

# THE SPIRIT HELPS US

Romans 8:1–39

Key Verse: 8:26

“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.”

How do you feel about prayer? When some people pray, it sounds so eloquent. They use such an emotional affect, and so many words. Frankly, it’s all just an act. Jesus called such people “hypocrites” (Matt.6:5,7). Then, some rather conceited people say with disdain, “I don’t pray; I *meditate*.” These kinds of people discourage and even turn us off from prayer altogether. On the opposite end of the “prayer spectrum,” there’s a scene in the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*. George Bailey is sitting at a noisy bar, disheveled, frustrated, and brokenhearted. With tears in his eyes and his face in his hands, he begins in a gruff whisper: “God...dear God...dear Father in heaven.” He’s trying to remember how he was taught to pray. While he desperately rubs his face, more words stumble out: “I’m not a praying man...but if you’re up there...and you can hear me...show me the way...I’m at the end of my rope...show me the way, O God.” Not a perfect prayer, but he really means it.<sup>1</sup>

Generally, we know that as Christians we should be praying. But how can we even begin, especially if we’re aware we’re so sinful? Or if our problems seem so impossible? Or if our suffering gets so intense? How can we know God is even listening? How can we pray when we feel so confused and overwhelmed? And why pray when God has his own sovereign plan anyway? Today we’re looking at Romans 8. To learn about prayer, people don’t usually choose this passage. Prayer is not even its main point. But there’s a great truth in Romans 8 that’s foundational to prayer. Those who believe in Jesus receive the Spirit. The Spirit gives us life, and hope, and assurance. What the Spirit does for us becomes the basis for our prayer life. To pray rightly, we need his help. How does the Spirit help us? With his help, what should we be praying for? And why should we pray? May God speak to us through his word.

Read verse 1. Here Paul applies the words “no condemnation” only to those who are “in Christ Jesus”—only those who have repented of their sins and received Jesus. This response to the gospel transfers us to a whole new realm. Read verse 2. We live in either of two realms: under “the law of the Spirit of life,” or under “the law of sin and death.” In Christ Jesus, the Spirit of life sets us free, and he begins to rule us. But how do we get in to this new realm of the Spirit? Read verse 3. In these words Paul summarizes the gospel. God condemned his Son Jesus on the cross in our place. The Spirit convinces us that Jesus did this for “even me.”<sup>2</sup> Read verse 4. It’s through the Spirit that the righteous requirement of the law can be fulfilled in us. In this new realm, we no longer walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. In a minute we’ll see a bit more of

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<sup>1</sup> See also Luke 18:13.

<sup>2</sup> *Jesus Loves Even Me* (1870), words and music: Philip P. Bliss.

what this means. But essentially, it's the Spirit who heals us from a sense of condemnation. It's the Spirit who heals our legalistic way of thinking. It's the Spirit who gives us a Christ-centered, gospel-centered way of thinking. In brief, with the Spirit's help, though we deserve condemnation, and we're still so sinful and so weak, we can gain the confidence to really pray.

To help us walk in this new realm, the Spirit also gives us a new mindset. Read verses 5–8. Paul is not yet telling us what to do here; he's just contrasting converted people with unconverted people. The unconverted have their minds set on the things of the flesh. The converted have their minds set on the things of the Spirit. Some things of the Spirit are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal.5:22–23a). As he fills our minds, he gives us "life" now (2a,6b). The word "mind" is repeated in verses 5–8 five times. In our flesh, our mind is corrupted. But now, with the Spirit's help, our mind tastes the life and peace of God. With the Spirit's help, we begin to love God; we want to please him and submit to him. With this new mind, we joyfully follow God's leading; we have a new "walk," meaning a new power, a new zeal, a new lifestyle. Paul writes elsewhere that the Spirit helps us understand even the depths and thoughts of God; the Spirit makes us a spiritual person. The Spirit helps us know the mind of Christ, which really helps us to pray (1 Cor.2:10–16).

"The flesh" is also repeated five times here. Without the Spirit, the human mind is full of the flesh. It means not only physical sin, but a mind bent toward self—self satisfaction, self glory. With such a self-centered mind, people are ready to use others, anyone, for themselves. With such a mind, though they're unaware of it, they're actually hostile to God. With a mind set on the flesh, the book of Romans tells us that people are totally depraved, totally unable, totally in the grip of the power of sin. In such a state, how can anybody possibly pray?

But Paul goes on to encourage us. He stresses, "*You, however...*" Read verse 9. Once we hear the word of Jesus and believe in God who sent him, we are no longer in the flesh; we have crossed over from death to life (John 5:24). God the Father and Jesus the Son have come to make their home in us, through the Spirit of truth (John 14:17,23). Even with all our old sinful habits, our frail mortality, all our ups and downs, we actually become a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor.3:16). When we receive Christ, it's true for each one of us: the Spirit of God dwells in us. He's invisible, but he's there, and he's real. Read verse 10. At the end Paul says, "...the Spirit is life because of righteousness." This means that now, because of the gift of righteousness our Lord Jesus gave us, the Spirit can dwell in us and give us life. Read verse 11. Paul is emphasizing that "...the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in" us. Why does he say this? Our bodies are weak and susceptible to death. But the Spirit dwelling in us gives us the hope to have a resurrection body like Jesus someday. This mighty Spirit of God is a permanent power source within us. Often we feel too weak and ignorant to pray. But by the power of the Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, and who's living in us now, we can find the strength to pray.

In verses 5–11 Paul has been contrasting life in the flesh with life in the Spirit. Now he's about to apply what he's been saying to our day-to-day life. Read verse 12. The beginning words "So then..." tell us that it's his conclusion. And the word "debtor" stands out here. Paul is saying that as those in Christ, we don't owe our flesh anything. We don't have to listen to it anymore.

Again, “flesh” means not only physical appetites, but our innate bent toward self and the world. Read verse 13. Paul warns us that if we live according to the demands of the flesh and the world, we will die spiritually. But, we’re too weak in ourselves to resist. What do we do? Because Christians have the indwelling Spirit, we don’t have to give up and give in. We have God’s power within us to put these sins to death. In other words, we have no excuse not to fight. These two verses give us a clear prayer topic: We all need to be asking the Spirit, every day, to help us put to death our worldliness, our self love, and our worst sinful desires and habits.

Paul says more about how the Spirit helps us. Read verse 14. Being “led by the Spirit of God,” living under his rule, shows that we really are God’s children. Read verses 15–16. It’s a most beautiful description of how the Spirit helps us pray. The Spirit makes us aware that, though we used to be slaves of sin, God has adopted us as his own sons and daughters. The Spirit pours out God’s love into our hearts (5:5b). The Spirit shows us the greatness of God’s love for us in the cross of Jesus (5:8,10). The Spirit convinces us that I am God’s child, and he is my Father. The Spirit tells us that in Christ I can even call God “Daddy!” The Spirit makes us *that* close to God, really sure that we’re permanent members of his family. Only the Spirit can give our prayer life such personal conviction and authentic intimacy. Read verse 17. The Spirit helps us see that we’re heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ. And, the Spirit helps us accept the hard prayer topic to suffer with Christ so as to be glorified with him.

In verses 18–22 Paul describes this future hope, though for now we have to live in a cursed world. Currently the world is in bondage to corruption, groaning for the glorious freedom God will someday give to all his children, and to creation itself. Yet the present sufferings of this cursed world can become so devastating, so heartbreaking, there are no words. Where is this hope of glory?

Paul again points to how the Spirit helps us. Read verse 23. He says here we have “the firstfruits of the Spirit.” “Firstfruits” is like a down payment, a guarantee.<sup>3</sup> The Spirit’s presence within us is proof that God has already begun his work of redemption in us. So, what do we do? Paul says we “groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” This is no groan of despair; it’s a groan of faith, of “eager waiting.” We have God’s promise that, at our resurrection, our full adoption as his children will be finalized. Still, we have to wait. Still, we have to suffer. We won’t see many of our hopes being realized with our own eyes (24–25). In this life we may never see some of our prayers being answered. But the Spirit helps us hold onto this hope of future glory and to eagerly expect it, even unto death. As the Spirit reminds us of this hope, we continue to pray and bear with even the most intense pressure and the most difficult circumstances.

In this fallen world, prayer isn’t a leisurely, pleasant stroll in a rose garden. Sometimes prayer feels like a bone-crushing struggle. Read verse 26. Here, the English word “helps” is deceptively simple. The Greek verb, rarely used in the Bible, means to take hold of someone else’s hand to join together and bear the burden. The Spirit within us is ready to do that for us.

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14.

Paul adds “in our weakness.” It could mean physical weakness, or spiritual weakness. Paul goes on, “For we do not know what to pray for as we ought.” Basically, in our weakness we can’t even see what God’s will is, so we don’t know what to say. So prayer doesn’t mean always knowing all the right things or even praying all the right things. Paul concludes, “...but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with wordless groanings.” Though he’s inaudible, the Spirit is groaning with us, asking God on our behalf. So sometimes, when we’re discouraged, tired, feeling so weak and helpless, prayer is just coming before God in silence and depending on the Spirit dwelling in us to intercede for us.

Later in verse 34 Paul says that Christ Jesus who died and was raised to life is at the right hand of God interceding for us. Here in verses 26–27 he says the Spirit within us is also interceding for us. So, we’ve got God the Son and God the Spirit both interceding for us. It speaks both to how dear we are to God, and how weak we are. Paul says one thing more about the Spirit’s intercession. Read verse 27. Three things about prayer stand out here. First, when we pray, God searches our hearts. He knows all about our struggles, even before we say anything. He sees our inner being. So we need to drop all the pretense, all our fears, and just get honest with him. Second, God also knows the “mind,” or the “intentions,” of the Spirit. He understands exactly what the Spirit in us is asking on our behalf. So we don’t have to try too hard or say too much. Third, the Spirit intercedes for us according to the will of God. He knows exactly how to pray for us, even when we have no idea. Paul’s point is that even when we’re suffering beyond the point of understanding, God sees, God knows, God understands, and the Spirit helps God’s will to be done for us. No matter whether we’ve just begun the Christian life or have been living it for many years, whether we’re unsure of how to pray, or so burned out we can’t say anything anymore, we can take great comfort in the fact that God knows everything, and that the Spirit is interceding for us perfectly, according to the will of God.<sup>4</sup>

So what do we learn in Romans 8 about prayer? Sometimes we feel too guilty, too condemned by our own sin to pray. We need to let the Spirit remind us of what God has done for us, in condemning his own Son in our place. Sometimes we get too legalistic about prayer, worrying about how to do it right. We need to let the Spirit give us life and set us free from the law of sin and death, and just pray honestly. Sometimes our minds get drawn to the flesh, to ourselves, and to the world. We need to invite the Spirit to rule our minds with his life and peace, and even show us the deep things of God. Sometimes we feel so weak, we just have to give in to our sin. We need to draw on the Spirit’s mighty power and pray fervently to put to death our sinful habits. Sometimes we feel so beaten down, like we’ll always be slaves of sin. We need to open our hearts to the Spirit and let him show us we are God’s precious child who can always call him “Abba! Father!” Sometimes our suffering gets so bad, we can’t even talk, and we have no idea what to pray for. Even at such moments, we can trust that God knows our hearts, and let the Spirit intercede for us in God’s perfect will. Sometimes we don’t know how to pray for those we love. But as we draw on the Spirit’s help, we begin to discern how to intercede for them.

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<sup>4</sup> This exposition of Romans 8 is partially informed by Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 470–537.

Ultimately, prayer is more than just getting our requests answered. Prayer is about having our inner person changed. Partly through our sufferings, and partly through the Spirit's help in prayer, God wants to conform us to the image of his Son (29)—especially his humility, his obedience and his great compassion. Finally, through the Spirit's help in prayer, God wants to assure us of his unassailable love for us (31–39). Let's read verse 26 again. In this new year 2024, may God bless us to experience the Spirit's help in our prayer life.