



Central Peninsula Church

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Romans 8:26-27
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The Promise of Answered Prayer

SERIES: *His Precious and Magnificent Promises*

There is an old story about a man being pursued by a hungry lion. Feeling the beast's hot breath on his neck and knowing his time was short, he prayed as fast as he ran. He cried out in desperation, "O Lord, please make this lion a Christian." Within seconds, the frightened man became aware that the lion had stopped the chase. When he looked behind him, he saw the lion kneeling, moving his lips in prayer. The man was very relieved and he decided to join the lion in prayer. He walked up to this massive beast, and when he was near enough he could hear the lion praying, "O Lord, thank you for this food that I am about to eat!"

That's a rather silly story about how we often pray in desperation. There is no question that difficulty, danger and desperation drive us to prayer. The Bible is very realistic about this. It's full of prayers born of adversity. David wrote some of his most memorable prayers while he was being chased by King Saul in the wilderness. When confronted with the grumblings of God's people, Moses prayed with added passion.

In Romans 8 Paul has been talking about the difficulties of God's children. He's been trying to offer some encouragement by way of God's promises. Last week we saw that he offered the encouragement of the future hope of glory. He said that the glory that awaits us far outweighs the sufferings of this present time. He said this hope is so great and our present afflictions so real that we and all creation groan for our future redemption; we ache to be freed from this world and these bodies. So we saw that the normal Christian life is a life of groaning, of longing and hoping for something we don't yet have.

The question is, where does that leave us now, in the present? Is there any help that God provides right now in the midst of my groaning? The answer to that

question is, yes. And once again the answer lies in the person of the Holy Spirit. Remember that up in v. 9 Paul said that the distinguishing mark of the Christian is that the Holy Spirit has actually taken up residence in his heart. And the Spirit helps us in a number of ways. The Spirit helps us fight against the flesh. The Spirit gives us an inner assurance us that we're God's children. The Spirit even gives us a taste of that future glory so that we long for it even more. But starting in v. 26 Paul says that the Spirit also offers his assistance in this area of prayer. Look at what he says.

"And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:26-27).

I. The need of the Spirit's help in prayer (ignorance).

We see here that there is an intimate connection between suffering and prayer. Paul mentions how the Spirit helps us in our weakness. Suffering, of course, exposes our weaknesses. It's through suffering that we come to grips with how frail and dependent we really are. And it's in these times that we cry out to God. Nobody has to tell us to do that, it just comes naturally. We all know that we should pray more. We all struggle to keep the discipline of prayer. But I've found that there is one sure fire way to get my prayer life going, and that's to be faced with my own helplessness. It's in those times we come to God. One of my favorite books is simply called, *Prayer*. It's by an old saint named Hallesby. He wrote,

“Listen, my friend. Your helplessness is your best prayer. It calls from your heart to the heart of God with greater effect than all your uttered pleas. He hears us from the very moment you are seized with helplessness, and he becomes actively engaged at once in hearing and answering the prayer of your helplessness.”

Isn't it true that in our helplessness we turn to God and we just don't know what to say? That's what Paul says here when he says *“we do not know how to pray as we should.”* Haven't you been in a situation where you wondered what in the world to pray for? You didn't know what would be the best solution to the problem. Should I pray for deliverance from my sufferings or the strength to endure them? Should I pray for this to happen or that? You can see two sides to it, and when one way looks like it would work, then you can see the other side and it looks like another entirely different thing would be better, and you didn't know what to pray for. We recognize that there could be times when our own prayers might conflict with others. I imagine the Boston Red Sox and the St. Louis Cardinals are praying for the same thing right now, but they both can't win. What is right? We don't know. There are many situations like that, when we don't know how to pray as we ought.

The Apostle Paul experienced this. He said he was afflicted with a thorn in the flesh. We don't know what that was, but it was something that was a real problem for him. It probably hindered his ministry. It probably made him feel at times like he wanted to quit. It made him feel terribly inadequate. So he says that he prayed that the Lord would take this thing away, remove it. Three times he prayed for that and each time the Lord came back and said, **“No, my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness”** (2 Cor. 12:9).

Even Jesus experienced this in the Garden of Gethsemene. He was in intense emotional distress. I believe there was a level of spiritual conflict going on

in Jesus' spirit that would be unbearable for any of us. Droplets of blood came out of his skin. And Jesus prayed. First, he just cried out “Abba, Father.” And then he asked his Father to remove this cup, but then he countered, **“Not my will, but yours”** (Mk. 14:36). You get a sense that in his humanity Jesus didn't quite know what to pray.

But it's right in this place of weakness, of helplessness, and of ignorance that the Holy Spirit helps us.

II. The manner of the Spirit's help in prayer (wordless groaning).

Paul says the Spirit *“intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”* Earlier he said creation groans, and we groan. Now he says the Spirit groans. And these groans are somehow equated with the Spirit's prayers on our behalf.

Notice these groanings *“are too deep for words.”* Literally they're “wordless groanings.” It's a mistake to associate these wordless groanings with the gift of tongues, as some do. These groans can't be equated with the gift of tongues because tongues were expressed in words that others could understand and interpret. These groanings are more like inarticulate sighs. They're those longings and aspirations which well up from the depths of the spirit and can't be imprisoned within the confines of everyday words.

What's our part in this? It appears on the surface that we're not doing any praying at all. Everything that's said relates to the activity of the Spirit on our behalf. But because the Spirit himself dwells within our heart, we feel these groanings ourselves. He groans for us but he also groans in us and through us. It's interesting that the word Paul uses for “help” in v. 26 occurs in only one other passage in the Bible. It's the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10. Jesus was at their home for dinner. Martha was doing all the work while Mary sat at the Lord's feet. Martha had more than she could handle so she asked the Lord to tell her sister Mary come to *help* her. In essence she said, “Tell her to help me by doing her part of the work.” The help would consist NOT in Mary doing ALL the work, just her part. That's the idea here. This “help” is a joint activity

of the Spirit and us. The Spirit is groaning and praying not apart from us but in us and through us.

You know what this feels like, don't you? It's felt in the heart; it often can't even be articulated. It's those deep yearnings of the soul that all of us feel at times for more of God for ourselves, or for someone else. This is what we often call a *burden*. Have you ever sensed a burden in your life for prayer for your own needs or someone else's needs? You feel it but you're not sure how to articulate it. This is what Paul is talking about. And it can't be separated from that longing for the redemption of our bodies that Paul talked about in v. 23. We feel a dissatisfaction with the present experience of life, a discontent with the shallowness of our present Christian experience and our weakness in fighting the flesh. This is the cry of the Spirit within for something more, something deeper, something more satisfying than our present experiences, for freedom. The Spirit prays within us, creating those restless yearnings for something more of God than we now possess.

A couple of months ago I had kind of a frightening experience. I got a bad case of food poisoning on a Sunday night. I'll spare you the details but by the time Tuesday morning rolled around I was pretty dehydrated. I got up, walked through the kitchen, and promptly passed out. I guess I was semiconscious because I was able to call out for Lynn to come and help me. It was kind of scary because we really didn't know what was going on. So she called 911. As you know, the nice thing about calling 911 is that the person you're talking to immediately gets a readout in front of them with your name, address and telephone number. The great thing about that was that we weren't even able to say what the problem was. I could just barely manage a groan. Lynn was crying and hardly even able to describe my condition. But the dispatcher was fine with all of that. She knew where the call was coming from and help was on the way.

We might be tempted to think, well, what can prayers do that are nothing more than wordless groanings? But, you see, when the Spirit intercedes for us in that way, God the Father hears; he knows us; he knows what we need;

help is on the way.

III. The result of the Spirit's help in prayer (confidence).

That's what Paul emphasizes in v. 27. God is the one who searches the hearts – our hearts. And he is able to understand the mind of his Spirit who lives in our hearts. Though we only know it as groaning, God the Father knows what the Spirit is praying. He understands.

It's like if our church copier broke down. I'm not mechanically minded, but what if I called the repair shop to see if they could tell me what the problem was and if I could do anything about it. I would quickly discover that I didn't even know how to describe what was broken. I didn't know the names of the parts or what was specifically wrong. I just knew the copy machine didn't work. So what would happen next? Well, the repair shop would send out a technician. While working on our machine, he might also call the shop. Unlike me, he would know how to describe what was needed. He would use words I didn't understand, but the person at the shop did, and soon the copier would be repaired. My need would be met because someone came and communicated to headquarters in words I could not express. That's what the Holy Spirit does for us. When we don't know how to pray, the Spirit knows precisely what we need and prays in a language the Father perfectly understands. No matter how incompetent you feel in prayer, the pressure is off. Someone far more competent than you prays for you.

And not only that, he prays in perfect alignment with the Father's will. That's what Paul says. He says God knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for us according to the will of God. To know the mind of the Spirit is not just to understand it in terms of knowledge, but it means he identifies with it; he agrees with it; he's one with it. Why? Because the Spirit is speaking according to God's will. So we don't need to worry that God won't know how to help us

because we don't know how to pray. The Holy Spirit knows what's best for us and he prays according to the mind of God.

John Chrysostom, who was a great preacher way back in the fourth century, used the analogy of a young boy whose father had been away on a long trip. The boy wanted to give him a present when he returned. So his mother sent him to the garden to gather a bouquet of flowers. But the boy gathered weeds as well as flowers. Nevertheless, when his father returned, he received a perfect bouquet of beautiful flowers. The boy's mother had intervened, removing all the weeds.

Our groanings and prayers aren't exactly a thing of beauty as they leave our lips. As they start their way heavenward, they're a mixed bag of weeds with a few stray flowers. When they arrive, however, thanks to the Spirit's competence, they're nothing but beautiful flowers. We may groan, "Lord, please take this difficult person out of my life," but the Spirit counters, "No, Father. Don't do that. He needs to be more patient. He needs to be more sensitive and easier to get along with." God knows the problem is not the difficult person, it's me. But I don't realize that. He knows that there is more important work to do, something that is more eternal and deeper than simply releasing me from pressure. God desires something glorious, and all through life we're being groomed for that. The tough times are the tools that shape us and make us what God intends us to be. God knows what he is doing. He is infinitely wise. He knows when we need to be left in hard circumstances and when we need to be delivered from them. That's why in the very next verse, Paul can declare, **"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose."** The reason we can know that and have such confidence is that the Spirit has weeded our groanings and

interceded for us according to the will of God and God answers those prayers.

CONCLUSION

So the end result of this is that you and I can have tremendous confidence in our prayer life. It's a confidence that's not rooted in who we are, or what we do, or how we say it, it's rooted in the Spirit's work of intercession on our behalf. No matter how incompetent you feel in prayer, the pressure is off. Someone far more competent than you prays on your behalf. Charles Spurgeon writes, *"It is a mark of wondrous condescension that God should not only answer our prayers when they are made, but should make our prayers for us. That the King should say to the petitioner, 'Bring your case before me and I will grant your desire,' is kindness. But for him to say, 'I will be your secretary. I will write out your petition for you. I will put it into proper words so that your petition shall be framed acceptably,' this is goodness at its utmost stretch. But this is precisely what the Holy Spirit does for us poor, ignorant, wavering, weak people."*

If he does that for us, how can we go wrong? He shapes our inarticulate groans into petitions that God the Father knows and answers because they're in perfect accord with his will. In essence, Paul is saying that we can't go wrong in our prayers. You might not feel like you know what to say or how to say it. You may feel like your prayers lack the passion and intensity that they ought to have. You may feel like your life is far too out of control for God to pay attention to your prayers. You might feel like your faith is smaller than a mustard seed. No matter how incompetent you feel in prayer, the pressure is off. Someone far more competent than you is praying.

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