

The Spirit's Intercession

📖 Romans 8:26-27

👤 Pastor Jeremy Thomas

📅 May 10, 2015

🌐 fbgbible.org

📍 Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin Street

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

(830) 997-8834

We're dealing with the doctrine of glorification in Romans 8:18-30. Glory and glorification come from the Greek words *δοξα* and *δοξαζω* respectively. They refer to light or splendor. To keep that from being too abstract we defined glory as the essence of a person or thing as it is originally intended to be, in its new, untarnished condition. Zodhiates defined it similarly saying, "The glory of God is what He is essentially, the glory of created things including man is what they are meant by God to be, though not yet perfectly attained (Heb 2:10; Rom 8:18-21)." So we can look at the glory of God, the glory of man and the glory of nature since these are the three distinctions in Scripture. When we look at the glory of God we're looking at His essence and since His essence is immutable then God's glory never changes. When we look at the glory of man we're looking at his essence as a finite replica of God's essence since man is made in the image of God and since his essence is mutable then man's glory is subject to change and it did change from creation at the fall. When we look at the glory of nature we're looking at the design of nature and since man fell then God cursed nature and it too fell so its glory was changed so that while it still manifests design it does so imperfectly.

Paul's point in Romans 8:18-25 is that at this present time man and nature are under the curse of the Fall and so are in an imperfect condition of glory. There is glory but it is not as splendid as it once was. It has been corrupted. Now it is constantly in a state of suffering. Verse 18 is motivating us to patiently deal with the suffering by knowing that both man and nature are going to be restored or glorified. Verse 19 is saying that nature longs with great expectancy for the revealing of the sons of God in their resurrection bodies because that is the time when nature will be glorified. Verses 20-21 are reminding us that historically nature was subjected to futility at the Fall, not willingly, but because God subjected it to futility when Adam sinned and he did so on the basis of hope that nature would be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Verse 22 shows that we observe that the whole of nature is suffering until now and therefore desires to be set free. Verse 23 shows that not only does nature desire to be set free, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, given to us as a first installment ensuring more to come, groan within, waiting with great expectancy to step into the rights of our adoption, our bodies being set free from captivity to the sin nature. Verse 24 explains that we have been saved in the past with hope for the future. There is still an aspect of

salvation we have yet to enjoy and that is being saved from the presence of the sin nature when we receive our resurrection body. We don't have the resurrection body yet but we do have hope for the resurrection body. For hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But since we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance or patience we wait for it with great expectancy. So the first thing we have that helps us deal with our present sufferings with patience is hope. We know that suffering is temporary and when our hope of resurrection is kept in focus the sufferings diminish relative to the light of the glory.

Now that's the conclusion Paul came to but I admit that it is a difficult conclusion to come to when you think of the terrible suffering and evil inflicted in this world. I think how I would personally respond to the threat of torture or execution and I can deal with it myself. But I think of how I would respond if my wife or children were being threatened with torture, execution or some other horrible treatment if I were told to deny Christ and that is a very difficult thing to digest. I've thought about that and it can literally make you sick. Paul said he carefully thought about it and came to the conclusion that the present sufferings do not compare to the glory to come, but that's something I am continuing to carefully think through in my own sanctification. This is what I'm aiming for and I have to say that I'm not there on every level. I am theoretically there myself and I can imagine myself confessing Christ if put to the test, but having to endure seeing my family members tortured or executed would be a question in my mind. I tell my family members to never deny Christ even if they have to see me tortured or executed. And that is part of the training now, you have to make up your mind now what you will do then, you will not be in shape then to make the decision, you must make the decision today that you will do it if it comes to that. And Paul is giving us one of the keys to getting to that point and that is to have a vision of future glory so splendid that it overwhelms the present sufferings. So the first help God gives us to deal with our sufferings is summarized in the word "hope." We have hope for the future.

Today we come to a second help God gives us and it is summarized in the words "the Spirit's intercession for us." This is a ministry of the Spirit that is not commonly known. The most commonly known ministries of the Spirit are recalled by the acronym RIBS; The R stands for regeneration, the I for indwelling, the B for baptism and the S for sealing. Most believers come across those four ministries at some point in their Christian life. There are others, less commonly known and understood ministries of the Spirit. For example, His restraining ministry. What exactly is He restraining? Is He restraining sin or is He restraining the identity of the anti-Christ or is He restraining both? How is He restraining? Does He do it directly Himself or does He do it indirectly through instruments like the Church, government, angels, etc.? So there are other ministries of the Spirit. Another less commonly known ministry of the Spirit is what we find here, His intercession. It's common knowledge that Christ intercedes for us at the right hand of the Father and Paul states this later in Rom 8:34, but the Spirit's intercession for us is not as commonly known. Intercession simply means prayer or petition on behalf of another and that is what the Spirit is said to do for us in this passage. Mitchell says, "...of the many wonderful promises to be found in the chapter, perhaps none is less understood and appreciated than the promise of the Spirit's help in relation to believers' praying (Rom 8:26-27)."¹ As far as I know these are the only two verses in the NT that reveal the

doctrine of the prayer partner of the Holy Spirit. Although I would say that it relates to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as a Paraclete as revealed in the Upper Room Discourse; one who would come alongside of us and help us in our time of need. So it is probably related to that ministry that our Lord predicted in the Upper Room and began on the Day of Pentecost and so is unique to the Church. So we are introduced to the doctrine of prayer and this doctrine can be viewed both in a general or introductory fashion as well as in a specific or advanced fashion. We start from the general and move to the particulars so let's say a few things about prayer in general. First, prayer should always avoid fatalism. If you have a fatalistic view of God's sovereignty then why would you pray? Fatalism will destroy your prayer life because fatalism says, "whatever will be will be whether you pray or not." So a fatalist view of God's sovereignty should be avoided. God's sovereignty is not fatalistic. And God has conditioned some things on prayer and so we should pray. Second, prayer should be based on God's word. God's word says there is a plan and in that plan some things are going to happen. We should not think that we can pray against these things. So our prayers should be constructed on the basis of God's word. That is one way to ensure that your prayers are going to be answered. Maybe not in your time and in your way but in God's time and in God's way. Third, prayer should be grace oriented. In other words, we should not think that God owes us something because we did something for Him. God doesn't owe us a thing. So we should come to Him in prayer with the grace mentality. Fourth, prayer should always have as its goal the glory of God. In other words, the goal in prayer is not to get your thing, whatever it is you are asking for. It is not ultimately for the person to get well or for the financial deal to come through. What you are praying for is that God gets the glory. It's not my will be done but it's Thy will be done. That's the proper attitude. Now those are the basics of prayer and today we're looking at a more particular aspect of prayer that relates to the Holy Spirit and his role in our prayer life. It may be strange for you to think that you have the Holy Spirit as a prayer partner but that's essentially what the passage teaches. He prays for us. Of course, the fact that He prays for you should not lead you to think that you no longer need to pray, even though some people have thought that. His praying isn't a replacement for your praying but a supplement or addition to your praying because of the inadequacy of your prayers. And knowing this is an encouragement in the midst of all your suffering.

Paul begins in 8:26 saying, **In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness;** The Greek word translated **in the same way** is *ὁσαυτως* and probably should be translated "Likewise." It seems that Paul is saying that the Spirit is another help in dealing with our sufferings. He has already taught us that our hope of future glorification helps us persevere through our sufferings. Now he teaches us that we also have the Spirit to help us in our weakness.

The verb translated **helps** is the double compound word *συναντιλαμβάνεται*. This word is used only one other place in the Greek NT, in Luke 10:40, where Martha was taking care of all the preparations and she came up to Jesus and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to *help* me." That's the only other time this word is used in the Greek NT but it is used in the Greek LXX, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT. Its use there sheds some light on its full meaning. In Exod 18:22 Moses was

overwhelmed with disputes people brought before him so his father-in-law Jethro suggested that he appoint various judges to hear the minor disputes and that would free him up to hear the major disputes. In that context Jethro says, "So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you." The Greek expression "bear the burden" is the same Greek word translated here as **helps** and so the word signifies "bearing the burden with another" (also cf Num 11:17). What Paul is saying then is that in prayer we are not left to bear the burden alone. The Spirit is there to bear this burden with us. Now isn't that an encouragement? Sometimes you feel like you are all alone in some suffering situation and that you have to shoulder the whole load. But Paul says you have someone else bearing the burden along with you. The present tense of the verb means that He is continually bearing this burden with you. So you are to know that you are not left alone to bear burdens in your **weakness**.

The word **weakness** is used to describe us in our human frailty. It's the common word *ασθενεια* and may refer to physical, spiritual or emotional weakness. In general it simply refers to the weaknesses of being human. No human is not weak. Paul includes himself as one who is in a state of weakness. Nor is it talking about specific times in your life which might render you weak but simply the fact that because you are a human you are weak.

Paul explains next what particular area of weakness he has in mind. The word **for** is the explanatory *γαρ* introducing the weakness. **For we do not know how to pray as we should.** The particular area of weakness is "knowledge" about how to pray. No Christian, including Paul himself, knows **how to pray**. Whether Paul has in view "how" to pray or "what" to pray is disputed. The pronoun *τι* may be translated as either "how" or "what." If Paul means we don't know "what to pray" he's talking about the content of our prayer. We don't know what to pray about. If Paul is talking about "how to pray" he's talking about the method of our prayer. We don't know how to do it. The difference is probably somewhat unimportant. In the context we don't know how or what to pray as we should because fundamentally we are not omniscient; we do not know all things about a suffering situation. Every suffering situation is ultra-complex. We don't always know why we are suffering. I usually give eleven reasons for suffering, some of which are direct and some of which are indirect. We suffer directly because the Fall of Adam introduced evil and suffering into the world but that suffering could also be used by God as a nudge for us to grow spiritually and at the same time be an evangelistic wake up call for an unbeliever who is watching us suffer and at the same time preparing us to edify another believer who is going to go through the same thing later and at the same time to resolve some issue in the angelic conflict. One or more or all of these could be reasons that we suffer. The point is that we don't know all the ins and outs of why we suffer. We have some general patterns and reasons we may consider but we don't know exactly how or what to pray as we should simply because our knowledge is limited. Now the expression **to pray as we should** translates the subjunctive verb but the text adds the verb *δει* which signals the idea of what is needed or necessary. It seems that his point is that we don't know how or what to pray in line with what is needed, and that looks back to our limitations of knowledge. But the comfort in all this is that we have the Spirit who does know and He personally enters into the prayer process from within us so that we're not left to carry the burden alone.

Of course, Paul is not saying that we don't know how or what to pray for relative to the things that are revealed in Scripture. There are things revealed in Scripture that we should pray for and since they are revealed we know how and what to pray for with respect to those things. The things Paul says no Christian knows how or what to pray for are related to things that are not revealed in Scripture.

Now the core of the section is the next phrase, **but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us**. And that is where the title of this ministry of the Spirit comes from. The Spirit's ministry of intercession. The word **intercedes** is from another double compound verb. This word is *υπερεντυχανει*. It's a *απαξ λεγομενον* meaning it occurs only one time in the NT. So we don't have any other uses to look at. The definition is "to intercede on behalf of another, *plead, intercede*." That doesn't help much but words have antonyms and the antonym does help. The antonym means "to leave as an orphan." Now doesn't that paint a picture? When you are suffering the Holy Spirit doesn't leave you as an orphan. Orphans are left totally alone, destitute, without anyone to stand up with them in a court of law and plead their case. And that is what Paul is saying about you; you are not left an orphan to plead your case alone because the Holy Spirit intercedes on your behalf, He pleads your case. So it's a very beautiful ministry of the Spirit and one that is very comforting, particularly because we do not know all the ins and outs of how and what we are to pray.

Now the manner in which the Spirit intercedes is difficult to ascertain. The NASB says He **intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words**. The word translated **groanings** is *στεναγμοις* and is defined as "an involuntary expression of great concern or stress." In other words, you just groan without even thinking about it because of the nature of the frustration. One use of this word is in Acts 7:34 where Stephen is recounting the Israelites sufferings in Egypt and how God "HEARD THEIR GROANS." They weren't necessarily verbal groans, though some probably were, but the point is that they were groaning inside and God knows what that meant. Now here it is said that the Spirit **groans** and because the word has an emotional element some theologians go bananas over this. Their idea of God is the idea that because God is immutable an extension of that attribute is God is impassible, meaning He is devoid of emotion because if God could have emotion then God would be subject to change and that would contradict immutability. Now I reject that logic. The biblical idea of God is not that He is devoid of emotion but rather that He cannot be impacted or hurt by us unless He so chooses to be. In this case you see that the Holy Spirit has a personal attachment to you such that when you groan He groans. He doesn't groan because you groan. In other words, He's not impacted by you such that He has to groan. Instead, He groans because He loves you and He chooses to groan. This **groaning** is set out as the manner of His intercession.

Now are these groans verbal or non-verbal? We can groan with or without words so which is it that the Spirit does. Well, that depends upon how you understand the next word and how you understand verse 27. The next word translated **too deep for words** is *αλαλητοις*. It too is a *απαξ λεγομενον* and so used only once in the NT, not giving us much to work with. The BDAG lexicon is not much help because it says "unexpressed, wordless." Those

two words are different. Unexpressed means there are words but they are kept to one's self, not expressed; whereas wordless means there are no words. So we are left with the same problem. Are the **groanings** words or no words? The Liddell Scott lexicon, which covers word usage in the classical period prior to NT times says "unutterable." This is something similar to the NASB translation, **too deep for words**, that is, something that is beyond words. If so we are to understand some kind of mystical non-thinking communicate between the Spirit and the Father, something beyond the ability of language to capture and so must be communicated without words. This is unlikely in light of verse 27 since the mind of the Spirit is what is searched by the Father and the word used of the mind of the Spirit is a "way of thinking." This helps us find our way but another help comes from looking at another word *αλαλος*. This word means "without words," whereas our word etymologically means "without sound or noise." Those are not the same thing. "Without words" means no words are used, it is pure emotion or mysticism. But "without sound" means silently. So there's a difference and Paul chose the word that means "without sound." If he wanted to say without words he could have done so. So what we are to understand then is that the Spirit **intercedes for us with silent groanings** and that is how I would translate it. In other words, they are words, but they are not audible. The Spirit prays silently from within us in His own mind.

Now what this does is a couple of things. The first thing it does is destroy the notion of many that Paul is talking about a private prayer language in tongues or angelic tongues. Even private prayer languages and tongues of angels are audible. But this communication is not audible. It is not a communication that comes through the mouths of believers, nor a communication that even comes through the mind of the believer, it is a communication on a private line between the Spirit and the Father; something we could never know about apart from divine revelation through the apostle Paul in this passage. The second thing it does is it prompts us to ask why the Spirit would pray on a private line to the Father. The best answer we can give is so that Satan doesn't have access to what's being prayed. Satan would love to hear some of this stuff so he could immediately fight against it. But he doesn't even know what it is because it's being prayed on a private line.

So putting the expression **silent groanings** together we are to understand that the Spirit's intercession for us is one in which He has a personal interest in our sufferings and therefore prays silently to the Father on our behalf from within us because we do not know how or what to pray in our human frailty. This is to comfort us in our sufferings.

Verse 27 continues and supports the idea that it's a silent prayer in the mind of the Spirit that is the proper picture. **and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is.** The **He** is not defined. In Acts 1:24 it's used of the Father and in Rev 2:23 it's used of the Son. So either the Father or the Son is described as **He who searches the hearts**. This is virtually a title; "The Heart Examiner." Either the Father or the Son is the examiner of our hearts. He can examine them and does examine them continually so that He knows our thoughts. Now because He knows our thoughts does not mean that we should not pray. What it means is that

when we pray by thought He knows our prayers. In fact He knows all our thoughts, whether they are expressed in prayer or not. He's "The Heart Examiner."

Not only does He examine our thoughts but Paul says, He **knows what the mind of the Spirit is**. This should be obvious. If God can search our heart then He is perfectly capable of knowing the mind of the Spirit. The word **knows** is the *οιδα* and in the perfect tense meaning He perceives entirely **the mind of the Spirit**. The word translated **mind** is *φρονημα* and as we said before, means "a way of thinking." It's the same word used earlier in Rom 8:6. The point is that God perceives entirely the Spirit's way of thinking. This may seem obvious since we know God is omniscient, but it is still good to know.

Finally Paul tells us what exactly it is that God perceives entirely. The word of transition is *οτι* and most translate it **because**. If this was correct it would be saying that God knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for us. But that is incorrect. God does not learn anything from the Spirit. God is omniscient. God knows simply because He knows. He doesn't learn anything new, never has and never will, He has ever known all things actual and possible. That is not Paul's point. The word should be translated "so that." Since God knows the mind of the Spirit then the Spirit intercedes on our behalf according to the will of God. In other words, the prayers are perfect. **He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God**. The words **the will** are not in the original. The original simply says, **according to God**. However, upon comparison of this expression with other passages it is clear that the expression does mean "according to the will of God." For example, 1 Cor 7:9, 10 use the same expression. So the translators did us a service here in adding the words **the will**. The words are also emphatic, meaning they are the most important. They are so important because they communicate that all the silent prayers of the Holy Spirit are in the secret will of God. The idea of a secret will of God indicates that there is also a revealed will of God. The revealed will of God is revealed in the Scriptures. That is what can be known. This passage is not about the revealed will of God. This passage is about the secret will of God. The idea of the secret will of God is the idea that there are things that are in God's plan for your life that you don't know about and can't know about. They are obviously not things revealed in Scripture or else you could know about them. What they relate to is your particular needs at the moment. Things you need that relate to the details of your life. You might pray for some of these things; what car to buy, what college to go to, to get well and so forth and so on, but you don't really know how to pray for these things as you should because you don't know the will of God relative to all these things. There are too many unknown factors. So you pray what you can but it's not adequate. And further, God is not going to whisper in your ear the answer, buy the red one or choose this doctor. The prayers are silent prayers and they are in the secret will of God. What Paul is saying is that the Holy Spirit is resident in you and He knows the secret will of God and everything He prays is in the secret will of God. Now what do you think about that? I hope you don't fret over the details of life. You can pray about the details but verse 26 is saying your prayers are so inadequate, they just don't figure all the factors into the equation because you don't know enough, you can't know enough. But the Spirit of God knows all things and He knows all the factors and how this is going to work together with that and how that is going to filter over here and affect this

person in that way and what effects it's going to have in the angelic realm and the economic crunch it's going to put this person in so that they'll be nudged to wake up to the things of God and on and on and on. You don't know hardly anything. I've had situations in my life where I looked back and saw the hand of God, but I'm not so arrogant as to say, "Now I know why that happened!" I may know 1/100th of the reason it happened, but I'd be a fool to say now I know why X happened. That is so short sighted and arrogant to say the least. What God is doing is so much more complex. And again, this is supposed to lead you to think the way it led Paul to think, and what did Paul say in the next verse, "I know why everything happens in my life the way it happens?" NO. Emphatically NO. He says, "We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God." That's what we do know. We don't know what it all means now. What we know is that it works together for the good. In other words, when it's all said and done the complexity of what God was doing with all these events will all come together for the good. Note that he didn't say everything that happens is good, there are bad things that happen, but all things good and bad work together for the good. That means a complex of factors far beyond your imagination are involved; what He is doing in my life and your life and with your dog and your bank account and the retail store down the block in this time and place linked with every other time and place and it all comes together to work together for the good for the believer! When you ask, how can it happen that way? Why do "all things work together for good?" The answer is because the Holy Spirit is making intercession for us. So if you ever wondered how things somehow turn out together for good then that's one of the reasons "all things work together for good." This fact should encourage you in suffering.

So let's summarize here, let's say you've got this suffering situation here and you're praying in a direction, but you're just a human, you don't know how to pray or what to pray in this situation. You may think you know but really it is far too complex for you to know, you are leaving out all kinds of things that need to be prayed for relative to your situation, but the good news is that there is Someone who does know all those complexities, the Holy Spirit and He resides within you and He identifies with you in your suffering and by silent prayers in the will of God He transmits them to God. You never hear a thing but you know on the basis of this verse that it is going on and this is to comfort you, this is to humble you. Isn't this a comfort to know that the Holy Spirit is doing this for you continually and you are not left as an orphan all on your own to bear the burden of your suffering? If it doesn't humble you and encourage you then something is wrong with you.

¹ *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139, no. 555 (1982): 227.