



Thank God for the Spirit!

Romans 8:26-27

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This morning we will be looking at Romans 8:26-27. This is the second of three passages we will look at, one last week, one this week, and one two weeks from now, in which Paul is giving encouragement to believers in the midst of the trials of the Christian life. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 8, beginning at verse 26:

"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. 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."

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord our God, we come to you and seek your blessing upon your Word. We ask, O Lord, that by the power of your Spirit you would enlighten our minds, that you would focus our hearts upon the truth of your Word, that in there we would see the Lord Jesus Christ, all that he has done for us and all that we are because of who he is. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

Last week, we looked at the first ground of encouragement for Christians as we live in a time of suffering and challenges. In this life, while we wait for redemption and reunion with Jesus Christ, we saw that we have suffering and we have pain. That is the reality of the Christian life. It's not a result of disobedience or of living wrong, but it is indeed a great challenge for us to live with. The encouragement is that there is a great disproportion between suffering and the glory that is to come. So Paul advised us to be sustained by hope in the midst of suffering.

Now, remember, this does not mean suffering doesn't exist, and it doesn't mean suffering doesn't matter. Instead, what it means is that God has given us a hope and a view of the glory to be revealed so we can bear the sufferings in our midst. This passage this morning introduces a second ground of encouragement, a ground of encouragement for Christians as we struggle with our weakness, particularly with our weakness in prayer.

This encouragement comes to us through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us we have the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit provides for us in the midst of our weakness. This morning, I would like us to see two things from this text under two main headings. First, we will see that *the Spirit helps us*. Secondly, we will see that *the Spirit knows*, that the Spirit knows not only us but the Spirit knows the will of God. The Spirit helps and the Spirit knows.

The Spirit Helps

Let's begin by looking at how *the Spirit helps*. The first thing we need to understand is that we are in need of help. Our text this morning describes that for us by telling us that we are weak. This passage of encouragement comes to us in the midst of our weakness. It is similar to what we saw in the midst of our suffering. As a matter of fact, verse 26 begins appropriately with the word *likewise*. We might translate it *in the same manner*.

As we think about it, we look back to the passage we looked at last week, from verse 18 to verse 25, and we saw that the Lord provided for us in the midst of our suffering. Likewise, in the same manner, he provides for us in the midst of our weakness. Now what does this mean? It means that just as we saw that suffering is real, weakness is real. Just as the Lord provided support for us in our sufferings, he has provided help for us in our weakness.

Once again, Paul takes our weakness as a given. You will notice Paul makes no attempt to convince us of our weakness. He makes no argument that we need help. Instead, just as he took suffering as a reality, he takes weakness as a reality. This is very interesting for a different reason. We, as Americans, do not like weakness. We do not like to show weakness. We like being powerful. We like the fact that we have the largest navy in the world. We like the fact that our military is the most powerful in the world. We like having the strongest and largest economy.

Think about it for a moment. Have you ever gone in for an interview for a job or a scholarship or entrance to a school? When you do that, what do you emphasize? Do you go in and say, "Well, probably you don't want to hire me for this job because I'm weak. I don't really think I'm capable of doing what you ask of me. I just thought I should come in, but really, you really should pass me by. I'm too weak for this job"? Is that what you do? No.

It's almost clichéd that when the question comes to us, "What is your greatest weakness?" we have to find a way to turn that into our best strength. "What's your greatest weakness?" "Well, to be honest, I work too hard. I'm too detail-oriented. I focus too much on my work to the exclusion of other life balances." Isn't that what we do? We don't want to show any weakness at all. We want to put our best foot forward, a position of strength.

"But," you might say, "Pastor, we love underdogs in America. We love the story of the unexpected victory, of the little guy who wins." Then I have to ask you... *What is it that we love?* Do we love the underdog who loses 72 to 3? Of course not. What we love is the underdog who shows unexpected strength. We're not fond of the weak team that loses every week. No. We want to see the underdog show themselves strong. We want the team that shouldn't win to show that they're capable.

We want the guy who has the business idea to defeat all comers, to do what no one thought was possible. That's what we like. We like strength. Paul reminds us that we are weak. This is a very un-American view of the world, but it is a very Christian view of the world, that we are weak. Again, Paul knows what he's talking

about. Just like we saw he knows what he's talking about with respect to suffering, Paul knew weakness, and he wasn't afraid to talk about it.

When Paul went to Corinth, a place that was obsessed with success and power and strength... They were so obsessed with strength and power, in fact, that when those who opposed Paul in Corinth came up with a name for themselves, they called themselves the *super apostles*. They were the first comic book league. So when Paul came there, how did he present himself? How did he deal with this issue?

Did he list off all of his accomplishments and what he'd done? Did he say, "Well, ask them how many churches *they've* planted. Let me tell you how many *I've* planted"? Did he say, "Let me tell you about all of the people I have led to the Lord"? Did he talk about all of the things he'd done, all of the important people he knew, governors, high priests, etcetera? No.

What Paul said when he was at Corinth was, "I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling." Think about that. Let's go back to our mock interview. Could you imagine being in an interview and someone says, "How would you handle this situation in this job?" and you say, "Well, I don't know. I'm here in fear and trembling. I'm just trying not to lose it sitting in the chair here. I'm weak." We would never do that, but that's exactly what Paul does.

This is the same Paul who says in 2 Corinthians 12 that God said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." "Therefore," Paul says, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Listen to the language there. He's not just willing to *accept* his weakness. He's not just willing to *admit* his weakness. He's not even just willing to *boast* about his weakness.

He eagerly and gladly boasts of his weakness. Why? So that the power of Christ can be seen in his life. So if you are struggling today with weakness, know that you have good company. Know that it is a part of the Christian life to be weak, not just by result but by design. The Lord knows you are weak. He does this and knows this so he can be shown to be strong.

Now, what does this weakness mean? The first thing we might think about as we think about weakness is *physical* weakness. This word *can* mean that. It can mean a physical limitation, an illness, weakness of the body, but I think there is more than that going on here, because Paul is talking about weakness in the context of prayer. He says, "We don't know what to pray for as we ought," and we know we don't need to be able to lift 200 pounds to pray. It's not a question of physicality.

We might also think Paul might be describing weakness with respect to *sin*, because after all, sin *does* get in the way of us accomplishing things. Sin *is* seen in the Bible as a barrier to prayer. John tells us in chapter 9, "We know that God does not listen to sinners." James tells us in chapter 4, "You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."

But that's not what's in view here. If you look, there's no call to forsake sin. If sin was the weakness in view, Paul would say, "You are weak because you are sinning. You need to repent and leave that sin." As a matter of fact, that's exactly what he says when in Corinth they're having difficulties around the Lord's Supper. He tells them, "You are weak, and some of you even die in sleep because you're sinning. Stop sinning."

There's none of that here. There's not even a note of negativity about weakness. Paul is not negative at all. He doesn't say, "You are weak, and that's miserable and horrible, and you need to push past it." No, he simply states it as a matter of fact. So I think what Paul is doing here is describing weakness as a part of the human condition. Again, what is the context of this weakness? It's prayer. And what is prayer? Prayer is admitting that we have needs, needs we can't meet. So we go to God because something is beyond us.

What Paul is saying here is we struggle with prayer because we're too weak even to deal with our weakness. That's weak. Do you struggle with prayer? Paul is telling you it's okay to admit that. Can you imagine that? We think we have to show ourselves capable in prayer. When we pray publicly, we need to show that we know what we're doing. So when we pray, we need to make sure we quote some Scripture in our prayer, and we need to make sure we use language that's formal and flowery and better than we would normally use, but Paul says we're weak. He says we don't even know what to pray for.

Notice this. Paul does not say *you* don't know what to pray for. Do you see that? He says *we* don't know what to pray for. If anybody knew how to pray, it was Paul. You can look at his prayer in Ephesians 1 for the church at Ephesus. You can look at his prayer in Colossians 1 for the church at Colossae. Rich, deep, theological prayers for the blessing of God to rain down on his people, for them to become mature in Christ, to realize who they are in Christ. These are powerful prayers that can even be a model for *our* prayers.

Yet Paul says, "We are weak...*all* of us, including me." Not just baby Christians, not just immature Christians, not just new Christians; no, *all* of us are weak. What does that mean? How can that be an encouragement to us? How does it help us to know we are weak? Well, it helps us to know we are weak because then we look for God's supply in our weakness and we see that the Spirit helps us, that he intercedes for us.

It's not just that we're comforted that other people are in the same position we are. No, we see that there are people in the Bible who struggle with prayer. Paul himself prayed that a thorn in the flesh would be removed from him. We don't know exactly what this was, but we *do* know it was of grave concern to Paul, because he prayed multiple times to have it removed. We also know Paul did not pray rightly, because God said, "No."

Do you remember Elijah? He is one of the most courageous and strongest people in all of the Bible. Do you remember in 1 Kings 18 where he goes up on Mount Carmel and confronts 450 prophets of Baal by himself and defeats them? Then do you remember what happens right after that? Jezebel sends word, threatening his life, and this powerful and courageous man runs in fear. He goes to the Lord, and does he know what to pray for? No.

Do you remember what this powerful man of God prays for? "O Lord, take my life. I'm at the end. I'm a complete failure. There's no hope. Please, take my life." It's the definition of not knowing what to pray for, not trusting God, not seeing what God has just done right in front of you. As is so often the case in the Bible, what is an encouragement to us is that the Lord uses the context of our weakness to show himself strong. That's what Paul said in 2 Corinthians. He said God uses our weakness to show us our true hope, that our true hope is found in him.

Isn't that exactly what we said about suffering last week? God doesn't do away with suffering; he uses it to point us to *his* sufficiency, *his* provision, our hope in *him*. Here, likewise, Paul says, he points us to the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit helps us. Just like with suffering, God does not remove our weakness. He doesn't tell us we *will* be strong. He doesn't say the Spirit will give us strength like Samson. No. The Spirit *helps* us. This is a very interesting word as we look at it. It is a compound word in Greek.

We have this in English as well. It's where you take a verb, and then you also take a preposition, and you mash them together and make up a new word. The preposition gives a fuller, deeper meaning to the verb. One example might be our verb *transgress*. *Gression* comes from a verb that means to go; *trans* means across. We talk about transgressing a river, going across a river. It's not just going; it's going across. We talk about transgressing God's law, breaking God's law, going past God's law. The preposition helps to give further definition to the verb.

Here, actually, there are *two* prepositions stuck together on this verb. The main verb means to take, to take hold of, or to bear, and there are two prepositions, one that means with and one that means in place of. As we first think about that, that makes no sense. It seems to me that the preposition *with* is nearly the exact opposite of *in place of*. You go *with* someone or you go *in place of* someone and they're not with you. But as we put all of this together, we get something like to take up a burden *with* someone *in their place*.

Our translation *help* is a good translation, but the content and the context of this verb means the Spirit helps us by coming alongside us *with* us and carrying our burden in place of us carrying it ourselves. It's a perfect picture of the work of the Holy Spirit, because one of his other names is the *Advocate*, or the *Comforter*. You may have even heard of the Greek word that goes along with that: the *Paraclete*. It means one who is called alongside to help.

From that we get a comforter, because someone who comes alongside us to help us comforts us or someone who stands beside us is our advocate. So the Spirit comes to us in our weakness. Paul tells us our weakness is chiefly that we do not know what to pray for. We don't know what to take up. We're confused. We're so beset by trials and difficulties we can't see a way out. It's not just that we don't *have* the solution; we're not even sure what the solution would be so we can ask for it.

Have you ever felt like that? So burdened by life or by problems or even by your own sin you're not sure what the proper solution or resolution would be, so devastated by your need you can't even get your mind around what to ask God to do? If so, you are not alone. As a matter of fact, Paul tells you you are normal.

That is what Christians face, and God knows that. He knows it and, therefore, he has sent you his Spirit to help.

Now *how* does the Spirit help? When we're lost, when we're unaware, when we don't know what to pray for, he intercedes for us, Paul tells us in verse 26. This is remarkable, because we're used to the idea of having Jesus intercede for us at the throne of God. The apostle John tells us this very thing in one of his letters. He says we have an advocate (the *Paraclete*, the same word that is used of a title of the Holy Spirit) with the Father, even Jesus Christ the righteous.

Now here we have this idea of Jesus interceding in heaven, interceding for the really big things, like our standing before God, but what about the here and now? What about the problems that are before me that may not seem so big to God but are too much for me? Paul says we have a second interceder. It's the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes alongside us and pleads our case with God, much like Christ does in heaven.

How does he do this? He does it by joining in with our groanings too deep for words. When we go to God and are unable to even express our deepest needs, the Holy Spirit joins in. He makes these unutterable, unspeakable thoughts speakable and brings them to God. Sometimes we have more than we can bear and we groan under the weight of it. The Holy Spirit comes alongside us, understands the weight we are under and groans along with us but in a way that these groanings come to the Father with meaning, replacing our weakness with his strength. We're not even aware of it all of the time.

I had an experience that I think is analogous a few weeks ago. My son was moving into his first apartment at college at Stephen F. Austin, and we went up to see his apartment. His mother and he had gone and bought a bookshelf for him. It was in the back of the car, and we brought it. I had already received a lecture from my wife to be careful carrying this bookshelf. It was really heavy. "I don't think you can carry this bookshelf."

As we are parking outside the apartment, my son calls his friend to come and meet us to help him carry the bookshelf up, because he says, "Dad, I don't think you can carry this bookshelf. I think you're going to hurt yourself." I said, "Son, I think I can make it up one flight of stairs. Your old man isn't *that* old yet." He said, "All right. My friend just told me he got called into work, so we're going to have to try to do it together." I said, "Okay."

We pull out the bookshelf. I'm at the bottom at the back, and he's at the top, and we carry it up the flight of stairs. The whole time, I'm thinking to myself, "This is easy. Why does my son think I can't do this?" Now, I'll tell you that the whole time we're going up the stairs I'm grunting and groaning, because even though it was easy, it still wasn't *that* easy. I make my way up there, and we survive, and we set it on the landing.

We needed to switch positions so he could get the door open and get it in. All well and good. I pick up the other end, and the other end is like five times as heavy as the end I was carrying. I definitely had the light end. Then I'm like, "Oh man. Now I know why I couldn't have done this." I couldn't have done it because

I had the light end. I just *thought* I was doing the carrying. My young strong son was doing almost all the carrying.

That's, I think, a picture of the way the Holy Spirit comes alongside us and helps us. We still have to struggle with our weakness. We still have to go to the Lord in prayer. We think all the burden is on us, yet it becomes light. Why? Because the burden is borne by the Holy Spirit. We're not in this by ourselves. We don't have to find a way to do it. The Spirit comes alongside and carries. The Spirit helps.

The Spirit Knows

The second thing we see is that *the Spirit knows*. He knows our true needs. How can the Spirit really help us when we don't even know what we should ask for? It would be one thing for us to say we know what we need but we're not expert enough to articulate the best case for our need. After all, isn't that what lawyers do? Lawyers take our case and put it in the best possible language, the most persuasive form so the requests or the needs we have will be met.

That's not what we're talking about here. We don't even know what to ask for. Paul says we're too weak even to know what to ask for, but the Spirit knows. The Spirit knows *us*, and the Spirit knows our needs...better than *we* do, in fact. Now, this concept can get a bit scary in Reformed circles. We don't like to talk too much about the Holy Spirit, especially because there is so much abuse of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the theology of our present day.

If we're honest with ourselves, we like everything to be intellectual, to be tidy, and to be neat. The only problem is life isn't like that, is it? Paul just told us that life is such that we are overwhelmed. We are weak. We don't know what to do. We don't even know what to ask for. The solution, Paul says, is that the Holy Spirit indwells the believer. He has already told us this in verse 9 and in verse 11 of this chapter.

We have a special blessing and a relationship with the Spirit that the greatest of the Old Testament saints wish they had. There is a very special connection with our intercessor, the Spirit. Because of that connection, the Spirit knows our true selves. He knows who we really are, what we really need, what we should come to the Lord for and request prayer for.

This is part of the mystery of the Spirit's work, and it should not scare us. It should comfort us. The Spirit searches the heart of the child of God and finds unspoken and unspeakable groanings, but because the Spirit *is* God, they're not unintelligible to him. They cannot escape him, and he brings those groanings to the Father in an intelligible and spoken form.

Where some make an error is they try to make the unintelligible nature of these groanings the valuable thing, promoting so-called "prayer languages" or non-thinking communication with God. What Paul is saying here is actually the exact opposite. He's saying it's not that there is value *in* the groanings but that the Spirit understands the groanings that even we don't understand and makes them understood before God.

The Spirit makes these groanings intelligible and communicable. That is the blessing the Spirit is to the believer. There is nothing lost in translation, because Paul tells us God knows the mind of the Spirit perfectly. When the Spirit brings our prayers to the Father, we don't have to worry about whether they'll be understood.

Have you ever had this happen to you, where you've had someone bring a request to someone else on your behalf but they didn't exactly frame it correctly? Your request is granted, but it's not really what you wanted because they asked for the wrong thing or at the wrong time or in the wrong way, and you think, "Well, I guess this is good, but this isn't really what I need." This is never the case with the Spirit of God. The Father knows the mind of the Spirit, and the Spirit is the one interceding.

Are you encouraged by that? The Spirit knows what you need even when you don't. He brings your prayers before the Father, and all you can do is groan. What hope there is in weakness. What strength we have access to in the Spirit, but there's more. The Spirit not only knows our true needs; he also knows the will of God. When the Spirit intercedes for us, he does so not primarily according to our desires, but he does so primarily according to the will of God.

This should be a great encouragement in many different ways. First, we might ask for the wrong things, things that would harm us rather than help us. The Spirit will not do that. Secondly, we might ask for things God will not grant because they're contrary to his will. The Spirit will not do that. He asks in accordance with God's will.

Briefly, what do we mean by the *will of God*? Well, first, we can think about the will of God as the *revealed moral will of God in his Word*. It's seen in his Word. Perhaps it's best summarized and its best example is in the Ten Commandments. We can follow this will of God because it's before us. We know what God thinks about lying. So if you come to a point in your life, "Should I lie or not?" I could tell you it's pretty easy: *not*, because it's revealed in the will of God.

We can also think, though, about the will of God as the *secret will of God*, as the things God does behind the scenes that he uses to bless us and shape us but of which we are unaware. When I think of this, I think of the story of Ruth. Do you remember Ruth? She comes, and she just happens to go to a field, and it just happens to be the field owned by Boaz, and he just happens to come by and see her, and he just happens to be the kinsman redeemer for her family. Wonderful set of coincidences. Right? Not!

This is the will of God being worked out, as we think about not only, humanly speaking, does Ruth and Naomi's well-being rest on being redeemed by Boaz, the line of the Messiah rests upon it. There's no coincidence here. God is making this happen. Well, a problem comes up when we try to think about this secret will of God in our individual lives. We think we need to follow this secret will of God in very specific ways, ways when we don't have any guidance as to what to do, things like, "Where should I go to school? Whom should I marry? What job should I take?" It can be dizzying.

"If I pick the wrong school, I won't be in God's will, and who knows what will happen to me. I'll pick the wrong school. I'll be around the wrong people. I'll be in the wrong church. I'll get the wrong job. I'll have the wrong family. My whole life will be ruined." "Unless I find my soul mate, my life is over. *My* life will be ruined. *Her* life will be ruined. Our *kids'* lives will be ruined. Our *neighbors'* lives will be ruined. Every pet we have will have its life ruined. What do I do? There's a lot of pressure here. How do I find that one person?"

What Paul is telling you is you don't need to try to pry into these secret areas, the secret will of God, where we can only rely on subjective things, like a feeling or a circumstance or a coincidence. Have you ever seen that or been tempted to do something like this? "I'm not sure if I should buy this car. God, if *that* guy over *there* comes up and talks to me, I'll buy the car. If *that* guy over *there* comes up and talks to me, I won't buy the car." We think this is what we should do.

We may even say, "Pastor, it's in the Bible. Don't you remember Abraham's servant? He went out to find a wife for Isaac, and he said, 'If someone comes and draws water from the well for me, I'll know you're prospering.'" What I say is, "How much Bible did Abraham's servant have?" Zero. He had nothing to go on. Now we have the entirety of God's revealed Word. We need to look and apply God's Word. Instead of trying to find coincidences, we need to rely on the Holy Spirit.

We follow the revealed will of God, and in his Word we live our lives in accordance with that. For other matters that are beyond our understanding and are actually a part of our weakness, we rely on the Holy Spirit to bring them to God, knowing that he knows the will of God. What an encouragement this is. Have you ever been afraid that you would miss the word of God, that you would not hit the bull's-eye of God's will and would, as a result, have to live a second-class life forever? Paul tells you to stop worrying about that. *You* may not know the will of God perfectly, but the Spirit does, and the Spirit has been given to you.

In conclusion, it is so important for us in the middle of the struggles of life to know that our hope does not rely on our ability. We know we are weak, but it is a great blessing for us to know that God knows we are weak. Because he knows that, he has made provision for us. We have hope because of what *he* has done. He has given to us his Spirit, and the Spirit helps us in our weakness. God has not left you by yourself. Trust the Lord and what he has done in giving to you his Holy Spirit.