

The Spirit's Intercession

Scripture: Romans 8:26-27

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Evening Service

People of God: There have been many times where I have been in a hospital room where the patient has been unable to respond. Sometimes they are completely unconscious. Other times they are conscious but their medication or their physical illness makes them incoherent or unable to carry on a long conversation. In these situations, they are unable to pray for themselves. They are just powerless to pray.

At such times, their loved ones often also find themselves unable to pray. They are so overwhelmed by the situation that they don't have the physical or emotional energy in which to really pray to the Lord. Or when they do, words escape them. They know that prayer is urgently needed, but they can't give voice to their thoughts. They can be so weighed down by the situation that they cannot find the words to speak to God.

At such times, we can be comforted by the words of our text: *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us.* When we find ourselves unable to pray, not only do we have a believing community upholding each other in prayer, we have the Spirit, himself, interceding for us. What an assurance that should be for us. Even our prayers are not dependent upon our own strength and abilities, because when our strength fails, the Spirit of God is still there.

In our weakness. Paul in the previous section talked about groaning. When we dealt with that last Sunday morning, we focused on how the creation groans. Even the very earth suffers and groans because of the effects of sin. The creation, too, needs to be liberated from its groans. At the same time, Paul also mentions how we groan inwardly. This groaning is something that Paul takes seriously.

That takes me back to verse 18, a verse I didn't focus upon too much last week. Paul says: *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.* How can Paul say that if

he takes our groans seriously and recognizes that in our weakness we are unable to pray? Is Paul dismissive of suffering? Is he trivializing our groans? Is he unconcerned about our weakness?

No, throughout this chapter Paul takes our suffering very seriously. In fact, in verse 17, Paul links our suffering with the suffering of Jesus Christ. Just as Christ was required to suffer, so we can expect to suffer. But just as Christ's suffering led to his glory, so too our suffering will lead to our glory. While suffering belongs to this present time, glory is what awaits us.

And so, Paul is not dismissive of suffering. He knew what it was like to suffer, especially for the sake of the gospel. Paul was whipped, stoned, jailed and he would be killed for the sake of the gospel. He knew what it was like to suffer. But he also knew the glory that awaited him. He knew that the life to come would be such a blessing that he could not really compare our present suffering with the glory that awaits us.

Think about that for a moment. We know the extent of suffering in our lives and in our world. For some people, it is completely overwhelming. And yet that is not worth comparing to what is to come. That must mean God must have something great in store in us. Something so great we really can't imagine what it will be like.

In the meantime there is groaning. In the creation and in our lives. But the creation's groaning will be lifted and we have the hope of the redemption of our bodies. And remember that in the Bible, hope is not used in our common way of using it. We often use hope as a wish that may or may not come true. I hope we'll have nice weather this week, but I really don't know. But in the Bible, hope is a certainty. It will come true. We have hope in the redemption of our bodies.

Then follows another word of reassurance: In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We are not alone in our weakness. Weakness due to physical suffering. Weakness due to mental illness. Weakness due to a battle with temptation. Weakness due to broken relationships. In such times, it often feels as if we are alone. Friends and family members sometimes don't understand or aren't there for you. Even God seems distant and aloof. It seems that you are completely alone.

But you're not. God is always there. His Spirit is with us. Isn't that what the Psalmist expresses in Psalm 139?

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

If I settle on the far side of the sea,
 Even there your hand will guide me,
 Your right hand will hold me fast. (vs. 7-10)

Even if we wanted to escape from the presence of God, it is impossible. Because God is everywhere. That's true for every human being, regardless of whether he or she is a Christian. God sees all what we do and what we say. There is no escaping the presence of God.

But we as believers have more than just this omnipresence of God. We have a presence far more personal, far more close, far more intimate than just a God watching over us. We have a God living within us, through his Spirit. As verse 23 stated, we have the firstfruits of the Spirit and because of that we have the assurance that the Spirit is there in our weakness. We are not left alone. The Spirit is there.

And what does the Spirit do for us? The Spirit intercedes for us when we do not know what we ought to pray for. Now, in one sense, we should not be ignorant about how to pray or what we should we pray for. After all, we have been instructed by Jesus himself, when he taught us the "Lord's prayer." But even when we follow that pattern, there can still room for ignorance. There are still times when we don't know what to pray for.

We should begin our prayers with praise of God. And yet, how well do we really know God? Can we fully comprehend his majesty and power? Can we truly search the depth of his wisdom and knowledge? When we address him as our heavenly Father, do we really understand what a privilege that is?

We pray for Christ's church and the coming Kingdom of God. But Christ's church is so big, how can we know all of her needs. We don't even know all the needs of the local church. And while we do know God's will for our lives, it's not always easy to apply the principles of God's Kingdom to the situations that we face in our lives. So how do we pray for these things?

We know that we can pray for our physical needs. But how do I distinguish between my needs and my wants? When a terminal illness arises, do I pray for a miraculous healing or for strength to cope with the illness, or perhaps for the Lord to take the person home to glory? And if I doubt about what I should pray for, does that undermine the effectiveness of prayer?

And then, there are those times when our weakness even prevents us from praying—where physically, we can no longer pray. Or where emotionally, we so overwhelmed that words are difficult to come by. Or even when spiritually, we are not prepared to come before the Lord in prayer. In our weakness, the Spirit intercedes for us.

It's like getting someone else to fill in your income tax return. I get someone to do that for me. He fills out the form for me and even sends it via

email directly to the government. But if a tax refund is expected, it's not the accountant who receives it, I do. It goes directly into my bank account.

In the same way, the Spirit fills out our prayers to God. He is the prayer expert. He knows what we need. He knows what we should be praying for. As a result, he helps us along. He makes sure our needs are presented before the Father. The resulting benefits are ours to receive and enjoy.

Now perhaps a word of caution should be voiced at this point. It is easy to abuse these words of our text. These words are not an excuse for a lazy prayer life. It's not as if we can say: well, it doesn't matter if I pray, because the Spirit will intercede for me anyway. That's not the goal of these verses. Paul assures us of the Spirit's intercession, not to deflate our prayer life, but to encourage it. Pray and pray—and when blockage develops in prayer, because of our weakness, do not despair or give up, the Spirit is interceding for us.

But how does the Spirit intercede? Our text says, *With groans that words cannot express*. In the Greek, it is simply stated as “wordless groans.” The Spirit does not pray like you or I. He has no need of words or sounds. His prayers are not something that we can hear.

Yet he does identify with our groans. This is the third time, groaning is mentioned. Earlier, Paul first mentioned groaning in terms of the creation. The creation groans for its liberation and freedom from sin. Then, Paul mentions that we too groan inwardly. We too long for that day when all things will be made new—when our weakness will be done away and our ignorance will be overcome.

Now Paul mentions groaning for the third time. The Spirit intercedes for us with “wordless groans.” The Spirit identifies with the groans of creation and the groans of believers. The Spirit too prays for the day of the complete renewal of the world and our lives. That's at the heart of the Spirit's intercession.

The Spirit does this in accordance with the will of God. As verse 27 says: *And he (God) who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will*. The Spirit's intercession is effective because it is done completely and perfectly with the will of God. Would you expect anything less? After all, the mind of God and the mind of the Spirit are in complete harmony with one another. Because in essence there are one.

And so, we have here a great word of reassurance. In our weakness, when even prayer fails us, the Spirit is there interceding for us. Do not doubt that God knows your needs. He knows them far better than you know them

yourselves. God hears our prayers. He hears our groans. He hears the intercession of Spirit, who also groans on our behalf.

And God will answer. He will respond to the intercession of the Spirit. He will answer in a way that will completely astound and amaze us. He will answer in such a way that we will be able to say with Paul: I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. What an amazing answer to the groans and weakness of the present time. Amen.