

We know not what to pray for

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[0:00] Let us turn now to the passage we read in the letter of Paul to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 26.

Likewise, the Spirit also helped with her infirmities, but we know not what we should pray for us we ought, that the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered, and he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

Amen. Now, this morning service for the past few weeks that I've been with you, we've been having a look at this chapter, and a fortnight ago we saw the emphasis that Paul places in the chapter of verse 14 onwards on the privileges which the Christians have as the sons or the children of God.

They occupy that particular privileged position, and they have the privileges of being heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.

In other words, they are pictured here as sons or children on the way to the glory of God. And as they travel along that way, we noticed last week that in a very wonderful way, they have the sympathy of the creation itself on their side.

[2:10] As they long for their adoption, for their deliverance, for their inheritance, so the creation, this world in which they live, the creation itself groans with them.

It too looks forward to the redemption of the people of God. And therefore, as they travel along the way to odds and glory, we see that the path is not always an easy one.

There are many blessings in it. Of course there are. Innumerable, incalculable blessings. But together with that, there are many difficulties, many problems, many obstacles, many perils.

The way for them to glory must be as it was for the Lord who awaits them in glory. It must be by way of the cross to the crown.

And so, these people need encouragement. And this chapter gives them all the encouragement that they need. As they consider the difficulties and the problems that confront them, so they say with Paul, I don't think he says that the problems, the sufferings of this present time are worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us and to us.

[3:43] There is a contrast drawn between what they have to go through on the way to glory and the glory that awaits them.

And the present pales into insignificance when it is contrasted with the future. And then, there is this other encouragement for them.

They have within them the Holy Spirit witnessing to their sonship, confirming to them that they are the children of God along the way. And also, the Holy Spirit indwelling the Massa as the giving them the fortest of the glory that awaits them.

We have the first fruits of the Spirit. In other words, there are times in life, many times, when the Holy Spirit gives them a fortest of the blessedness and the glory that awaits them.

And I think that you and I should consider that, that there are times in life, these moments, in your own experience, in your own existence, when you know that the Lord is near, the Lord is precious, that the Lord is blessing you.

[5:03] These moments when His power is made so very clear to you, when you rejoice in His grace and in His goodness, in His mercy, shown to you in Christ, let us remember that these are but four tests of the greater and the better glory that awaits.

And then the other encouragement they have is this, that the hope that they entertain will assuredly be fulfilled. remember the way in which He shows us that, that we are saved by hope, that what a man sees, for hope is seen is not hope, but what a man sees is what is yet hope.

He knows, and this is in the context, remember, which He's saying that the whole creation is groaning and traveling with them together as we are in pain until now.

Andy, as He gives us that picture of the creation waiting in expectant mood and the Christian church waiting in expectant anticipation, He assures us that the hope of the Christian will not be disappointed.

Unfortunately, as we saw studying this two weeks ago, unfortunately, there are situations in life when people look forward to a wonderful event and all their hopes are shattered.

[6:34] Unfortunately, this happens. Their hopes are not realized. But He says that will not be the case for the Christian. The Christian's hope will assuredly be fulfilled.

That's another encouragement that He gives the beleaguered Christian along the way. And today, we turn to this other encouragement that He gives. to the Christian.

He says, together with that, the Holy Spirit helps us in our infirmities. For we know not what we should pray for as we are, but the Spirit itself makes a decision for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

And he that searcheth a heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit because he makes a decision for the saints according to the will of God.

And here we have a picture of this Christian, this Son of God, this child of God on the way to heaven confronted with many difficulties on that way.

[7:36] but he has this inestimable privilege, this great encouragement that the Holy Spirit has been given to him to help him.

And the particular aspect of the help that he has here is in his prayer life. The Christian is helped to pray.

Now you know that you often hear that whatever else a Christian is, a Christian is a person who prays.

You can put it another way. A Christian prays very often for the simple reason that he has to. He needs to pray.

He is confronted with circumstances in life in which he can do nothing else but pray. He may not know, maybe, he may not know what he needs.

[8:42] He may not even know what he wants. He may not even know how to express his needs or as wants even if he knew what he wanted.

He may not be very articulate in prayer but the point is that a Christian must of necessity pray.

And the Holy Spirit is there indwelling him to help him. Now we will look first of all this morning at the importance of prayer in the life of the Christian.

The necessity of it. And then we shall look secondly at how the Holy Spirit helps him in his prayer life.

First of all the importance of prayer and the necessity of prayer in the life of the Christian. The Christian life as you know is a life of dependence upon God.

- [9 : 48] And that dependence is expressed in various ways in the Bible. It is a life of faith, a life of trust, a life of commitment, a life of hope as we see in this chapter here, a life of reverence for God, a life in which the fear of God indwells his heart, a life in which he delights delights in God.

Now, all these are terms which the Bible employs to express this dependence that you and I have in God.

And very often, prayer, as someone has put it, is the spiritual faculty by which these various graces are expressed.

take faith and its connection with prayer and look at that great text in Hebrews. He that cometh unto God must believe that he is.

There you have a man coming in prayer to God, but you can't pray to him unless you believe not only that he exists, but unless you believe that he also is the God who does what he says.

- [11 : 13] We come to God therefore with requests, with cries, with entreaties, with prayers, with petitions. Philippians, Paul writes in Philippians chapter 4 makes this abundantly clear.

We should pray to God and thank God in every situation. We should make our requests known to him whatever our circumstance may be.

Prayer, in other words, is the expression of our dependence upon God. There's one way in which the Christian religion, the Christian faith, finds expression.

And there are circumstances, as I said, in life which show us that we need this exercise of prayer. And the word that is used here to bring that out is this, the Spirit helps us in our, in, helps our infirmities.

But there are two ways in which your infirmities and mine show themselves. There are two things that make necessary, as it were, two things which prove that each one of us has infirmities.

- [12 : 26] The first, of course, is indwelling sin, and this chapter refers to that as just the chapters preceding it. chapters 5, 6, and 7 in this epistle show us the weakening effect that sin has upon the life of every individual, including the believer.

It is a source of all our weaknesses. Sin, my infirmities, my sins, that the psalms were sung here today, prevail against my iniquities, prevail against me.

Sin has a weakening effect upon every single one of us. And prayer is the expression of a weak person in the presence of a stronger.

Always remember that. Prayer is the expression of a weaker person in the presence of a stronger. That is why the Christian in his weakness comes to God in his strength.

And then the other thing that shows us our need of prayer along the way is the thing that the apostles are dealing with particularly our sufferings as Christians in this world.

- [13 : 42] And there are experiences that we have, sufferings that we must encounter, which prove to us that our strength cannot stand up to these things.

We don't have the physical and the mental, intellectual and the spiritual resources to stand up to certain situations through which we pass.

And this is something, this is one way in which God is going to show to every single one of us our need of himself. A Christian is a person who discovers more and more his weakness along the way.

A few weeks ago I tried to preach in the seminary on Sabbath morning and one of the elders there coming out said to me, I remember finishing up with Psalm 84, so they from strength and where it goes, still forward unto strength.

And he said, I was reminded, he said today, of something that an old elder from Southloch's, I believe he was, said once about these verses, these words, said, if I said I penned these words, I would have put them like this, so they from weakness to weakness go, still forward unto strength.

[15 : 06] This is the way the Christian feels. He is made increasingly aware of his own insufficiency, of his own inability, of his own weakness, of his own nothingness.

he can't cope with many situations that confront him in this life. And it is in these situations that he cries to God in prayer.

The Spirit helps our infirmities. We are made to cry in prayer to God.

And this weakness, this infirmity is illustrated in this very wonderful way. For we don't know what we should pray for as we ought.

In other words, you find yourself in life confronted with circumstances that so hem you in that even if you could pray, you don't know what to pray for.

[16 : 18] now think of the man who said this before he says, we know not what to pray for as we ought.

This isn't a picture, remember, of a person who has neglected prayers. Oh, I know that there are situations in life where the spirit of indifference and even backsliding so envelops your own heart that you just, you lose the spirit of prayer, you lose the desire to pray, you lose your sense of need to pray.

There are unfortunately these circumstances in life, but the apostle here isn't dealing with that kind of situation. He's not dealing with a person who has slipped away from the position that he ought to have as a Christian.

He's not dealing with that person. He's dealing with this person who's agonizing his way to heaven, who's struggling along the way to glory, who's groaning, who's sowing, who's longing for deliverance.

This isn't a person who's been caught and awares by sin and who finds himself in the grip of sin. Oh, no. This is the person who's warring at good wars and against sin, who's not in league with sin, but who's in deadly conflict with sin.

[17 : 45] That's a person who's dealing with his, he's talking about. Not the person who has neglected prayer, but the person who realizes that he must pray, and yet he knows also that there are certain situations which he finds himself in which he just doesn't know what to pray for as he ought.

Let me give you two examples from the Bible of this. One from the experience of Paul himself, and another from David. Two contrasting circumstances.

Do you remember that Paul himself tells that he wants a wonderful experience, a very heavenly experience. He was caught up in the third heavens and he heard wonderful words.

And even he says, if I could relate this experience to you, I couldn't because I don't have the words to express the wonder and the glory of it. And you know, at that time he says, I was given a thorn in the flesh.

He doesn't tell us what the thorn was, just that he was given this thing to buffet me. It was something that happened to him and the picture he gives us of a punch drunk boxer, blows he said were rained upon me, I was hit from every conceivable direction.

[19 : 06] that's a picture. And what did he do? Well he says, I prayed the Lord thrice. That's probably a word we just use to show that he prayed often.

I prayed. And this is my prayer. Lord, take this away from me. What answer did the Lord give him?

Paul, he said, my grace is sufficient for you and my strength is made perfect in weakness. In other words, the Lord didn't answer Paul's prayer the way he wanted.

Lord, take this away. And the Lord said, no, but I will give you grace to bear it. You know, there was a situation which Paul found himself almost at the end of his tether and he prayed for the wrong thing.

There are times, he says, when we don't know what to pray for as we ought. Take the other example, the example from the life of David, Psalm 55. There he is, finds himself in a very trying situation.

[20:19] He's got the answer to his problem. He knows the answer. Oh, Lord, give me the wings of a dove and take me away from this place and let me be somewhere else where I can be at rest.

You know what it's like? The grass on the other side of the fence is always greener, isn't it? Another situation would always be better, wouldn't it? To be somewhere else, that's the answer.

And was that the answer for David? No, he had it all wrong. The Lord said to him, Cast thy burden upon the Lord and he shall sustain thee.

Now, there you are, two examples of the lives of two eminently good and gracious and godly men who asked for the wrong things. You see, this is very often a difficulty with life, that you find yourself in situations in which you just don't know what to pray for as you ought.

Well, what's the answer? Where's the encouragement? Here it is. We don't know what to pray for as we ought, but the Holy Spirit helps our infirmities by making a session for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

[21:57] This is what the Holy Spirit does. He helps us in these situations. He has been given to us for the purpose.

He doesn't take us away from these situations. He doesn't remove the obstacles. He doesn't all of a sudden make the path clearer and smoother and easier.

He doesn't place you as David wanted from point A and place you in point B. Nor does he remove from you as Paul wanted. The difficulty, the thorn and the flesh.

That's not the way God operates. He's got a better way of doing things. He gives us the Holy Spirit to help us. The Holy Spirit is there to help us.

And what does that mean? It means that the Holy Spirit shoulders the burden with you. He doesn't take it away from you, but he shoulders it with you.

[23:02] And how does he do it? By teaching you what to pray for and teaching you how to pray.

He helps you by strengthening your soul to pray. You want to pray in this situation. And how does the Spirit help you? By strengthening your determination.

By encouraging you to continue. By giving you the desire to come to God. This is what happens, for example, when people throw a conversion.

The Lord is bringing home to them their need of himself. Their need to break away from sin. Their need, as it were to take up a new life.

He convinces them of that. And what the Spirit does in conversion is that he strengthens that person in which he was his whole desires for God.

[24:06] He didn't know what to ask God for. And he wasn't even sure about the being of God himself or where he was, but just that he had to cry to God to help.

That's the way in which the Spirit helps. But then, you see, we are told something else about the way in which the Spirit helps. He helps by making intercession for us according to the will of God.

Now, those of you who have keen eyes would have noticed in our reading in verse 34 something else.

It is Christ who died, here are other who is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.

Now, there you have two verses in the same chapter which tell you the same thing. The Holy Spirit intercedes for us, and Jesus Christ in heaven intercedes for us.

[25 : 14] Now, have you noticed that? We have two intercessors. Is there a difference between the two intercessors? Of course. One is Christ, the other is the Holy Spirit.

Is there a difference between the two intercessions? Of course. One goes on in heaven, and the other goes on, on earth.

Jesus is in heaven interceding for us, praying for us. The Holy Spirit is on earth interceding. for us.

And is there any other difference? Yes, there is. Jesus speaks for us. The Holy Spirit speaks through us or in us.

I don't think we're warranted to take the view that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us in the same way as Jesus does.

[26 : 19] Jesus is our advocate in heaven. The Holy Spirit is our advocate on the earth. What if I could do this illustration?

I think some of you may have seen this on television the past few days. I'm not sure about my facts and when I do get one or two words wrong, don't pop the illustration for that reason.

You know that this was, isn't it, Colonel North, who was in President Reagan's administration and who had to resign because of the unfortunate, to say the least, incident about the sale of arms to Iran.

Well, a few days ago, he was before this committee as the Senate who was investigating the whole incident. And he was asked a question. Remember what he said?

my counsel has advised me not to answer. It wasn't his counsel who answered for him, it was him saying.

[27 : 26] He was advised by his counsel not to answer. Now, that gives you some idea of what the Holy Spirit's intercession is like, as distinct from Christ's intercession.

The Holy Spirit's intercession is like this. He tells you what to say. And he tells you what not to say.

Jesus doesn't tell you what to say. He says it for you. He is your advocate in heaven, speaking to God on your behalf.

Father, I pray for them. His intercession goes on in heaven. in what form, that's not our business just now.

But the intercession is in heaven for you. The Holy Spirit indwells your heart in this way that he intercedes, this way that he asks. He prompts you to ask for the right things.

[28 : 33] He, as Psalm 45 puts it, he indicts your prayer. My heart indicted is. Remember, I spoke about that person who is being converted. He is being taught what to pray for.

He never prayed in his life before, but now he prays. He prays as he never prayed before. And it is the Holy Spirit who is prompting him, telling him, directing him, counselling him, advising him what to say.

You see, the problem with each one of us is we don't know what to pray for as we ought to. But this is the great privilege that the Christian now has. He has the Holy Spirit telling him what to pray for, directing him in accordance with the world.

And there's something else that comes in here. He that searcheth the heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit because he can search for the saints according to the will of God.

This is the other encouragement. The Holy Spirit tells you what to pray for because he knows the mind of God.

[29 : 51] He knows what the judge will give you and he knows what you need to ask the judge for. And when the judge hears the prayer that is inspired by the Spirit hears a prayer which is in accordance with his own will.

You know what people ask the question, how do I know that I'm praying for a thing that is according to the will of God?

How can I know the will of God? How can I know what to pray for? And people say, well, I'm not very sure if I have the will of God in this or not, but this is the way that some people tell you.

If it might be a good indicator for you that you're praying for the will of God, if what you are praying for is constant, if it remains for you.

In other words, if you're praying for the same thing over and over and over again, as long as God hasn't taken that design from you, you are praying for something which is in accordance with this will.

[31 : 02] Well, whether it is trying to generalize like that or not, I'm not very sure, but there are some things that we know for a fact are according to the will of God.

It is according to the will of God that you seek salvation. It is according to the will of God that you seek forgiveness. It is according to the will of God that you seek sanctification.

It is according to the will of God that you seek to be holy, that you seek to be like him. It is according to the will of God that you move in the direction of his will as it is revealed to you in the word of God.

These things are absolutely certain. Then, there are other things in life that may not be all that clear. I mentioned already Paul who was given the stone and the flesh.

Should he pray, Lord, take this away from what I suppose was inevitable, it was not that he should, but he prayed for the wrong thing. What he prayed for, he should have prayed for, was grace to accept this.

[32 : 13] Perhaps you are here today, you may have a very difficult providence to deal with in your own life or in the life of somebody else who is close and connected with you. Perhaps you think that life would be far better and far easier if only this were removed.

But maybe that's not the answer. The answer is grace sufficient for your need, grace sufficient to deal with the problem, difficult to be.

Maybe of course, it's inevitable, it's natural that you should think that things would be far better if this were taken away. But you see, my friend, it may be even better to receive grace in that situation.

I think I told the story before of the father who went in search of his black slidden son. and he said that his son who had back sitting was a source of great grief to his heart.

He referred to it as the thorn in his flesh. But you know this he said, God has been so rich to me in his grace and the sincerity of his grace and the wonder of his sustaining grace.

[33 : 32] There have been times when the grace of God has been so real that he has lifted me above and beyond the thought of the thorn in the flesh.

And that's the way it is. The spirit will prompt you to ask for the right thing. Hence the need every time you bow your knee in prayer. Hence the need to pray like this, Lord, give me the spirit.

Help me to pray for the right things. Direct me by thy spirit and with thy spirit. And there are times also when you bow in the place of God and you don't even know what to say.

pray. It isn't just that you cannot, it isn't just that you pray for the wrong things and ask for the wrong things. There are times when you don't even know what to say.

You haven't got a word. And some may say, I'm sure if God was calling me to pray, I would have some words to say. Not necessarily, my friend, not necessarily.

[34 : 40] We pray, he says, with groanings which cannot be uttered. There are circumstances in life where you cannot even articulate your need in the presence of God.

You can't find the words to express your need. You know your need, but you can't express your need in prayer.

Eloquence, as you and I define eloquence, as you and I understand eloquence, is not necessarily the prayer that God hears at home.

But we do know for a fact that there is one prayer that he hears. The prisoner sighs and the prisoner's groans.

The Lord will not despise. And after you're here today and you're afraid that you don't have a prayer at all, or at least you're afraid that you can't put into words, your own wants and your own needs, how will you remember this, that if you have the groan that ascends from a heart, taught, instructed, directed, guided by the Holy Spirit, you have then a prayer that is heard by God because God is the searcher of the heart.

[36 : 24] And here you have pictures of God, the eyes of God, focusing on the heart of every individual. What's he looking for? He's looking for a desire.

He's looking for needs and wants expressed to himself in a way that is according to his will.

That's a picture. He's searching thoughts. And this God who searches the heart, remember, he knows the mind of the Spirit.

The two, they are one. There are three persons of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These dear want God the same in substance, evil, power, and glory. They are together in the Trinity.

They are together in heaven. They are fellows. And that minds are identical. They know each other's mind.

[37 : 27] And God the Father searching the heart of people in this world looks for this. Is there a heart here indwelt by the Spirit who has the same mind as myself and who is teaching this heart to pray for things according to my will?

Well, what about yourself here this morning? Is your own heart indwelt by the Spirit of God?

Are you yourself taught what to pray? Do you entertain the hope that you are groaning heavenward?

Do you entertain the hope that the Spirit is prompting you, moving you, constraining you to try Godward?

In your need? Is that your hope as you travel along this rocky way from time to eternity?

[38 : 41] Let us pray. O Lord, we bless thee for thy truth and we pray for thy presence, for thy grace and for thy Spirit.

We thank thee for the mercy that are renewed to us each day. We pray for thy grace and for thy help in our own need today.

Father, thy blessing continue with us. Be your teacher and help us as we look to this, to our evening service. We pray for thy Spirit to guide and to direct us to the glory of thy name and for our own good.

For Jesus' name and amen.