeed, “we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (v. 23).

This is the third time in this extended paragraph that Paul uses either the verb or noun form of the word “to groan.” In v. 22, the material or natural creation has been “groaning together” in the pains of childbirth. In v. 23, Paul says that “we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly.” The only difference is that the former verb emphasizes that creation does not groan alone but in conjunction with either the rest of creation or in conjunction with us Christians. When Paul comes to v. 26 to describe what the Holy Spirit does in and on behalf of weak Christians, he uses the related noun form of these verbs. As I said, there’s a whole lot of groaning going on in Romans 8. The material creation groans, we Christians groan, and even the Holy Spirit himself groans!

But is this “groaning” of the Holy Spirit literal or physically audible, or could it be metaphorical? In other words, is it the sort of groaning that a person could actually hear? The “groaning” of the material creation is clearly metaphorical. In other words, the natural world is personified and ascribed attributes or actions that are possible only among humans. Trees and rivers and valleys don’t audibly “groan” but are portrayed as laboring under the curse of sin and in a sense longing for the day when the curse is removed.

Of course, we humans both audibly and inaudibly “groan” as we wait in anxious expectation to be set free from the perishable and painful bodies in which we now live (Rom. 8:23). Perhaps Paul’s point is that the Holy Spirit stirs up within us and then identifies with our deep, profoundly emotional, yet inarticulate yearning for answers to prayers that we feel too weak and ignorant to utter. As our intercessor (vv. 26-27), the one who brings our inexpressible requests to the Father, the Holy Spirit takes up our groaning and in some mysterious way transforms it into meaningful requests that conform to the will of our heavenly Father.

So, Paul is here describing the Spirit himself praying or interceding “for” us to compensate for our lack of clarity or insight into what most needs to be articulated. It is the Spirit who prays, not we. As we noted earlier, whereas all spiritual gifts, including tongues, are “manifestations” (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:12) of the Spirit such that we can’t and probably shouldn’t even try to differentiate between what the Spirit does and what we do in our human spirit, in Romans 8 Paul clearly says it is the Spirit who prays. We don’t. In fact, we can’t. We are too weak. And he does it by means of “groanings too deep for words” (v. 26b).

Therefore, if praying in tongues is included in Paul’s thought in Romans 8, it is in no way exclusively concerned with tongues. It would be quite similar to what we saw in regard to praying “in the Spirit.” ***All praying in tongues is praying in the Spirit, but not all praying in the Spirit is praying in tongues.*** It may well be that Paul would include tongues in the reality of the Spirit’s “groanings” within and for us, but he would not restrict the latter to praying in tongues. In other words, Romans 8:26-27 is a glorious truth that applies across the board to all Christians, both those who pray in tongues and those who do not.

The argument of Romans 8:18-27 is that ***all Christians*** suffer in this present time, ***all Christians*** groan under the curse imposed by sin, and ***all Christians*** therefore struggle in their weakness to know precisely

how and what to bring to God in prayer. The promise of the Spirit's work on our behalf in vv. 26-27 thus applies to every believer, every child of God, regardless of what spiritual gift they either have or don't have.

Whose "groanings" are they?

But we need to dig more deeply into the question of whose groanings Paul has in mind. Does this refer to our groanings, or to the groanings of the Holy Spirit, or in some sense to both? Could it be that the Holy Spirit stirs and elicits these groanings in us such that they are in some sense both his and ours?

Some argue that these can't be the groanings of the Spirit because the Spirit is communicating directly with our heavenly Father. Why would the Spirit need to make use of groanings? The Spirit knows what he is asking on our behalf and the Father certainly knows what the Spirit is saying. Look again at v. 27. God the Father knows the mind of the Spirit and the Spirit knows what the will of God is for each of us. There is no confusion or uncertainty.

But remember: Paul isn't talking about how the Spirit regularly speaks to the Father. He is describing an altogether unique experience when the Spirit intercedes with the Father on our behalf when our hearts and minds are incapable of articulating in prayer what we want him to know. So I am led to conclude that these "groanings" are both ours and those of the Holy Spirit. ***The Spirit awakens in us or stirs in our hearts groanings with which he then identifies and makes his own. He then carries these groanings to the heart of the Father on our behalf.***

Such groanings occur in our "hearts" (v. 27), not in our mouths. You can't hear them or feel them. Paul is not describing some sort of spiritual ventriloquism as if to say we are the "dummies" through whom the Holy Spirit speaks. Rather, as God searches the hearts of his children (v. 27), he finds unuttered, unexpressed groanings produced in us by the Spirit.

The single Greek word behind the translation "too deep for words" is used only here in the NT (*alalētois*). It could mean incapable of being expressed in human language (cf. 2 Cor. 12:4). If so, the groans may well be audible, though inarticulate. Or does it mean simply unspoken, never rising to the audible level at all? In either case, the groanings are probably ours which the Holy Spirit inspires and prompts within us, which he in turn makes his own. They are inarticulate, inexpressible. But they are perfectly intelligible to him. Why? Because they are the work of the Spirit in our hearts by which he brings to expression what we are too weak to do.

These requests and needs are taken up by the Spirit in the form of deep groanings and carried by him to the Father. The Father in turn understands perfectly what these groanings mean because when the Spirit conveys them to God on our behalf, he does so in a way that perfectly conforms to God's will. The mind of the Spirit and the mind of the Father are in perfect harmony. So here is the sequence or process that Paul is describing:

In our weakness we don't know what to pray for → the Holy Spirit awakens in us and stirs up groans → the Spirit in turn makes our groans his own, groans that can't be put into words ---- these groans are then taken by the Spirit to God the Father ---- God the Father knows perfectly what the Spirit is saying because the Spirit only asks the Father, on our behalf, for things that align with his will.

Conclusion

We should never lose heart in praying. We should never give up. Our weaknesses and shortcomings and our sense of inadequacy must never undermine our commitment to prayer. The Holy Spirit is not affected by what so easily cripples us. He is never short of understanding. His knowledge is infinite and exhaustive. In a language which only the Father and the Spirit speak, your prayers are laid at the throne of grace.