

Our Spiritual Helper in Time of Need (Rom 8:26-27)

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Introduction

Romans 8:26 starts with the phrase “in the same way”. This phrase directs us to look at the context of the verse within the whole of chapter 8. Specifically, here is the *broad context hinged at v. 17*. The exhortation to put sin to death (v. 13a, we have an obligation and it is not to the flesh) has the promise of life attached to it (v. 13b), and life is defined by our childship to God as co-heir-ship and co-glorification with Christ (v. 17). Therefore, Christians are on the sure path to glory where they will share in Christ's glory. That is the great end of our battle with sin: to share in his glory. However, this brings up the thought of how Christ reached glory. It was through suffering. Christians, Christ-ones, enter glory in the same way that He did. Before the crown is the cross. The crown is not yet and the cross is now. This journey is a time of present suffering.

The fact of suffering, a hard truth about many necessary hardships on the way, underlies everything else that comes up in Romans 8:18 to the end of the chapter. Thus, there are *three encouragements given* to support us in the difficult reality of present sufferings. 1) First (18-25), Paul encourages us by directing us to the relative insignificance of suffering. 2) Second, in our text for today (26-27), Paul encourages us by directing us to our spiritual helper in time of need, the Holy Spirit. 3) Third (28-39), he encourages us by directing our thoughts to God's providential care, to His gracious oversight over the whole progress of our journey. So our passage for today has the general purpose of *giving encouragement and comfort to us in this time of present suffering*. This passage directs our thoughts to the Holy Spirit who is our *Spiritual helper in time of need*.

Here then is how we can read *the transition into verses. 26-27*: "as we are sustained by the magnitude of the glory to be revealed in us, which shows the relative insignificance of present sufferings, in like manner we are also sustained by the help of the Spirit."

My outline is twofold: 1) Our need, and 2) His help, followed by applications.

1A. Our Need

How does the text describe our need? It is called weakness and ignorance (v. 26, the Spirit helps us in our *weakness* and *we do not know*). The weakness is general and the ignorance is specific. Weakness describes our entire existence in this present evil age (Gal. 1:4) where the creation partakes of a bondage to corruption, decay, and futility (Rom. 8:20-21). Ignorance describes the apex of the religious life, prayer: "we do not know what we ought to pray."

The *general* weakness must include our conflict with sin (Heb. 4:15; Rom. 7:21-25a). In this connection, the Westminster Confession cites temptation, the remnants of sin, and neglect as things that exist in tension with the certainty of our perseverance:

They...certainly shall persevere...Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve His Holy Spirit, come to be

deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves (Ch. XVII, Of the Perseverance of the Saints).

Weakness must also include the fact of physical suffering in the present time ("the body is dead because of sin" that is, subject to dying and death, Rom. 8:10, and thus subject to sufferings plural, Rom. 8:18) and to grief in many kinds of trials (1 Pet. 1:6).

Citing the *specific* subject of prayer is like magnifying a slice of the apple pie to see more than just the top view of a triangle cut from a circle. It is like lifting the piece of pie and looking inside at particular ingredients and the relation between all the components of crust, apples, cinnamon, brown sugar syrup, etc.

Paul says in effect, "let's take the example of prayer to show what I mean when I refer to our weakness." Immediately we sense a tension between our most religious action, our fellowship with God in prayer, and our failures right there in prayer.

This is a reminder of how important *concentration in prayer* is. This is one reason for audible prayer (praying aloud), both in public and private. We are weak and need helps for concentration. It serves to aid sharing and communion or fellowship in prayer as primary in praying with the saints. Jesus prayed in the hearing of others. He shared this intimate relation with the Father with His brothers and sisters. Consider how intimate conversations with our earthly fathers have *circles of intimacy*: a) with our father and strangers present who overhear, say, as at a doctors office or in a line at the airport, b) with friends present, with brothers and sisters present and c) special times alone. Public prayer is with the saints, with our brothers and sisters present.

We may go *to prayer* and go *to sleep* like the disciples with Jesus in the critical hour of His passion. Interruptions abound. Thoughts of taking the garbage out interrupt communion with God. Many a minister, or any of us, may pray longer in public than in private. I know that is often the case for me. *Some helps* are a) good planning for quiet, lack of potential interruption, a comfortable place where you may walk about and pray audibly without thought of being heard or observed by others, and b) arrow prayers – Cotton Mather in the Colonial days spoke of these as prayers for people as you encounter them in the course of the day. For example, on the tennis court when I hear others cursing I will simply pray, "Father forgive them." Or, going onto the court regularly because of my past back injuries, I offer a thanks to God that I can be there, on my feet, active and enjoying the game. Arrow prayers perhaps go with prayer without ceasing.

Still *in our best moments*, when we are overwhelmed with the greatness, glory, beauty, and grandeur of God *we experience weakness* in our attention, fullness of praise, and depth of gratitude. Ours is a massive need that is reflected across the board of our lives and distinctively in that place where our religious aspirations rise the highest, in our praise and worship of the triune God. Self-righteousness easily corrupts our piety, and we may even take credit for accomplishments, things for which we seek commendation, based on our "marvelous" praying. Praying may include manifestations of pride in the very piety of the act.

Prayer is the *"vital breath" of the Christian*. Dependence on God is central to the Christian life and prayer is an attitude, a posture, of dependence on God. "That man is religious who habitually holds toward God, in life and thought, in act and word, the attitude of prayer" (Warfield, *Faith and Life*, 197). Yet right there we choke. Right there in our prayer lives we gasp for air; our

vocal cords spasm, and we fail to breathe deeply of these opportunities of fellowship with the Father, His dear Son, and with the Holy Spirit.

Now prayer is vital furthermore because it is *the key that unlocks the door* to the storehouse of supply for *all* our needs. We need wisdom so we go and ask of God. We need daily bread, work, health to work, and the presence of graces for work so we go to God. But right there we are deflected and do not know what to pray or what to pray for. We are confounded and perplexed. Do we pray for rain or for no rain? Do we pray for someone's distant relative that they spoke with for the first time in thirty years and learned of an ingrown toe nail problem? Do we pray for the cessation of all wars? Do we pray that we get the job we are seeking (or would it be a better blessing if we do not get it)? How do you pray *for* the terminally ill? How pray *with* them? How pray with them with nurses coming in and out and a stranger on the other side of a curtain in the same room? How pray in a restaurant with all the noise and activity? Whatever, we definitely need the quiet and private times alone with our God to cultivate true and honest piety (private prayer cultivates honest public prayer).

A *central weakness* is that *we do not know how to address all our weaknesses* through the resource of prayer and dependence on God. Our needs are massive, and prayer is the door to the storehouse of provision for them, but we have difficulty getting to and through that door. Prayer is pivotal. It is like *an access road* to a supply area. As we attempt to bring all of our needs over this road to the supplies on the other side, our needs are like huge trucks loaded to the gills which bottleneck at the access road called prayer. We do not know how to pray regarding our needs! In this connection, Murray says, "we know not what to pray as the exigencies of our situation demand" (*Romans*, I, 311).

We are to learn to pray *according to God's will* in two ways: 1) we learn the pattern of praying that He has given us that begins with worship and praise; this is praying according to His will. We learn what His will is and we ask accordingly. 2) We ultimately say, "thy will be done" submitting in our petitions to what God purposes to do as our Sovereign Lord.

These areas, coupled with the meaning of our weakness, combine to show us our needs. The writer cites an example of prayer as a part for the whole. Thus, *even in the six petitions of the Lord's Prayer we reach a limit due to our weakness*. We do not seek God's praise and glory as we ought, or God's will, or the advance of the kingdom, or daily bread, or forgiveness, or deliverance from temptation as is necessary. This is not to downplay the place or value of the six petitions, nor does this downplay the meaningful guidance they give us for prayer. If anything, the fact of our limitations shows how carefully we need to attend to these petitions. The facts of our limitations speak to another side of the picture. Our limitations speak in an ultimate way to the edges of the envelope and tell us that *our best is tainted* by sin. This is not to direct us away from doing our best but *to humble us by keeping us ever mindful of our full, true, and utter dependence on the Lord*.

Another way stating our weakness is to cite the tension that exists between doing the will of God, the law (8:4) and not doing it. Part of this is due to our finitude, but we cannot rule out the fact that all of our good deeds are tainted by sin. We reach the limits of our humanity, of our flesh, and of this present evil age. Yet there, at the limits, the Holy Spirit furnishes us with His help.

2A. His Help

The Holy Spirit is our helper-advocate. He helps us. He is there as our helper in our weakness. He helps us in the critical bottleneck need of our weakness, which is prayer.

At this very critical point, where we come up short, where we bottleneck and do not properly cross the access road of prayer, there the Holy Spirit is our helper. There He sustains us in our prayers in all their flaws, in our prayer needs with all their fullness. He helps us in our prayers as our helper-intercessor, picking up where our prayers leave off.

Let me give and unpack a statement regarding the intercessory-help of the Spirit. His intercession is personal, intense, incomprehensible and effectual.

His help is personal

There is no go between, no angel or man that stands between the Father and us. He is the one, in joint work with Christ who is life-giving Spirit (1 Co 15.45) who is personally in between. He is in our hearts (v. 27); He lives in us (v. 9). And there is repetition: He helps us (v. 26), He intercedes for us (v. 26) and He intercedes for the saints (v. 27). It is a special part of our walk to have the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit with us, and personally interceding for us. In other words, He is your helper in prayer and my helper in prayer. We can each say, "He is personally my helper-intercessor."

His help is intense

The intercession is with groans (v. 26). A groan is a deep prolonged sound usually indicative of pain, grief or vexation. This is figurative or metaphorical speech as each usage of "groaning" suggests (v. 22, it is total metaphor to speak of the creation as groaning; v.23, our groans are inward so they are not literal, outward, or audible groans; v.26, God, the Holy Spirit groans but, of course, God does not have literal vocal cords). So what does it mean to say the Spirit groans? A look at each example of groaning in the passage will lead us to our answer.

1) How does the creation groan (v. 22)? Not literally but the creation is like a woman who groans in the pains of childbirth. The pains experienced by the woman in child birth are so intense that they cannot be endured silently. At the least then, the idea of the creation groaning tells us that the suffering is intense.

2) The inward groaning of the saint (v. 23) has a context of tasting the first fruits of the Spirit and waiting for the full harvest of our adoption (home going) and the full redemption of the body. Groaning here is not confined to our present suffering. It relates to the *discontentment and intensified longing* instilled by tasting the first fruits. Groaning here refers to something within and reflects how intense the longing is for glorification (cf. the desire to depart and be with the Lord which is far better than this present time between His comings with the incompleteness). This is experienced by the saint when he tastes of the honey in the honeycomb and finds his delight in the Lord. With the Lord as his portion (Ps. 73), he desires nothing on earth but groans and longs for the end of this incompleteness.

3) In this light, what is the figurative meaning of the Spirit's groaning (v. 26)? It must reflect the intensity of His intercession on our behalf, how deeply He longs for our blessing, how eagerly

He anticipates meeting our present needs. It is analogous to God's hope which is His expectation based on His plans, purposes, and determined will. God can be described like a person who awaits something that He eagerly desires and anticipates. Similarly, the Holy Spirit sighs or groans in deep desire and anticipation of our blessing. He intercedes for us to that end with eagerness and intense desire.

His help is incomprehensible

The groans are said to be literally wordless. But groans are already without words since they are extended sounds akin to sighs and moans. They are not articulated speech. Therefore, the point must be something more than "without words." It is not simply that the groans are not uttered in words because, again, they are that in the first place per the meaning of a groan.

So what is this something more? In what sense are the groans wordless? It has to be in a sense *oriented to words as ways of articulating thoughts*. However, they cannot be "thoughtless" since these are matters of the mind of the Spirit and matters of the will and purpose of God (v. 27). Thus, *the groans give expression to thoughts that can only be understood by God, the searcher of the hearts* (v. 27). Therefore, the meaning of wordless has to be found in the contrast between God's understanding and ours. This tells us that wordless is to be taken in the sense of "inexpressible in human words" and "beyond human understanding."

Thus, the groans give expression to thoughts that cannot be grasped by the human mind or expressed in human language. These thoughts are beyond the kind of understanding that takes place when there is a meeting of minds by means of a common language (communication).

We are thus pushed back to the Spirit's intercession as something beyond human language and comprehension. Therefore a better translation would be, "the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans whose meaning words are powerless to convey" (adapted from Meyer, *Commentary on Romans*). Therefore, a twofold description is being given *of the intercession*: it is something characterized by groans and it is something beyond human comprehension and language (*we cannot understand His intercession or articulate it in words*).

What is the value of this? What value can we have in the incomprehensible? It pertains precisely to our ignorance of our needs. That whole area of our lack of knowledge, of our ignorance and lack of comprehension is known by the Spirit and addressed by Him as our helper. He knows our true needs. He takes them all beyond the bottleneck of our weakness and weak praying. He presents them to God and pleads on our behalf for their resolution. He personally, intensely, and eagerly petitions the Father *that all our needs be met in all their true fullness* (beyond our comprehension and articulation in words).

His help is efficacious

How do we know this? How do we know that His prayers are effectual? From this text, we know it because what is asked is according to God's will. Furthermore, the logic of the verse indicates this efficacy. What does it mean to speak of God's searching and knowing *because* the Spirit intercedes according to the will of God (v. 27)? It means that God knows in the sense of cares, loves, protects, and blesses. The Father understands the mind of the Spirit, cares about His petitions that are incomprehensible to us but that concern our true needs, loves being of one mind with the Spirit, loves granting what the Spirit requests, and thus we can be assured that all of our

needs will be met, *all* of them. He blesses *because* the requests are in accord with His will and purpose.

Applications

1) Let me begin with a negative point, what this help is not. This help is distinct from how He helps us in our daily praying (cf. "Lord, teach us to pray" and the Lord's Prayer). It is an ultimate perspective. It is *not something we learn, experience, or feel* (unless we can say that in our groans within we have an experience that by analogy tells us of His groaning on our behalf). Special *tongue speaking is not in view* here. Tongues are ruled out by three things, a) the groans are the Spirit's not ours as would be the case if this referred to tongues. b) The groans are sustained sounds and not speech but tongues are speech, and c) this groaning of the Spirit is *given to all the saints* in all our hearts but tongues are given only to some saints.

This intercession is beyond our comprehension. It is *not a special religious experience* that produces *flaming moments* of pure and *perfect communion* with the Holy Spirit. This is not an experience of "fleeting moments of temporary isolation from our weakness" that need to be "recaptured" repeatedly (Gaffin, *Perspectives*, 86). For such experiences, many look when they attend church. In such seeking, we fail to trust God regarding the faithful words of the Holy Spirit which nurture us and tell us what He has done and is doing on our behalf. We do not know what to pray as needed but we are to know, ponder, and *embrace His word regarding our Spiritual helper who owns our needs* and takes them to the Father on our behalf.

2) This is a *comforting thought* for us in our weaknesses, in our sufferings, and thus in all our acute needs.

Having someone in your court, going to bat for you is a great encouragement. Knowing that He is intense, earnest, and caring lifts our hearts. It encourages us to pray when we know that our shortcomings are covered by the gracious work of God, the Holy Spirit.

It is comforting because His intercession is in perfect accord with the will of God and thus secures our blessing with unfailing efficacy. What He seeks according to the Father's will, the Father certainly gives by His grace.

We have an advocate in our hearts and with us always. He deeply and eagerly desires our blessing in the midst of our sufferings. *Therefore, we shall be blessed* with regard to all of our needs in all of our weakness, fully and completely.

We must distinguish wants from needs. And we must remember that our needs are met in accord with God's will and purpose. It is all a matter of His timing for His glory and our good.

The Holy Spirit is the guarantee (cf. firstfruits) that He will in fact meet all of our true needs according to God, according to God's will and purpose. By faith in the face of suffering, know this: *your helper will not fail you for one moment*. He knows all your needs and takes them all to the Father who hears His intercession and will in fact grant every request.