

### **When we don't know *what to pray***

November 2, 2008 - Romans 8:26-27

Sometimes you just don't know what to say. Your toddler paints the wall with peanut butter. Your teenager backs the car into a fire hydrant. Your spouse tells that embarrassing story at a social event you wished they would not repeat.

One of my speechless moments came at the end of a simple trip to a store. I paid for my stuff, and then I made the dreaded journey towards the store's security gate. You know those things they have at the exit doors to try to catch shop lifters? Well, I always get a little nervous going through those things. I took one step into the gate. Then I thought world war 3 had started, a siren went off, lights started to flash, the gates locked. There I was looking like a criminal. Of course everyone's heads at the checkout snap over and look at the offender. I saw the mothers giving me a look like "I've come face to face with a hardened criminal." Others whispered to their children probably things like, "he steals stuff – he might steal children too." To make matters worse, a girl from our church was working there. Does she come to help me? Does she intervene saying this man could not possibly steal? No. She's doubled over laughing hysterically at my

plight. I could say nothing. I went back to my cashier, she did her little scan and I tentatively went through the gates. Thankfully the alarm didn't sound this time and I escaped. But sometimes you don't know what to say. Other times you don't know what to pray.

You do your best at work. You carry out your responsibilities. But there are some difficulties. You've been trying to bring change maybe for years. But it never seems to happen. So you come before the Lord in prayer. Do you ask for strength to persevere at work or do you pray that God leads you to another job?

You've been given the diagnosis. The question is now what. The doctor presents several treatment options. But you don't know which one is best. The possible side effects make you wonder if you should take any treatment at all. So you come to the Lord in prayer. Do you ask for wisdom on which treatment to take or strength to let the disease run its course?

There's a bully in the class. Sometimes he targets your child. It infuriates you that this kid acts like that. But you're child doesn't want you to get involved because it will just make things worse. So

you come to God in prayer. Do you ask for the bully to be removed from the situation or for strength for your child to confront the bully?

Your elderly loved one lies in a hospital bed in serious condition. They know Christ. Life has been a struggle these last years. So in the waiting room, do you pray for their healing or for their promotion to glory? Do you express your true feelings to the person you like and think like you or do you remain silent? Do you step out on your own in business or stay where you are? Do you ask for God's help to move to that new situation or do you ask for contentment to remain where you are?

What do we do when we don't know God's will or what to pray?

God has revealed a lot of His will to us. Love your neighbor as yourself. Flee sexuality immorality. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Speak the truth in love. But in many other situations, like the ones I just talked about, His will is not clear.

Some people claim you can discover God's will on everything if your faith is strong enough or if you walk close enough to God. But that position does not hold water in the Bible or real life. The human

condition imposes upon us all sorts of weaknesses. We face some physical challenges. We suffer from lack of power. We have disabilities and inabilities. We have limitations to our knowledge. We don't know what other people think. We don't know God's specific will in certain situations. We can't possibly understand all that He's up to. We live in a fallen world. We ourselves are stained with the sinful nature which we must struggle against in seeking God's will. We face the opposition of the spiritual forces of evil who do not want God's will to become known or carried out. All these add up to large obstacles in actually discovering God's will. So we might know the door is open to pray. We have learned a bit more of how to pray over the last few weeks. But what happens when we don't know what to pray?

Well friends, we need not despair. God has not left us alone to thrash around in confusion. In fact, God provides a very specific and intentional plan to assist us when we're perplexed in prayer. Today, we are going to see that plan rolled out for us.

In the past couple of messages on prayer, we have begun to look up to the One we pray to. We considered the prayer of praise two

weeks ago. In Psalm 135, David praised the Lord in prayer because of God's greatness and awesomeness. Last week we looked at who we pray to in asking. We discovered our God is the generous Dad in heaven who wants to give good gifts to His children.

Today we want to look at what God provides when we don't know what to ask for. This provision plan comes in the middle of a passage written by the Apostle Paul. He describes many provisions of God for the Christian which assure us that we are God's children and encourage us as we live the Christian life. We seek answers to four questions from this passage. Who has God provided to help us in times of perplexity? What kind of help does He offer? How does He help us? How might we respond to these truths? Please find Romans 8, starting at verse 18 in your Bibles.

### ***Romans 8:18-30***

<sup>18</sup>I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. <sup>19</sup>The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. <sup>20</sup>For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

<sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. <sup>23</sup>Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup>For in this hope we

were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

<sup>26</sup>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 with groans that words cannot express. <sup>27</sup>And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

<sup>28</sup>And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup>For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. <sup>30</sup>And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Verses 26 & 27 contain the answers to our question:

***Q. Who does God provide to help us when we don't know***

***what to pray?***

**A. God provides the Holy Spirit to help us.**

Who is the Holy Spirit? He is the third person of the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. John Piper writes, "Christianity is the only religion in the world that affirms that there is one, and only one, true God, and that there are three divine persons in the one God: God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ), and God the Holy Spirit. This is called the doctrine of the Trinity. The church did not come to embrace it because there is a sentence in the Bible that says: "there is one God existing as three persons equal in divine essence, but distinct

in personhood." There is no sentence like that in the Bible. Rather the reason the church has embraced this doctrine is because the Bible unwaveringly speaks of one true God, not three Gods, and yet reveals the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit as God, *and* as distinct persons.

If this perplexes us (you), keep in mind: We are in no position as creatures to dictate to our Creator what he may or should be like. God is absolute reality. He was there before anything else was, and he did not come into being, but always was. Therefore nobody made him the way he is, and there is no reason he is the way he is. He simply is. That is his name: "I Am Who I Am" (Exodus 3:14). Our role is not to say what can and can't be in God, but to learn who he is and who we are, and to shape our lives according to his reality – his will. We submit to the way he is. He doesn't submit to the way we are or the way we think he should be. One place which reveals a lot about the Holy Spirit is Romans 8."<sup>1</sup> Specifically in verses 26 and 27, Paul explains the Holy Spirit's help when we don't know what to pray.

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, Sermon – The Spirit Helps Us in Our Weakness, Part 1, May 26, 1992, Desiring God. Website: [www.desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringGod.org).

God provides the Holy Spirit to help us when we don't know what to pray.

### ***What kind of help does He offer?***

#### ***1) It is a "one piece of a greater support system" kind of help.***

The Holy Spirit's help when we don't know what to pray for is part of God's massive support system for the Christian. It is one piece of a vast puzzle adding up to a beautiful picture. It is one pillar among many that holds us up in our Christian lives.

Verse 26 begins with the word "Likewise" or "in the same way." Like what? In the same way as what? Well there are a couple of possible answers.

Paul could be referring to the same way that hope helps us in trials. In verses 18-25, Paul explains that Christians face their trials by hope in our ultimate deliverance by God. This hope comforts us, sustains us and enables us to go on. So in the same way that hope helps us face trials, the Holy Spirit helps us in prayer. As hope sustains us in suffering, the Holy Spirit sustains us in times of perplexity.

Another possible source that Paul refers to is many other helps the Holy Spirit gives the Christian. Romans 8 is a Holy Spirit-saturated

chapter. In verse 2, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus sets us free from the law of sin and death. In verse 4, the Spirit helps us fulfill the just requirement of the law. According to verse 6, setting our minds on the Spirit gives us life and peace. Verse 11 tells us God will raise us from the dead by the Holy Spirit. In verse 13, we're told that by the Holy Spirit we put to death the misdeeds of the body. In verse 14, the Sons (and daughters) of God are led by the Spirit. In 15 and 16, the Spirit bears witness IN us that we are the children of God and so assures us of our salvation. And in verse 23, the Spirit is the foretaste of the glory that will be ours when God ultimately glorifies us. All of these pillars of support already exist in the Christian's life because of the Holy Spirit. Then verse 26, likewise, in the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

In either case; the comparison with hope sustaining through suffering or the emphasis that this is yet another pillar of support by the Spirit, Paul shows the broad, vast, comprehensive support God provides us to live the Christian life. So the Holy Spirit's help is "one part of a greater support system" help. But it is also another kind of help.

*It is a "coming alongside when we nearly collapse" kind of help.*

When we don't know what to pray for, its like we're near collapse. We face a situation we can do little or nothing about. So we cry out. But we don't even know what to cry out for. So the Holy Spirit comes alongside to help us in that moment.

We get a picture of this from the word "help" used in the first part of verse 26. The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. What is meant by the term help? The word literally means "together taking over against." One person gives help to another by taking hold of the burden so that together they can push against or hold up that burden.

Think of a man struggling to carry a heavy load and almost collapsing. Suddenly, someone comes along and says "Let me get hold of the other end of your load." So instead of the man having to carry the whole burden himself, the man who comes along takes hold of the other end. Together they proceed to carry this load that was too much for the one man acting alone. The Holy Spirit is the man coming along to help.

The same word for "help" is used in that account of Jesus visiting Mary and Martha. Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening. Martha was busy

preparing a meal for about 15 people. Martha gets frustrated that Mary has not come into the kitchen. Finally, in front of everyone, Martha confronts Jesus: “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work. Tell her to HELP me.” Same word as in Romans 8:26: the Spirit helps us. Tell Mary to give me a helping hand in this heavy load of suddenly getting together a meal for 15 people.

When we carry heavy burdens and experience perplexity in prayer the Spirit comes and gives us a helping hand. He takes hold of our perplexing burden in order to help us to know what to pray for. Notice he doesn’t do the work instead of the Christian. He assists the Christian in doing the work. Martha didn’t want Mary to do the work instead of her. She wanted Mary to assist her in the work. We need the Holy Spirit’s assistance in our weakness. Not weaknesses – weakness - singular

This weakness is our general state or condition that prevents us from clearly knowing God’s will. This weakness is not sin. It is the weakness that comes with being human. In fact, Jesus himself experienced this weakness. Notice in Romans 8:3 Paul writes, “God sent his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh.” Jesus did not sin. But

he took on the weakened flesh of humanity which included this limitation of not always knowing the will of God and what to pray for. Remember the Garden of Gethsemane prayer we looked at: Father if it is possible, take this cup from me. Jesus asks for wisdom on the will of God because the limitations of humanity prevented Him from fully knowing it.

Paul struggled with this weakness. He confesses he doesn’t know which way to go in Philippians 1:23. “I am hard pressed between the two.” He didn’t know whether to pray for release from prison so he could continue to help the Philippians or for release from life so he could die and be with Christ. All Christians suffer from this weakness where we carry the heavy load of not knowing what to do.

But God sends someone to help us: the Holy Spirit. We’ve seen what kind of help he offers: “One pillar among many in support” and a “coming along side” help. But how in fact does the Holy Spirit help us when we don’t know what to pray for.

### ***How does the Holy Spirit help?***

***Way #1 - He intercedes for us through our groanings while we pray.***

Look at the end of verse 26. “The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings that words cannot express.” What is intercession? To intercede means to come alongside someone in trouble and act on their behalf. Say you’re driving along the road. You come upon an accident. You see that a group from one car is about to throw the driver of the other car over a bridge because they are so angry about the accident. So you jump out and plead with the mob not to follow through on this vicious act. There are insurance companies and police who can work these things out. But please give this man his life. That’s intercession.

When we do not know what to pray for, the Holy Spirit intercedes. He sees us in our trouble and begins to cry out on our behalf to God the Father. He does this through groanings. We’re told the groanings are wordless or that which words cannot express. But whose groanings? Are they His groanings or our groanings? Some argue that these are the Holy Spirit’s groanings that go on deep in our soul.

The problem with that view is why would the Holy Spirit have to groan and offer wordless requests? He’s God the Holy Spirit! He doesn’t lack knowledge. He knows what we need. He is not subject to

the weakness of sinful flesh. Much more likely is that these are our groans. We come to pray. We consider a situation. We bring it before the Lord and we realize we don’t know what to pray for. So we sigh or groan. In that moment through those groans the Holy Spirit intercedes. The last time I preached on this passage, I spent a lot more on this groaning section. If you want to review this, please check out the September 24, 2006 message on the website.

<http://www.svbc.ab.ca/sermons/pdf/06/sept2406outline.pdf>

In that moment of great need when we are so burdened by what we’re praying about and we groan, the Holy Spirit comes alongside to help us. He takes our wordless groans and makes them into effective prayers.

So God is not against us when we struggle with uncertainty or perplexity. God has not abandoned us when we don’t know what to pray for. At that very moment when we experience that nearly overwhelming burden of not knowing what to pray, God’s Spirit works for us and not against us.

Is that not an incredible truth my friends? Isn’t it releasing to know that we don’t have to know exactly what to pray for so that our

prayers will be effective? Isn't it freeing to know that when we're perplexed, it doesn't mean we can't pray?

But how can we be sure God hears and understands these requests? We don't even know what the Holy Spirit is praying through our groans let alone if God understands them. Verse 27 provides the answer to that question. "And he who searches hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is." God searches our hearts. God is the only one who can search hearts. God comprehends this intercession of the Spirit because He knows the mind of the Spirit. So the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. How else does the Holy Spirit help us?

**Way #2 He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.** (end of verse 27).

Now there are two important observations here. Notice that this special work of the Holy Spirit is for the saints. That is Christians. The Bible calls all Christians saints because we are set apart for God. So for Christians, this verse is good news. If we find ourselves groaning when we pray and perplexed about what to pray for, that is a pretty good indication that we are children of God. No one else sighs

this way. No one else knows anything about these groanings. The Spirit works through these groanings in the hearts of saints alone.

But for non-Christians, this verse is a wake up call. There is no promise of help from the Spirit for you. If you are not a Christian, He does not help with your weakness. Nor does He intercede for you.

In fact, your sin separates you from the Holy God right now. This book of Romans argues most completely about this desperate reality that you need to come to terms with. R 3:23 says all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. R 6:23 says, "the penalty for our sin is death." The good news is God has not yet carried out that just penalty in your life. And the even better news is Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins. R 5:8.

But it is not enough to simply know these facts or verses of Scripture. Nor is it enough to agree that they are true. We must personally respond to Jesus' invitation to come to Him. We must personally put our trust in Him as our only hope. We need to turn from our sin and turn to receive Him as our Savior.

At that moment, there will be no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. You will be given the gift of eternal life in the presence

of Jesus. The Holy Spirit will come in to begin His work of intercession when you don't know what to pray for along with all the other blessings we've talked about in this chapter. Will you respond to this call from Christ now?

Those of you who are already Christians, I want you to think back to when you first received Christ or that time in your life when you began your walk with Him.

Ever since that time, the Holy Spirit has interceded for you with groans that words cannot express. And God, in searching your heart, found those requests from the Holy Spirit in perfect harmony with His will. He answered them. Rejoice in the Holy Spirit's work in your life from your conversion up to this day. Continue to pray even when you don't know what to pray for.

What about the last phrase of verse 27. The Spirit intercedes for the saints *according to the will of God*. It could mean that everything the Spirit prays is in perfect harmony with God's will. So though we don't know what to pray for, the Spirit knows perfectly. He prays it and God answers it. But there is another possibility. Could the fact that the Spirit intercedes for the saints be according to the will

of God? Could Paul be emphasizing another way that God reaches down to help us in our Christian lives? God looks down from heaven and when He sees the Spirit helping us in our weakness by interceding through our groans, "that is what I want to see happen; my people receiving help in their time of need." In either case, we have great encouragement. When the Holy Spirit intercedes for us in prayer, it is exactly what God wills. Through our perplexity, the Holy Spirit utters exactly what needs to be prayed.

Now how might we respond to this incredible truth and help from God.

- 1) **Glorify God.** Any claim we want to take is totally removed in this spiritual event. We can't steal God's glory when we come to those perplexing moments. All we can do is groan and sigh. Yet the Holy Spirit prays through those sighs. God the Father searches, finds, hears and understands the Holy Spirit's requests through those sighs. God acts upon those requests. God proves He won't leave us in perplexity. God gets the glory for what He is doing on behalf of us and through us.

2) **Let this Word of God encourage you.** You are not expected to know the will of God in every situation. In our groanings and perplexity, God understands what we really need. God's work is not limited to what we can understand and express in words. In our weakness, sickness, loss, hardship and perplexity, God is praying for us, not against us.

3) **Let this word of God equip you to battle the devil's accusations.** That accuser can come along during times of perplexity and say "Ah, you do not know what to pray for. IF you were a child of God you would not be in this kind of difficulty. As a child with its father, you would always know what to ask for; but you do not know, you are ignorant; you are in perplexity. The fact is you are not a child of God at all." \_You can turn around and say "you are making a great mistake. My groanings are the finest proof I have to date that I am a child of God. It is only children of God who groan in this way because the Spirit does this work in none but the children of God." So instead of being depressed and discouraged by your wordless groanings, lift up your head. It is an

absolute proof that you are a child of God. Yes friends, there are times when we don't know what to pray.

So take that situation in your life right now where you don't know what to do. Take that which you don't know what to pray and offer it to the Lord. When you sigh know that is a holy moment when the Triune God is ministering to and through you. Let us pray now.