

The Spirit's Ministry of Intercession

Romans 8:26-27

At one time or another we all find ourselves in perplexing situations. We can't figure out exactly what we should do, and we certainly can't predict how things will turn out.

Chances are that you are facing such a situation right now.

- Perhaps you're in a relationship that is strained to the point of breaking. I've been in relationships in which I honestly didn't know if my efforts would make things better or worse. Relationships are so complex that we often don't know what to think or do or even pray.
- Perhaps you're perplexed about a work situation. We would say that your work is the main thing you do whether you get paid for it or not. Your work may be caring for your children or volunteering or going to an office/work site or going to school. Your work occupies the best hours of your week, and so your work obviously matters to God. It's not uncommon to encounter a work situation in which you feel helpless and stuck. Maybe you can't decide whether you need to change majors or stick it out or take a semester off. Maybe you are wrestling with how best to discipline your kids; you know all the various options but nothing seems to be working. Or perhaps you're wondering whether or not to change careers. Sometimes we find ourselves unsure about these things.
- Perhaps you have a health issue that's very complicated. Maybe you have several good options or several bad options, but the way forward isn't very clear.

Can you identify a situation in which you're fairly clueless about what to do? Some of you are thinking, "Yes, I'm clueless about almost everything in my life."

If we wanted to use biblical terms, we would say that we find ourselves in these situations because we are neither omniscient nor omnipotent. We are neither all knowing nor all powerful. Therefore, in this life we are very limited in terms of what we can figure out and what we can control. In today's passage Paul will sum up our condition by saying that we have "weakness." We are weak in terms of what we understand and we are weak in terms of what we control.

Paul flags this issue in order to let us know that God fully understands and has made provision for our weakness. That provision is the Holy Spirit's ministry of intercession. The Holy Spirit prays for us. Paul explains this ministry to let us know that it's okay if we don't understand everything and if we can't control everything. Be encouraged by what Paul writes in Romans 8:26-27.

The Spirit's Ministry of Intercession (Romans 8:26-27)

In the previous paragraph Paul described how for believers present suffering isn't worthy to be compared with future glory. Since this future glory is a hope that lies in the future, Paul acknowledges that we need perseverance and we need to wait (which is not easy). He continues in verse 26 by saying:

26 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; 27 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.

In this life and in these bodies, we have weaknesses that make it difficult to persevere. Life is hard, But God hasn't abandoned us: "the Spirit also helps our weakness." The only other place that the term "help" occurs in the New Testament is in Luke 10:40. There Martha says to Jesus, "Tell [my sister Mary] to **help** me!" Martha wanted some assistance with the meal preparations. Similarly, the Holy Spirit gives us assistance/help when we bump up against our weaknesses.

The specific weakness Paul has in mind is the fact that we sometimes "do not know how to pray as we should." Paul is talking about the content of our prayers. Sometimes we don't really know what God is doing in a situation, and so we don't know how to pray. On the one hand we have tremendous freedom to ask God for whatever we want. But sometimes our "wants" are at odds with His "will" (what He wants in a specific situation). We'll see an example of this from Paul's life in a few minutes.

But the Spirit doesn't have this problem. At the end of verse 27 we are told that the Spirit "intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." The term saint means "holy one" or those set apart exclusively for God and His purposes. The Spirit intercedes (in the sense of making requests) for us "according to the will of God." The Spirit makes requests for us that are fully compatible with what God wants in our lives.

This is one of the core criteria for effective praying. We are to pray in faith; we are to pray in Jesus' name; and we are to pray according to the will of God. In 1 John 5 we read this:

14 This is the confidence which we have before 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 which we have asked from Him.

Generally speaking, when the Bible speaks of the will of God it is referring to the revealed will of God. We are supposed to ask for things that are compatible with what the Scriptures tell us God wants. Praying according to the will of God is a way that we align our will with the will of God. We are to want what He wants - so much so that we ask Him to supply it.

The presupposition in Romans 8:26-27 is that if we knew exactly what to pray, we'd be in great shape. It's not that our lives would be easy or that everything would turn out the way we want. It's the perspective that the safest place to be is in the center of God's will. There's great security in praying according to the will of God - even if that will involves suffering and pain. But Paul has us consider a scenario in which we really can't discern the will of God and therefore don't know how to pray.

The Holy Spirit helps us in many different ways, but Paul specifically has in mind here the Spirit's prayers for us. Notice again what Paul writes in Romans 8:26-27.

26 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; 27 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.

The Spirit Himself intercedes for us “with groaning too deep for words” or “with wordless groanings.” Paul uses the same root word for groan that he used earlier in the chapter when he wrote that “the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now” (v. 22) and “even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons” (v. 23). Paul tells us that the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

As you may or may not know, there is great debate about the exact nature of these wordless groanings. Since we aren’t told, I assume that we don’t really need to know the exact nature of the Spirit’s groanings. But the fact that they’re groanings means that the Spirit deeply identifies with our plight in this world; He is not disinterested. The Spirit **longs** for the will of God to be done in our lives.

In verse 27 Paul makes an interesting point about God when he says that “He who searches the hearts [of humans] knows what the mind of the Spirit is.” The point is that God understands exactly what the Spirit is praying. Therefore, we can be assured that God hears the Spirit’s prayers. And since the Spirit always prays for us “according to the will of God” we can be assured that God is pleased to give what has been requested.

All of this means that God has made provision for our weakness. When we don’t know how to pray as we should, the Spirit intercedes according to the will of God.

An Illustration from Paul’s Life (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

2 Corinthians 12 illustrates how God has made provision for our weakness, especially when we don’t know what to pray. In the first few verses of the chapter Paul mentions that he had such a powerful experience in the presence of God that he wasn’t sure if he was “in the body or apart from the body.” Those who have such intense spiritual experiences are tempted to exalt themselves as superior to others who haven’t had such experiences. In order to keep Paul from exalting himself, he was given a “thorn in the flesh.” This is what we read beginning in verse 7:

7 Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!

We aren’t told the nature of Paul’s thorn in the flesh. But the language Paul uses suggests that this wasn’t some minor annoyance; it had the potential of tormenting him. Paul actually saw that God and Satan had opposing objectives with this thorn in the flesh. Satan wanted to torment him, and God wanted to humble him. It’s hard to say how clearly Paul understood these dynamics at the time. His prayer was that this thorn in the flesh would be removed. (That’s what I want when I have a thorn/splinter in my flesh.)

8 Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.

This was a fervent, heartfelt prayer. Paul prayed three times that the Lord would remove this thorn in the flesh. But God eventually showed Paul that (to use the terminology of Romans 8:26) he did “not know how to pray as he should.” Notice verses 9 and 10:

9 And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

The will of God for Paul in that specific circumstance was not the removal of his thorn in the flesh (his “weakness”). The will of God was for Paul to experience God’s power **through** his weakness. We aren’t told that the Spirit was interceding for Paul according to the will of God, but that’s exactly the type of ministry that Romans 8:26-27 suggests. Paul didn’t know how to pray as he should, but the will of God was accomplished in his life anyway. God’s will wasn’t thwarted by Paul’s limited knowledge or by Paul’s weakness. Paul’s weakness was actually the place where God’s power was most fully demonstrated.

Let’s consider a couple of implications.

A Couple of Implications: These two implications are really two sides of the same coin. The first addresses what isn’t true and the second with what is true.

The will of God in our lives doesn’t always flow from our knowledge and understanding.

The normal pattern in Scripture involves **knowing** the will of God, **praying according to** the will of God, and **doing** the will of God. Scripture tells us to pursue the will of God in a rather comprehensive way. That is the normal pattern in Scripture by which the will of God is accomplished in our lives.

But today’s passage acknowledges that there are times when the will of God is opaque; there are times when we don’t know the will of God and therefore we don’t know how to pray as we should. What we learned in Romans 8:26-27 is that the will of God doesn’t always flow from **our** knowledge and understanding. Sometimes the will of God in our lives flows from the Holy Spirit’s knowledge and understanding of the will of God. The Holy Spirit prays for us according to the will of God.

This should take some of the pressure off of us. Bring to mind the area(s) of your life in which you’re fairly clueless. Do you accept that you don’t have to figure everything out and that you don’t have to be omniscient? Do you accept that you don’t have to control everything and that you don’t have to be omnipotent? When we let God be God, the pressure is off.

God is fully aware of our limitations and weaknesses; actually, as we saw in Paul's case, our weaknesses are sometimes God-given and strategically placed so that we'll trust in Him and not ourselves.

The Spirit's ministry of intercession can give us confidence that God is always at work in our lives and our circumstances.

Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit prays for us according to the will of God in order to build our faith. God is actively working in our lives and in our circumstances even when we're clueless.

I was talking with Russ, our youth pastor, about this on Thursday. He pointed out that Jesus is also interceding for us (Hebrews 7:25, Romans 8:34), ***two-thirds of the Trinity*** is praying for us! I would add that ***the other third*** is listening eagerly and responding. This reflects what we're told throughout Scripture about God's attentiveness to our lives. Psalm 139 says that God knows our thoughts from afar; God goes before us and behind us; we can never escape the presence of God. This is all evidence that God is with us and for us and that God is committed to freely giving us everything we need in this life.

This morning as we celebrate the Lord's Table, bring your weakness into the presence of God. You might even revel in your weakness as the very place where you can best experience the power of God. Thank God for the Holy Spirit and His ministry of intercession. Thank God that the Spirit prays wise, insightful, effective prayers on your behalf. Acknowledge that all of this flows from the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We invite all who trust in Jesus alone to celebrate the Lord's Table this morning. If you've not yet trusted in Jesus, take this time to consider that God saw your sin and your inability to do anything about it. He sent His one and only Son to bear your sin on the cross. If you accept this payment for sin, you become a child of God and begin experiencing His presence and His help in the ways we've been talking about today.