

In March of 2018 we were in Taiwan for Aaron's wedding (**picture**) (I love that picture!). Because of the language and culture barriers Aaron went with us nearly everywhere. But Aaron had to go back to work and since we'd begun to adjust, he thought that we were ready for a solo flight to go out for breakfast by ourselves. The night before Aaron walked us by the restaurant so we'd know exactly where to go. Then, the next morning Jane and I headed off to see if we could order breakfast without our translator.

In Taiwan, as in this restaurant, they often have pictures by the item of what you're ordering. I ordered and thought I'd chosen the appropriate picture. But what I thought I'd ordered and what I got was totally different. Add to that, no one in the restaurant spoke English and we didn't speak Chinese. It was edible, but it wasn't breakfast. I didn't communicate well because I didn't speak the language.

When it comes to prayer, we don't speak God's language. God is awesome, eternal and infinite – He's so far above and beyond us.

Every parent can relate to this. Your baby is very upset. They're crying and screaming, but they haven't learned how to talk – and you're clueless as to what the problem is. But wonderfully, our Heavenly Father is never clueless but we often are. I know that I am. That's why I love this promise in Romans 8:26-27 (p. 944).

Did you know that God prays for you? What a comfort to know that when we don't know what to say or say the wrong words – God's got it all covered!

This morning we're finishing our series, *Prayer: Talking with my Father*. The first Sunday of November, we'll begin a new series on the Old Testament book of *Hosea: Relentless Love* (**picture**).

I hope this series on prayer has encouraged you to pray more, to see the power and endless possibilities of prayer. It's easy to feel guilty about our lack of prayer. Please hear me – none of us pray like we should. This past week during my Quiet Time, I asked the Lord to help me grow in my prayer life.

Our Heavenly Father doesn't want prayer to be a burden or some obligation. He wants us to know Him and we know Him better as we communicate with Him. He speaks to us in His Word and we share our hearts with Him in prayer.

Read the New Testament and you'll quickly find that prayer is not something we're to stress over. No, prayer is a gift and a privilege. Our Father wants us to talk to Him. It's never a bad time and we're never a hassle. He's never too busy. So, please move forward in your prayer life, just baby steps. Jump in and start praying even if you don't know all that there is to know. All you have to do is ask, seek, and knock (Matt. 7:7-8). It all starts right there.

Sometimes prayer is very hard. When our son, Ben (**picture**), was two-years-old, he had his first seizure. I didn't know what was going on. I honestly thought that Ben was dying. I had no idea how to pray.

Many times someone will call me. They've just learned that they have cancer or that their spouse is leaving them. I pray, but I really don't know how or what to pray. There are many moments in life for all of us when we can hardly pray at all. No words come out. Nothing. We can hardly think, much less pray. Maybe the best we can do is stammer out "O God...O God...O God...Lord Jesus, have mercy." And our Heavenly Father hears even when we can't find the words. The more your heart is broken, the more that something means to you, the harder it is to pray for it.

The reason we can pray so easily for others is that we're not that deeply invested. It's relatively easy to say a brief prayer for people in Turkey or China or DC. We don't know them personally and will probably never meet them. There's no personal investment. But it's much different when you try to pray for those who are closest to you. The more you care, the harder it is to pray. When it comes to those things in life that really matter—your husband, your wife, your children, your loved ones—those things are hard to pray for because they're so close to your heart.

It's precisely at this point that these two verses in Romans 8:26-27 become so crucial. They assure us that when we struggle with prayer, the Holy Spirit prays for us. When we can't find the words, the Holy Spirit speaks to the Father with groans that can't be put into words. And when we aren't sure how to pray, the Holy Spirit prays for us according to the will of God.

This is a wonderful promise of God because as we go through life, we face many situations where we simply don't know how to pray. In those moments we can be sure that God the Holy Spirit is praying for us. If your taking notes.

The Holy Spirit prays for us in our weakness. *"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought."*

The word "*helps*" is a rich word. It pictures someone helping another carry a heavy load. Imagine someone trying to drag an enormous log but it's so heavy he can barely move it. Then along comes a strong man who picks up one end and together they carry the log down the road. That's what the Holy Spirit does. He continually comes to us and helps us with our heavy load.

We need the Spirit's help because we're so weak. The word "*weakness*" is the same word used for *sickness* in James 5:14. It refers to those moments in life when we are physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted. Circumstances have combined to push us over the edge.

But it refers to more than momentary difficulty. Weakness is our condition on the earth. We're inherently weak and unable to help ourselves. When it comes to the spiritual, we're completely inadequate. Some of us realize that, the rest of us try to muddle through on our own.

And here's the proof – we don't know how to pray as we ought. Literally, this means we don't know what to pray for. This is one of our chief problems in prayer. How many times have we tried to pray and we didn't know what to ask from the Lord? This happens often when we're faced with a crisis or when we try to pray for someone else.

In the first place, we don't know the future so we can't tell how things will turn out. Second, we don't know what's best for us. We may think we want a new job because we can't stand our boss, but when we get a new job we also get a boss who is 10 times worse. On a deeper level, married people may dream of being single again (or single people may wish they were married) but when you are, you discover that you exchanged one set of problems for another.

And so it goes. We don't know what to pray for because our perspective is so limited. We see only a tiny fraction of the universe and our outlook is inevitably tainted by selfishness. How can we be sure that what we're praying for is what God wants? As Ecclesiastes 6:12 says, "*For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?*" The answer is, we don't know what is good for us. When we were little our mothers said, "Eat your broccoli, it's good for you." But we're not so sure anymore. In fact, we're not sure about much.

Some of you may recognize the name of Dr. James Montgomery Boice (**picture**). For over 30 years he served as pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. For generations it's been a Bible-teaching center in the heart of Philadelphia. Dr. Boice was well known as a speaker and author of many books on the Bible. But in 2000 he was diagnosed with advanced liver cancer. He shared with his church family about his illness and the course of treatment he was pursuing. In his comments he answered the question regarding how people should pray for him. "*Should we pray for a miracle?*" he asked. Not necessarily. There is no doubt, he said, that God can work miracles. But the God who works miracles could have prevented the cancer in the first place. He asked prayer for the doctors that they'd have wisdom in pursuing the proper course of treatment. Then Dr. Boice spoke of the goodness of God, that even his cancer is for his own good in the long run. He recognized that humanly speaking his life might well be measured in weeks, not months or years.

I was both comforted and humbled as I read his words. His faith comes shining through and shows itself in the very weakness this text is talking about.

Dr. Boice didn't know what God wanted to do through this sudden attack of cancer. He didn't know if he'd be healed or taken Home...and God called him Home. One thing is certain – God is always good. God is good is so clear. Yet, what God wants to do in any situation is not so clear. The very next verse in Romans 8 is verse 28, "*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.*"

Rarely can we be absolutely certain what God wants to do in a particular situation. After we've made our requests to God, especially regarding a crisis issue, we must cry out, "But Father, I don't know what you want. I want your will to be done even if it means my will is not done in this situation. I truly believe that you know best."

2. The Holy Spirit helps us when we don't know how to pray. "*But the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.*" (Romans 8:26b).

We need the help of the Holy Spirit because we don't know how to pray. The Spirit intercedes for us with groans that can't be expressed in words. (Literally, "*wordless groanings.*") In those moments when we can't pray, the Spirit prays for us. That means that when we lift up our feeble and even ignorant prayers to God, the Spirit takes them and translates them into the language of heaven.

No one knows exactly how this happens because it's a ministry that goes on between the Spirit and the Father. But I imagine that it's something like this. We may pray for a new job but the Holy Spirit speaks to the Father like this: "Father, he thinks he wants a new job because he's weary of the pressure. But I know it's your will that he learns to depend entirely on you. So Father, please don't give him the new job right now. Give him supernatural strength and please send a Christian along to give him some encouragement." And because the Holy Spirit always prays according to the will of God, that's the prayer that's answered.

Matthew Henry (**picture**) says the Holy Spirit "*excites praying graces.*" The Holy Spirit makes us want to pray, then He teaches us how to pray, and He helps us as we pray. And when we can't pray at all, He prays for us to the Father. What a fantastic promise and encouragement!

Sometimes we're so confused, so worried, so hurried, so harried, so pressured, so ill, so distracted, so tired and so weary that the words won't come. The best prayers are often unheard and even unspoken. They arise from a broken heart to our Heavenly Father who hears the groanings that can't be put in words.

3. We have confidence that the Father hears even our groaning prayers. *“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”* (Romans 8:27). How do we know that God hears those inarticulate deep groanings that come from deep within? Verse 27 declares that God constantly searches our hearts.

Because the Father knows what the Spirit is thinking, there’s perfect intimacy and perfect harmony. There is no contradiction between the Spirit in our hearts and the Father in Heaven. When the Spirit intercedes for us, He always intercedes according to God’s will.

So when we pray, we say what’s on our hearts. And the Spirit says to the Father, “What he really means is this...If he knew better, this is what he would ask for...She wants to be like Jesus and this is what she really needs.”

God already knows our deepest desires. Sometimes we talk about having an “unspoken prayer request.” Unspoken prayer requests are those things that are so close to our heart that we dare not mention them in public. They’re deep, precious and private. Sometimes we couldn’t share them and maintain emotional control. Verse 27 reminds us that there are no “unspoken requests” with God. An old gospel song says, *“Jesus knows our every weakness,”* and He does. He knows what we need before we ever ask Him.

There’s great encouragement in this passage though we may not see it at first. Our suffering, our uncertainty, our struggle with prayer, our doubt and confusion, and our worry about the future reveals our weakness. It strips away the mask of self-sufficiency and displays our utter helplessness. It forces us to confront our own inabilities. We’re forced to say, “I’m not as strong as I thought I was. I’m not invincible.”

And the Holy Spirit comes alongside to help us in our need. The Spirit who is Himself the third member of the Trinity prays to the Father (the first member of the Trinity) in the name of the Son (the second member of the Trinity) for us in our moment of weakness. What we have is God praying to God in God’s Name on behalf of God’s children! Wow! What an amazing thought this is!

In your weakness, when you feel desperate about the things that truly matter to you, and you don’t know what to say, and all you can do is cry out “Oh God!” the message coming back from heaven is, “Don’t worry. That’s enough because there is Someone who is praying for you.”

We know that Jesus is in heaven praying for us (Romans 8:34). But in this passage the Apostle Paul goes a step beyond that. When you come to the moment of complete exhaustion and can no longer frame the words, you don’t have to worry. The Holy Spirit will pray for you. In your weakness He is strong. When you cannot speak, the Holy Spirit speaks for you. When we lean against the wall of desperation, crying out to God, when we whisper, “God, I don’t know what to say. I don’t know how to pray about this,” the Holy Spirit comes alongside and says, “Don’t worry. I’ll pray for you.” And He does.

The great Reformer, Martin Luther (**picture**) insightfully writing some 500 years ago, commented that it’s a good thing if we occasionally receive the opposite of what we pray for because that’s a sign the Holy Spirit is at work in your life. We may be praying, “Lord, do this and this and this.” Meanwhile the Holy Spirit is saying, “Lord, what he means is this. Don’t pay any attention to that. He said thus-and-so. If he saw the bigger picture, he’d really ask for such-and-such.”

As we pray from our weak and limited perspective, the Holy Spirit does some needed editing and “corrects” our prayers, so to speak, so that God’s will is always done even in our most wrong-headed prayers. Since the Holy Spirit knows what God’s will is, and since God searches our hearts, He is able to pray for us in ways that always correspond with God’s will. One sign that this is happening is that we pray for one thing and God does the opposite.

Does that mean our prayers are in vain? Not at all. Does it mean we shouldn’t pray? Not at all. It simply reveals our inherent human weakness and the limitation of our perspective on life.

We see the part, the Holy Spirit sees the whole. We see one tiny piece, the Holy Spirit sees the big picture. We pray according to the little bit that we see, the Holy Spirit prays according to His perfect knowledge.

Conclusion: So what do we do with this? **What are the lessons** we need to take home from this for our own walk with the Lord and for our prayer life?

This should encourage us to pray with great confidence. Your Heavenly Father is not judging your words, He’s listening to your heart. We pray to a God who can discern the prayer within the prayer. He hears the words we say and also understands the heart cry and hidden desires that lie underneath our prayers. He can give us the substance of what we ask for even while refusing the form they take. It’s how He can say *Yes* to our deepest desires, even while He says *No* on the surface. Thus, we get what we truly desired even though it’s not what we asked for.

I love the words of Henry Viscardi. They bring this home in a powerful way (**picture**):

*I asked God for strength, that I might achieve.
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.
I asked for health, that I might do greater things.
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.
I asked for riches, that I might be happy.
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of others.
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life.
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I hoped for.
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am among all men, most richly blessed.*

This should teach us that our salvation rests in God alone. Romans 8 teaches us that the entire Trinity is involved in our salvation. We know that God hears our prayers. Romans 8 tells us that Jesus is in heaven interceding for us and the Holy Spirit is on earth interceding for us.

What could be better than that? We have our Father in heaven. Jesus at His right hand and the Holy Spirit is within. This is why, too, we have eternal security. For a believer to end up in hell, the Spirit would have to fail in His intercession. You may be weak but the Spirit is praying for you right now.

We have a Trinitarian salvation: *God called you. Jesus saved you. The Holy Spirit intercedes for you.*

How can you ever be lost? Your salvation rests upon the work of the Trinity. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit would all have to fail before you could ever be eternally lost. It can't happen, it will never happen. All of God's sheep will show up in heaven. Not one will be lost. He knows them, He calls them all by name, and every single one will be safe in the sheepfold in the end.

As we come to the end of this series on prayer, I hope you've been encouraged. I hope you're growing in your prayer life.

Romans 8:26-27 tells us that when we're so discouraged, when the pain is too deep, the disappointment too profound, the sense of loss so overwhelming that we can't put it into words, the Holy Spirit says, "My child, I understand. Let me take over. I'll talk to God for you." And He prays for us with groans that words cannot express to the Father.

Even when no one else cares or knows or understands, even when we can't understand anything around us, even when the present is bleak and the future a dark mystery, the Son in heaven and the Holy Spirit on earth are interceding for us. We are being prayed for by the #1 Prayer Team in the Universe. One is above, one is below, we're right in the middle. That ought to encourage us.

God has given us the gift of prayer. It was never meant to be a burden, but the source of unlimited blessing for us and for those around us. And God has made it possible for us to pray about anything, anytime, anywhere. When we can't pray, when the words won't come, when we don't know what to pray for, God has given the Spirit who prays for us.

What an honor, what a privilege, what a gift. And what a God who would make such provision for us!

It's a sure thing! The Father hears and answers His prayers even though not a word is uttered. Isn't that incredible? The Father and the Spirit know one another's minds so completely, they're in such perfect touch with each other, that the Spirit doesn't even need to speak a word. The Father understands His unspoken groanings, and will answer them. Ultimately those groanings will bring us to glory. Christian, you're destined for glory. As 1 John 3:2 says, "*Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is.*" Why not begin to live right now in the light of what we shall be soon?

This, though, is only for God's children – those who have trusted Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. If you've never trusted Christ as Savior, there's no hope that your groaning will ever turn to glory. The Bible makes that very clear. But God wants you to be His child, to be part of His Forever Family. It's why He sent Jesus to die for your sins but you must come to Him, you must trust Him and come to Christ's cross. Will you trust Him today?

God sent His Son to die in your place on Calvary's cross and now He offers you forgiveness and everlasting life if you will acknowledge your sin and trust in Him. If you've not done that, please do it today...do it now.

Do you know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior from sin? Do you have the assurance—the hope, as the Bible calls it—of eternity in God's presence in His glorious heaven. If not, will you take Him at His word today?

That's what faith is...taking God at His word. Will you turn from your sin to Him in faith? Will you settle it in prayer right now, in the quiet of your own soul. It's as simple as praying, "Lord, I'm a sinner. I believe Jesus paid for my sin at Calvary. Lord Jesus, I'm trusting You right now. Come into my heart and save me from sin."