

Sermon 76: Romans 8:26-27: The Intercession of the Spirit

OUTLINE

Our intercession

The Spirit's intercession

INTRODUCTION

When I was in the Charismatic church I met up with a group of extremely zealous Christians. And once a week we would meet for prayer. A particular man would stand up and begin to exhort us. He would give a violent and angry tirade on how we needed to pray. It was much like pumping the troops before a battle. Then we would all break out in the African fashion of prayer with every one praying together. The idea was not one of praying in one heart and mind and as a body, but rather that God could understand us all and the more prayer you offered the more fire power you were making available. I cannot begin to describe to you the raucous nature of the prayer times, but there would come a distinct time in the praying where the quick rattling of tongues would give way to deep long groans. It was believed that this breakthrough into the groans was the higher plane of prayer where the best prayers were offered. These groans were understood to be unmediated Spirit prayers and the labour pains that produced answers. These groans were understood to be a burden under which one had to pray until they were released and the groans became peace.

I had much that was unbiblical that I had to unlearn from these weekly prayer sessions, and one truth in particular that had become clouded was the role of the intercession of the Spirit. I had wrongly understood the groanings of the Spirit to be this higher level of tongues, but this cannot be the case. The Scriptures clearly teach that not every person can have the gift of tongues, this is found in 1 Cor. 12:30, 'Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?' And Paul is speaking in Romans chapter 8 about a ministry of the Spirit from which every Christian can take encouragement.

Paul in the context is talking about 6 reasons why we can be certain of our salvation and in v19-27 he talks of three types of groaning which prove we will indeed receive our glorious inheritance. The groaning of creation is one of eager expectation of 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God;' then he talks about the groaning of the Christian who because of the Spirit longs for the redemption of our bodies; and now he talks about the groaning of the Spirit offering perfect prayer support in our weaknesses on our behalf. And so Paul brings to the forefront yet again the ministry of the Spirit in our salvation.

Many have noted the emphasis on the Spirit in this chapter. Notice that in v2 the Spirit of life sets us free from the law of sin and death. The Spirit does this by uniting us to Christ that we might receive His righteousness and be grafted into His life and death thereby dying to the power of sin. We see that it is the Spirit who enables us to live according to the Spirit, and to even put to death the deeds of the body, v13. The Spirit is the Spirit of our

adoption who causes us to cry out 'Abba Father.' The Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God. The Spirit seals us as heirs. The Spirit is the firstfruits of the new creation, and now we see that the Spirit is engaged in praying for us in our greatest needs. This is a wonderful reminder of the working of every member of the Trinity in our salvation.

As we consider this most important ministry of prayer, we will also consider our own praying before looking at what Paul is trying to encourage us with, in connection with the Spirit's intercession.

Our intercession

One of the great misunderstandings with regards to the prayer is that this praying by the Spirit is seen as some sort of replacement of our praying. This would be one of my main criticisms of the modern day tongues movement where people are encouraged to pray more in tongues than anything else because they are supposed to be praying perfect prayers. If you read v26 closely you will see the implication that it is still the Christians duty to pray although the Spirit also prayer, it is a case of both and, not either or. '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.' Notice that Paul describes the intercession of the Spirit not as a replacement for our praying, but rather the ministry of God's grace to us when our own ability to pray is at an end. This is not something that is done in place of our praying but in addition to our praying.

It is most important for us, before we consider the praying of the Spirit to remind ourselves of our own duty to pray. Prayer is probably one of the things that Christians find to be most difficult. Prayer is not a basic instinct like breathing that does itself automatically. Prayer is something that sin runs from and is unnatural for sinners. Prayer is an attitude of dependence and humility which does not appeal to the modern mindset of a being a self-made man. Prayer is something that is done by faith and does not often offer any tactile response that keeps us engaged. Prayer can appear foolish to a logical mind. For example, if God knows everything why do I need to pray; or, if God is in control and will do His will anyway why do I have to pray?

Let's remind ourselves why the Spirit's intercession does not replace our own. God is all powerful and does not need us in order to bring His will to pass. It is not true to say, as the Word of Faith teachers do that God needs permission to work in this world and you give it to Him by your prayers. Prayer is not a necessity for God; it is a condescension on His part to bestow upon man the privilege of participating as partners in His will. God has determined His will from before the foundations of the earth. He is working all things out in accordance with His will. However, God has appointed that He will bring His will to pass using prayer not bypassing it. This idea of God choosing to use our prayers even though He does not have to is pictured dramatically in Revelations 8:1-5, 'When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. 2 Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. 3 And another angel came and

stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, 4 and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. 5 Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.'

This reminds us then of the purpose of prayer, prayer is our opportunity to partner with God in seeking His will. Prayer is not a tool put into our hands so that we can seek everything we ever wanted. All our prayers must be directed to seeking God's will. Let me take the basic example of praying for health. Why do we pray for the health of ourselves and others? Most of us are shortsighted and think of it in terms of stopping pain. However, our prayers should be more ambitious than merely stopping discomfort we should seek our bodies to be healed in order that we may be fit to serve God. I don't doubt that God does care about our pain, but it is our duty to remember that pray is not ultimately given to us to have God as our personal doctor, butler, or fetchall. We are instruments in God's hand and should be seeking to pray in order to serve and not to be served, so that even in those things that we need like work, health, money, etc., that we ask for those things not as an end in themselves but as a means to fulfilling God's will.

Our prayers should be focused on God's glory and the extension of His kingdom. Our prayers should be for our missionaries, and for labourers to be raised up to go into the harvest. Our prayers should be for the strengthening of our persecuted brethren. We have an example of Paul using prayer for the gospel even though it includes something for Paul, Eph. 6:18-20, '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, 19 and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.' The Scripture gives us confidence of answered prayer when pray according to His will, 1 John 5:14-15, 'And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.'

The wonder of prayer is that we sinful, frail finite creature are able to beseech an almighty God and be answered. This is only possible because of Christ. Christ has made the way open so that we can come into God's presence and pray and be heard and answered. The true effectiveness of our prayer is not ultimately the amount or earnestness we apply, though to pray without zeal is an insult. No, our prayers are ultimately answered on account of Christ.

However, Paul is addressing the scenario when we are unable to pray as we ought. He speaks about the time when our weakness which is part of our fallen condition puts us at a disadvantage so that we even flounder in prayer. It is at this time that the Spirit prays on our behalf. Much is accomplished by prayer, but there are times when we don't know what we ought to pray. The famous example of this weakness is the time Paul prayed for the removal of the thorn in the flesh. 2 Cor. 12:8, 'Three times I pleaded with the Lord about

this, that it should leave me.' Here was Paul afflicted, in pain, in earnest that the suffering should cease, he prayed three times, but we see that God had another plan for him, for it was God's will to humble him and for him to suffer, 'But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.' (v9-10). Paul is telling us in Romans 8:26-27 that at times like these when we are at an end of our resources in prayer this is the time the Spirit is praying His perfect prayers for us. We are never forsaken by God even when we have done all that we can and can't do anymore, He continues to work for us.

The Spirit's intercession

Let us look more closely now at the Spirit's praying. We can know that the groanings of the Spirit spoken of by Paul are not tongues for this groaning of the Spirit is something that is done for every believer and not only for those who have the gift. The groaning of the Spirit is universal where the gifts of tongues we have said is not for every Christian. We also need to emphasize that the groaning of the Spirit is not the praying in the Holy Spirit mentioned in Jude v20, 'But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit.' Praying in the Holy Spirit here would be praying in accordance with the will of the Spirit and in line with revealed truth. Jude is not speaking about tongues, nor is he talking about the groanings of the Spirit, for this is not our praying but the Spirit's. In V19 Jude contrasts the false teachers who are devoid of the Spirit with Christ who should pray in accordance with the will and message revealed by the Spirit.

What is up for debate though is whether the groans of the Spirit are the groans that the Spirit causes within us, so that we groan; or if the groans are unuttered by us and only uttered unheard by us by the Spirit. A good argument can be made for either case and nothing is really lost by which conclusion you come to. There are those who believe that those times in prayer where you have exhausted yourself in prayer but you do not get up but continue to linger in a drawn out state of soul, perhaps with just tears and cries, with a heart heavy with pain and sharing of that pain with God without words but in groans and tears, that this is the groaning of the Spirit. Personally I believe that Paul is describing a hidden working of the Spirit on our behalf that we do not 'feel' but a ministry of the Spirit that is sure. My reasons are firstly, the groaning of the Spirit is distinguished from the groaning of the believer in v23. Secondly, God is said to read the mind of the Spirit not to hear our groans in v27.

Whichever way you want to go on this one does not matter, what matters is that we have perfect back up. Many of us may have the impression that we go through our sufferings alone, but we are not alone. Many think that we have to face our sufferings and trials with only our own strength. Many think that we are dependent upon our own perfectly rendered prayers for aid from God. Paul tells us otherwise. Paul puts 2 staggering truths before us. Firstly, there are perfect prayers being offered for you by the Holy Spirit when you do not know how to pray. And secondly, the Father perfectly hears these perfect prayers. The

conclusion is inescapable. If God is praying for you and God is hearing those prayers, do you think those prayers will be answered? Of course yes!

Paul's desire to make sure that you feel like you are the centre of working and love of three undefeatable friends, the Father, Son and Spirit. Add this thought to all that Paul is telling us in this chapter. The Trinity have loved you from eternity past setting their love upon in Christ. The Father elects, the Son agrees to stand surety for us and the Spirit agrees to apply the benefits of the Son's work. The Father provides all that is necessary in the Son and the Spirit to save and secure you. The Son gladly gives Himself and His Spirit to us. The Spirit unites us to Christ so that we receive the co-benefits of justification, sanctification and adoption. But the love does not stop there; the provision does not stop there. God will ensure that all those who are predestined will end up glorified, that all who have been given to the Son will be raised up on the last day. Christ continues to intercede for His bride, the Spirit has been given to apply all the benefits of Christ's work to us and enables to walk holy. But upon that the Spirit is not only helping us when we cooperate with Him but also when we are helpless, when we have come to the end of what we can do and our weakness overcomes us. Then the Spirit groans for us, the Father hears and we can be sure that all we need to get to heaven God is working for us. We are not saying that you should be passive and not seek to make your calling and election sure, nor that you should not complete your salvation in fear and trembling. No, apply yourself in dependence upon the Spirit all that you can. But when you come up against your finiteness, when you but heads with indwelling sin, when you catch that speed wobble and continue sliding along on the tar, when you come to the end of yourself, all is not lost for the Spirit continues to pray on your behalf. Praise be to God forever!

What do you think some of these intercessions would be?

Even if we do not know what the Spirit is praying, please appreciate the intense way in which the Spirit is engaged in prayer for you, He groans. There is strong feeling and wholeheartedness in His praying for us.

Now what does the Spirit pray? There are other prayers in Scripture which reveal something of what the Spirit might pray, let us consider these. Firstly, the high priestly prayer of Christ. This is the longest prayer of Christ in the Bible and it is significant because this is Christ's unveiled prayer for the disciples just before He is arrested and taken from them. So picture it, you are weak, tempted, doubting, frayed, and the Spirit begins to pray as Christ did. V11-17 'And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. 12 While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. 13 But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. 14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 15 I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of

the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.' Jesus not only prays for our preservation but that we might know His love, and be unified, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.'

When God prays for His people He prays that they would persevere and that they might know His love, that they might be sanctified.

Paul prayers reveal what the Spirit might ask for, Eph. 1:16-21, 'I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might 20 that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.'

And I will end with Eph. 3:14-21, 'For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith---that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ 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, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.'

If God be for us who can be against us?