

## The Perplexity of Prayer

### Romans 8: 26 – 27

*“Someone has said that in the whole of the Scriptures the brightest and the most lustrous and flashing stone, or collection of stones, is this Epistle to the Romans, and that of these [chapter 8] is the brightest gem in the cluster. The most moving [chapter in Romans] is this chapter 8.” Martin Lloyd Jones*

- Why? Because it is all about the assurance and confidence that the Gospel brings to a person’s life. The chapter begins with the assurance of no condemnation.

**Romans 8: 1** There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

- And it ends with the assurance of no separation.

**Romans 8: 38 – 39** For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- And in between those verses Paul lays out one argument after another to convince us that because it is God who is saving us, our salvation and our glorification are completely assured.
- Almost all of the arguments that Paul makes to give us assurance of our salvation center around the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, which is right in line with:

**Ephesians 1: 13 – 14** In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, <sup>14</sup> who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it,

- So, it makes sense that, in Romans 8, all of the arguments Paul makes concerning our assurance of salvation center around the work of the Spirit.
- Because the Holy Spirit is the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance. His work is vital in calling us to salvation, opening our eyes to see the beauty of God’s grace, working to sanctify us into Christlikeness, and ultimately raising us to new life.
- Just consider all the things that Paul has taught us, in chapter 8, that the Holy Spirit does for us as a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance.
  - Romans 8: 2 the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus sets you free from the law of sin and death. In other words, it is the Holy Spirit, who opens our eyes to see the righteousness that is already ours in Christ, so that we can stop being enslaved to trying to have a righteousness of our own.
  - In Romans 8:4, Paul says the Spirit helps you fulfill the just requirement of the law. How does the Spirit do that? By reminding us of the righteousness that is ours in Christ, and then using the word of God to cultivate the fruits of the Spirit in us. When love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control start flowing out of our lives, I can guarantee you that you are fulfilling the law of God.
  - According to verse 6 the Spirit gives life and peace.

- According to verse 11 God will raise you from the dead by the Spirit who dwells in you. The Holy Spirit is power of the resurrection.
  - According to verse 13 the Spirit helps you put to death the deeds of the body. The Spirit leads us in sanctification.
  - According to verse 14 the sons of God are led by the Spirit.
  - According to verses 15-16 the Spirit bears witness in us that we are the children of God giving us continuing assurance of our salvation.
  - According to verse 23 the Holy Spirit is the foretaste and guarantee of our final redemption.
- All these things are the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Now what does it mean that the Holy Spirit is working you? It means that you can be sure of your salvation, because the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life is the deposit guaranteeing your salvation.
    - And now here in verses 26-27, Paul is going to focus on one more work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The work of the Spirit to help us when we don't know how to pray as we should.

**Romans 8: 26 – 27** 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. <sup>27</sup> And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

- Christians, who want to pray in accordance with God's will find themselves asking:
  - "What should I pray for? How should I pray? Can I pray with confidence, claiming things by faith? Or do I have to make my prayers tentative, always adding, 'If it be your will?'"
  - What happens if I pray wrongly?
  - Does prayer get God to change His mind? Can I change God's plans? If not, does it even matter if I pray?
- Prayer can be a great perplexity to us. But think what Paul is teaching us here. We are not alone in prayer. We have a helper—the Holy Spirit.
  - Now this is significant for two reasons.
    - First, is that the Holy Spirit makes our prayers powerful, and effective, perfectly aligned with the will of God.
    - But second, and really, I think the reason that Paul brings up prayer and the Holy Spirit here, is that the Holy Spirit helping us in prayer in one more proof of the guarantee of our salvation.
- Now, this is important, so let's tease this out for a few moments. What is our salvation?
  - Through the Holy Spirit applying the benefits of what Christ has done for us at the cross, our sin is cleansed, and we are made righteous before God.
- And the guarantee of our salvation is the Holy Spirit living and working in our lives.



- Because we are made righteous before God through the blood of Christ, we can have fellowship with God. What is the Hebrew word that describes the perfect fellowship with God that is ours through Jesus Christ? Shalom.
  - What is shalom? It is perfect communion, perfect fellowship with God.
- Christ's death on the cross, secures eternal shalom with God for those who trust Christ in faith. That is what awaits us in eternity. But in this less than perfect life, it doesn't always feel like we have perfect communion with God, in fact sometimes it may seem like God is angry with us because of our sin.
  - But I assure you, He is not. How do I know that? Because the Bible is clear, if you are trusting Christ in faith, at the cross all of God's wrath was poured out on Christ for our sin, so there is no more wrath left for you to face.

**Romans 5:9** Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

- You might be suffering, you may be going through a very difficult time in life, but if you are in Christ, you are not going through that hard time because God is angry with you. Remember, all of creation is groaning in the futility. All of us, all of creation is suffering.
- Now, God may be using the hard time to discipline you, but it is not discipline in anger, it is discipline in love. How do I know?

**Hebrews 12:6** For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.

- If you are at a time in life in which it seems like God is far away and removed from you, I can guarantee you that if you are in Christ, it is not God is removed from you, it is you who have removed yourself from God. Remember what Paul taught us in:

**Ephesians 1: 14** (The Holy Spirit) who is the guarantee of our inheritance

- The moment you trust Christ in faith, the Holy Spirit moves into your life, and he never moves out. Think about it, the Holy Spirit wouldn't be much of a guarantee if he was always coming and going, moving in and out of our life depending on how we were doing.
- Even as we go through the remainder of our less than perfect life here on earth, with all its groanings and struggles, we have a foretaste of the shalom that awaits us for eternity. The Holy Spirit communes inside us with our spirit. The degree to which we sense the presence of the Holy Spirit is often sensitive to how willing our spirit is to commune with the Holy Spirit, but if you are a believer the Holy Spirit is always there, ready to commune with you.
- In fact, even as we think about our text here in Romans 8, we can see that the Holy Spirit living in us is a foretaste of the perfect shalom, perfect communion with God that awaits us for eternity.

**Romans 8: 23** we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit

- What does that phrase, firstfruits of the Spirit refer to? The firstfruits are the beginning of the harvest that is to come. If you are a Christian, you have the Holy Spirit, and if you have the Holy Spirit, you have the firstfruits of the perfect communion with God that awaits you for eternity.
  - So what Paul is telling us here in our text is how the Holy Spirit helps us to enjoy communion with God, shalom with God, today. That is what Romans 8: 26 and 27 are about. God giving us His Spirit so we can enjoy a foretaste of shalom, even as we live in the brokenness of this life.
    - Notice how our passage starts out.

**Romans 8: 26** Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

- What does that likewise refer to?

**Romans 8: 15 – 17** For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” <sup>16</sup>The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup>and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him

- So what Paul is saying is that the Holy Spirit assures us of our place in the family and then works to help us enjoy that place in the family, by helping us to communicate with our Father in heaven, so that we can enjoy a foretaste of the shalom that is already ours.
- Prayer isn’t just about us asking God for stuff. It is about communing with God—experiencing a taste of shalom—a taste of the great and wonderful things to come for all of eternity. But how can a sinful creature commune with a holy God?
  - We often focus on just one aspect of what makes it possible for us to have communion with a holy God. That is, our justification that comes because Christ has died for our sins.
  - But receiving Christ into our life by faith doesn’t just cleanse of our sin, and make us righteous in God’s sight, it also gives us the Holy Spirit to lead us and guide us to help us in our weakness.

### 1. Why does the Holy Spirit need to help us communicate with the Father?

**Romans 8: 26** Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought

- The weakness that Paul is talking about here is not our sin. Rather it is our creatureliness, our finiteness, that makes it impossible for us to understand what God is at work doing. In our weakness we don’t see the big picture that God sees.
- It is not a question of not knowing how to pray. Jesus taught us how to pray in the Lord’s Prayer. Our problem is summarized by Paul in verse 26. “we don’t know what to pray for as we ought.”
  - Even righteous people and heroes of the faith struggle to pray as we ought.
    - Think for example of Job in the Old Testament. He is described, by God, in Job 1: 8, as a man who was righteous and upright—a man who fears

God and shuns evil. Sin was not a barrier to Job communing with God. But once God allowed Satan to afflict Job, Job became very confused and perplexed. He didn't know why he was suffering as he was, and as a result had no idea how to pray. So here is how he prayed:

**Job 7: 20 – 21** Why have you made me your mark (target)? Why have I become a burden to you? <sup>21</sup>Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?

- But God hadn't made Job a target, Satan had. And Job wasn't a burden to God but rather brought glory to God as he refused to curse God even in his perplexity. And sin wasn't the reason for Job's struggles. None of those things were the right things to pray for. In hindsight we can see that Job should have simply been praying for patience and perseverance of faith so that God would be glorified. But Job couldn't see what was going on, and so even though he was a righteous man, he didn't know what to pray for.
- Think of Elijah. Elijah was bold and courageous as he stood against the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel and won a great victory. Yet after the confrontation, Elijah was so physically and emotionally drained this is how he prayed:

**1 Kings 19: 4** But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers."

- Surely that was not the right thing for Elijah to pray for, as God still had more for him to do.
- How about the Apostle Paul himself?

**2 Corinthians 12: 7 – 9** So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. <sup>8</sup>Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup>But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

- Paul prayed three times thinking if I can just get rid of this infirmity, this thorn in the flesh, I can have a more powerful ministry. In his human finiteness and frailty, Paul could not see, at least initially, that frailty, the thorn, was a ministry enhancer, not a detriment to ministry.

**Philippians 1: 21** For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup>If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.

- Now, if we were to take time to read that entire section of Philippians, we can see that Paul is actually doing a great job wrestling through things and praying as correctly as he can, but in those few verses we can Paul struggling in frailty to know what to pray for.

- And what about Jesus? We have to be careful here but remember in his flesh he had the same limitations that we do. He grew tired and hungry, he didn't know everything, and there in the Garden of Gethsemane, hours before his death, we see him pray for the cup of God's wrath to be taken from him, if there was any other way for our sin to be atoned for.
  - Now again, like with Paul, we see Jesus acknowledge the will of God as he prays, and as Jesus wrestles in prayer we see him come to a point of quiet confidence and trust in His Father, and yet at least for a moment, Jesus was praying for something that clearly was not the will of God for him.
- What to pray for can be very perplexing, because of our human frailty and infirmity, but that frailty and infirmity isn't sinful. It is just a weakness that we all struggle with, even Job, Elijah, Paul, and Jesus.
- Our ignorance concerning what to pray for is a heavy burden, so what does God to help us in our weakness? He gives us a burden bearer.

## 2. The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness.

**Romans 8: 26** The Spirit helps us in our weakness.

- The Greek that is translated as help is the word, "sunantilambanetai" which really conveys a lot more than just the word help. It is actually a compound word made up of three words in the Greek.
  - "Sun" which means together with. "Anti" which means in place of. And "lambanetai" which means to take hold of or to bear. So, when you put all three together it refers to a person coming alongside of another to help carry or bear a heavy burden.
  - So, think of the picture that Paul is painting for us here. Knowing rightly what to pray for is a heavy burden that none of us can bear on our own, so God gives us the Holy Spirit to come alongside of us and bear the burden with us.
- The Holy Spirit doesn't simply bear the burden for us, so we let go and let God, but rather bears the burden with us. What does that look like?
  - I think we saw it in the example of Paul with his thorn, wrestling in prayer through the infirmity and coming to the realization the infirmity was good.
  - Or Paul wrestling through was it better to live and continue in ministry or die to go and be with Jesus.
  - Or Jesus wrestling in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, not wanting to go through the agony of the cross but wanting the will of God to be done.
  - Think what happened in each of those cases as the Holy Spirit came alongside of Paul and Jesus helping them bear the burden of prayer. They grew and as they grew their thinking and their prayer more perfectly aligned with what God was doing.
    - The Holy Spirit doesn't eliminate our need to pray regularly and fervently, but rather comes alongside of us to make up what we are lacking in our frailty.

### 3. How the Holy Spirit bears the burden of prayer with us.

**Romans 8: 26** the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

- These words point us to what the Holy Spirit is doing as he helps bear our burden and how the Holy Spirit is doing it.
- First what is the Holy Spirit doing to help us? He is interceding. Here Paul tells us the Holy Spirit is interceding for us, but in other places we are told that Jesus is our great high priest, who is at the right hand of God interceding for us.

**Hebrews 7: 25** Consequently, he (Jesus) is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

- Now think of this picture. If you are a Christian, you have two persons of the Trinity interceding on your behalf.
  - To intercede means to plead on behalf of another. So, as we think of that meaning our thoughts turn to the work of a lawyer on behalf of a client. Now think how a lawyer works with a client. Before the trial they work with the client to help the client know how to say what they ought to say. This is how the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf. But then as the trial comes, the lawyer also goes into the courtroom and speaks on behalf of the client.
- The Holy Spirit is our advocate in our hearts, telling us how to pray. Christ is our advocate in heaven speaking for us as we pray in his name. Knowing this should fill us with confidence as we pray. One member of the Trinity helping our hearts to prepare our prayers and petitions, and another member of the Trinity presenting our prayers and petitions in the courtroom of heaven.
- How is the Holy Spirit interceding for us?

**Romans 8: 26** the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

- What does groanings too deep for words mean?
  - Does it refer to groanings that we make? Or groanings that we do not make but the Holy Spirit makes?
  - This is the third time he has talked about groanings. First it was in regard to creation.

**Romans 8: 22** For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

- Next Paul spoke of our groaning.

**Romans 8: 23** And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

- Now Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit, himself, groaning.

**Romans 8: 26** the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

- As you look at this, there seems to be a progression from inanimate creation, to the redeemed, to the third person of the Trinity.

What does this progression mean? It can't possibly mean that the Holy Spirit is unable to find the words to communicate with the Father and the Son, so it must mean something else, but what?

- Well, think of the idea of burden bearing.
  - Suppose you were to help someone with a heavy load. What is more expressive of the weight. A deep heartfelt groan, or a lot of words?
    - "My, this gun safe is heavy. It's awkward too. Maybe we should have called a professional safe mover. I don't want to do this again. Have you ever moved a safe before? Do you think my insurance will cover hernia surgery?"
  - If you are struggling under a load, that kind of chatter is no help at all. The person is more busy chattering away than helping. What you really want to hear are groans of sympathy. A real burden bearer groans with you, as they lift the load.
- The bearing of our prayer burdens doesn't have to be in words because look what Paul says.

**Romans 8: 27** And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

- Our groaning doesn't always coincide with the will of God as it should, but because the Spirit is part of the Trinity, his groaning always does. As the Spirit bears our burden and joins us in our groanings, his groanings on our behalf perfect our prayers. What we lack, He makes up.
  - But even in our weakness, God wants us to pray. Our prayer doesn't change God, but God uses our prayer to change things, and to change us.
- As we pray more, we find more joy, more encouragement, more shalom, because we are joining God in the work He is doing. Just like Paul experienced, His strength is made perfect in our weakness.
- When you feel very weak, because of suffering or decay or sickness or futility or persecution or failed plans or baffling decisions, don't despair, as if God is angry with you or at your inability to know what to do or what to pray.
- Trust the Holy Spirit to intercede for you about the specifics and just let the wordless groanings of your heart be groanings for the glory of Christ in your life.
  - What a gracious and merciful Father in heaven we have.

**Psalms 103: 13 – 14** As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. <sup>14</sup>For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.

- He doesn't condemn us in weakness and inability. He has planned for all our weakness and given us both his Son and His Spirit to make up for all we lack and there is nothing can separate us from his love!