

XIV *The Spirit of Intercession*

In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

(ROMANS 8:26, 27)

The main theme of the apostle in Romans 8 is life through the Spirit. In the last two chapters, I concentrated on the fact that we have received the Spirit of sonship, the Spirit who testifies with our spirit that we are children of God. In Romans 8:17 the apostle tells us that we will share in the *glory* of Christ. That is ultimately the inheritance which awaits us as children of God. The counsel of God concerning our redemption is completed only when we are glorified.

We find this same line in Romans 8:30, “And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those who justified he also *glorified*.” The apostle does not give here an exact scheme with each and every phase in God’s order of salvation, but he shows us key lines from calling to glorification. Until we are glorified, the work of redemption is not yet perfected in us.

Reality check

Therefore a reality check is in order. We are not yet glorified, but live in a creation that is in bondage, under present sufferings. Sometimes we are like sheep being led to the slaughter, as Paul quoted from Psalm 44. It is comforting to look at the great and glorious future that awaits us, but first we must contend with the present sufferings of this world.

With the word “sufferings” Paul does not just mean the situation of his time, which was becoming increasingly difficult for Christians. He looks at the entire last age, connects that in verse 22 to previous times, and realizes that in many ways for the believers the worst is yet to come. How will we stand as believers in the ever-deteriorating situation of the last ages, when Satan will be loosed (Rev 20) and the man of lawlessness will appear (2 Thessalonians)?

Groaning

If there is a word that connects the entire passage on which we focus, it is the word *groaning*. Verse 22: we know that the whole creation has been *groaning* as in the pangs of childbirth. Not only this, but (verse 23) we ourselves *groan* inwardly. And then in the text printed above: the Spirit himself intercedes for us with *groans* that words cannot express. Creation is groaning, we are groaning, and the Spirit is groaning. How are we to understand this groaning?

The word groaning indicates deep misery and great suffering. Often when there is groaning, there are no clear words spoken, just sounds uttered that come from deep within. It is significant that life is characterized as groaning, for this clearly indicates that life in this world is one of deep suffering.

I once read a description of how an army surgeon entered a military hospital ward, and he heard only groaning, a clearly audible but incomprehensible sound. He suddenly realized that many of the wounded were beyond help, already crossing the threshold of this life with incessant groaning.

But here it is not a groaning without hope. The groaning of creation is compared to the pangs of childbirth: I can see a new tomorrow coming on. At the end of this process is new life. We groan, it says, but inwardly as we wait eagerly for the redemption of our bodies. The Spirit’s groaning is not without purpose and effect. The groaning is done in *hope*, see verse 24: if we hope for what we do not have, we wait for it patiently. In this light also we understand the work of intercession which the Holy Spirit does on our behalf.

The Holy Spirit intercedes for us in the hope of salvation. We learn about the need for this intercession. We may be assured of the depth of this intercession. And finally, we may find joy in the effect of this intercession. When the Spirit intercedes for us, he does a wonderful work.

We have two Counselors

We know that we have a sympathetic high priest in heaven, our Lord Jesus Christ, who can fully understand our predicament because he himself was here in the flesh, knows this world, and knows us intimately. We know that in his love he intercedes for us with the Father, that is, he pleads our cause at God's right hand.

What is remarkable about this passage is that we learn here how the *Holy Spirit* himself also intercedes for us. Christ in heaven and the Spirit on earth in us both intercede for us. We do not have one Counselor, but we have two Counselors, one in heaven and one on earth. We noted this earlier, but with this passage we bring to mind once again this deeply comforting reality.

Why the intercession of the Holy Spirit?

Why do we have or do we need this intercession of the Holy Spirit? Let me begin with the indication in the text itself. It says: in the same way the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses. Note the expression: in the same way. What way is meant?

The apostle has written about birth pangs. A woman who is about to give birth needs much support and help. At the end of the birthing process, human resources are almost empty. We, too, who eagerly await the redemption of our bodies, are sometimes at our wits end. There is the danger that just before the new dawn breaks, we give up and give in. We need to have hope. Hope springs eternal, keeps the fires burning, and the hearts beating expectantly.

This is now exactly the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the Spirit of hope whose great joy is to give us hope and perseverance. Therefore he intercedes for us. You have to see the need for this intercession; otherwise you will not appreciate it or even despise it.

Our weakness

It says: the Spirit helps us "in our weakness." Here again, as so often, the Lord gives us a proper evaluation of our activities and possibilities. We cannot stand on our own, not even for a moment. If God did not sustain us every moment of the day, we would perish utterly. We'd be crushed under the harsh reality of life that is cursed by sin.

I think that Paul here, however, means more than just our weakness as human beings. There is a strong connection with the next sentence: we do

not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us... Now the apostle is speaking not about the style or the manner of our praying, but about the *content*: we do not even know *what* we ought to pray for! We may ask many things, but in our praying we miss the real need and overlook the true essentials.

The disciples once asked the Lord: teach us to pray (Luke 11:1). Then he taught them the Lord's Prayer. That prayer is a basic model. But how are we to pray these things in the ebb and flow of daily life? It is not so easy. We do not even know what we should be asking for. This shows how limited we are. We lack the proper self-knowledge for a God-pleasing prayer. We either estimate ourselves too highly or too lowly. Often specific character weaknesses are seen only by others and not by ourselves.

Besides, we cannot properly fathom our circumstances. We fail to see where the real dangers lie and where the true opportunities are. There is a tremendous lack of insight in the complexities of life. We do not know what will happen tomorrow. We look through a dark glass, and sometimes we, indeed, come to the point where we do not know anymore what to pray. Ever had the experience that you simply don't know anymore what to say to the Lord?

The Spirit knows

Paul speaks here inclusively. This happens to all Christians. There is a great need here that pertains to everyone. Our life of prayer is insufficient, lacking in depth and conviction, often so much a manner of custom that it fails utterly as a prayer. I am not trying to put anyone down, especially not those who think that their prayer life is very advanced, but this is the Biblical assessment of our prayer life: we do not know what we ought to pray for.

This sad situation is one that the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us, fully comprehends and tackles. It says: we do not know what we ought to pray for – we have our priorities all mixed up often – *but* the Spirit intercedes for us... The Spirit who knows all, who accurately assesses our present condition, and who knows our character, our God-given strengths and our natural weaknesses, intercedes for us.

This is truly astounding. As mentioned, we know that Jesus Christ intercedes for us in heaven, at God's right hand. But now we read that the Spirit himself (emphasis on his person) intercedes for us as well. This interceding has a judicial element. It is based on God's *law and justice*. The Holy Spirit functions as a "counselor," as an advocate, an attorney-at-law, and he presents to God on our behalf the real *facts* – the saving work of Christ – and

he points out the real *needs* – that we need to persevere in hope. The Spirit urges God to listen, even to the things that we do not say or cannot say. The Spirit points to the lawful basis for this, namely the death and resurrection of Christ, and he pleads: forgive your children, help your children, renew your children, and do not let them fall. As in heaven through Christ God speaks to God, so the Holy Spirit within us on earth carries the embattled and beleaguered believers before the throne of God, and pleads on their behalf. On earth through the Spirit, God speaks to God.

Our prayer not replaced

We must be clear on one important matter here. The Holy Spirit does not replace our prayer. It does not say that the Spirit intercedes *in* us, or *with* us, but *for* us. I may not say: the Lord Jesus intercedes for me in heaven and the Spirit intercedes for me on earth, so now I can sit back and do nothing. After all, with such intercessors, what weight will my feeble prayer possibly put on the incense scales of heaven?

It does not say at all that we should not pray or intercede for one another. The Holy Spirit does not push us aside, and say: you're making such a lousy job of it, here, let me take over. On the contrary, Paul, for example, later asks for the intercession of the Christians in Rome that he may come to them (Rom 15:30, 31). The intercession of Christ and the Holy Spirit are meant to undergird and fortify our own prayers and intercessions. We can even say: our praying makes sense, despite its many weaknesses and shortcomings, because the Holy Spirit himself intercedes for us. He asks the Father: please listen to them as they pray, for I know their needs, their trials, and their hopes. I live in them.

The Spirit's praying does not cancel our prayer but strengthens and furthers it.

No superficial request

The intercession of the Spirit is not some kind of superficial or off-hand request that the Holy Spirit makes on our behalf. We sometimes also plead for somebody else in needy circumstances but our heart is not always in it, and we try once but then give up. Then we sometimes even dare to say: I did my best for you, but it did not help. Our intercession is perhaps well-meant, but is always weak.

But it is said here of the intercession of the Spirit, "(the Spirit himself intercedes for us) *with groans that words cannot express*" (verse 26b). If our

groans, as I suggested earlier, are mere sounds, that come from deep within us and express our anguish wordlessly, how much more will this not be said of the Holy Spirit?

As a matter of fact, it actually says: the groaning of the Holy Spirit cannot be expressed in words. That's how deep it goes. Our language, colorful as it may be, simply does not have the words that can adequately catch and convey this groaning of the Spirit, what he is saying and why.

A bond of solidarity

What is the meaning of this groaning of the Spirit? In what way is it helpful for us to know this? First of all, it shows us something of the depth of the Spirit's involvement in every situation and in our lives. He is here, indwelling in our hearts, but we should never take this to be a cold and lifeless presence. The Spirit knows what we feel, what we need, and also knows that we cannot express this properly ourselves, and therefore in his interceding for us there is a bond of solidarity that goes beyond our understanding.

Reformed explainers, and others also, refer to this as a mystery, that is, something which we know about, but cannot understand. It goes far beyond our mental and spiritual capacity.

It means surely that the Spirit who helps us in our weakness is very personally and intensively involved in every aspect of our lives.

What we cannot express to God, he expresses on our behalf. He makes clear what deep need we are in. He explains how sad and defeated we can feel. He also testifies to the remorse over sin that there is in our hearts, and he pleads with the Father in heaven that he graciously for Christ's sake grants us what is necessary. In this way he adds what is lacking in our prayer. He expresses what we cannot express. My weak and sinful prayer, which is often not to the point of real need, is carried to heaven by the groaning of the Holy Spirit, and he makes it into a proper, even a perfect prayer.

In prayer we are not alone

Here we see the depth of the intercession by the Spirit. Creation groans. We, too, groan. But the Spirit also groans! He is not an uninterested observer, who has no bond with us and with this creation, but he longs for the day of complete renewal and perfection, the liberation from all bondage and the glorious freedom of the children of God. The Spirit is the Spirit of *freedom* (2 Cor 3:17) and he wants us all to be free forever from all sin and effect of sin.

This deeply motivates the Holy Spirit, and when we pray such prayers, our prayers fully touch the Spirit, and he groans also in a longing that goes beyond our longing, for the longing of the Holy Spirit is greater than ours, as we learn also in Revelation 22: the *Spirit* and the bride say: come, Lord Jesus. The bride says come, but only because the Spirit says it first, and teaches the bride to say this.

We see here how the Father, Son, and Spirit together long and work for the renewal of all things, of creation, and of God's children, so that God will be all in all. The Father works his counsel, the Son pleads on our behalf as heavenly high-priest, and even the groaning of the Spirit ascends on our behalf before the throne in heaven.

So when I pray, I am not alone. When you pray, you are not alone. We are not alone when we pray together. For the Spirit also prays. He intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. He takes our feeble prayers, and makes them strong. He takes our unfinished prayers, and perfects them. He makes our groans his own and deepens them. We must learn this, reckon with this, and work with this knowledge. It's not revealed here to be ignored. Focus in your praying on the Spirit also, knowing that he lifts up your prayers to heaven by his intercession from earth, and then in heaven Christ receives them, sanctifies them, and offers them to the Father, who listens and understands. In this way prayer becomes so uplifting, comforting, and encouraging that you can not, will not, do without it. Your own praying will become deeper and stronger, because of the work of the Spirit in you, and the bond with God will grow.

No deceiving of God

There is one more question here. If the Spirit intercedes with groans that words cannot express, and if they are unintelligible sounds, how can God make any *sense* out of them? How can God possibly understand and hear such groaning, much less respond to it?

We read in verse 27 exactly how this goes. It says: he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit. These are important words. He who searches the hearts is *God*. God is always searching our hearts. He looks deep into our hearts, especially when we *pray*. When we talk to him, tell him our problems, and ask for his blessing, he looks deep into us to test our true motives and real desires.

That's why we cannot deceive God with our prayers. We sometimes perhaps subconsciously think that we can fool God. We pray, but our heart is not right. Our motives are wrong and self-centered. We use the means of

prayer, knowing that God cannot be pleased. And God knows, because he made us. He is our Creator. Although we are different, for he is God and we are human, he sees right to the core of our hearts. Nothing is hidden before him.

We must remember this when we pray. We should not try to hide things or conveniently forget to mention important matters. When you speak to God, he listens, and he does so better than anyone else, for he listens to the heart. He knows if our groaning is real or feigned. You cannot fool the Lord God.

The mind of the Spirit

He searches the hearts of men. But it also says: he knows the *mind of the Spirit*. The Father, Son, and Spirit are one, also in their thinking. God knows what the Spirit wants. God knows what the Spirit is aiming for. The groaning of the Spirit may be without words, but the Father and the Son do not need words to understand exactly what the Spirit is conveying.

The *effect* of the Spirit's intercession therefore is immediate and powerful. God does not have to check it out to see if it fits or to analyze it to see if it is proper. You only have to check out requests if you are not sure about their truth, their sincerity, and their motive. Then you must try to ascertain whether everything is in accordance with God's will. God does not answer petitions or intercessions which are not in accordance with his will. Therefore we must remember always to pray according to God's will only; your will be done.

This explains why Paul writes that the Spirit intercedes for the saints *in accordance with God's will*. Since our petitions are not always proper, God does not accept them or hears them differently than we expected. But the Spirit's intercession is always heard, for the Spirit intercedes only in accordance with God's will. Every intercession of the Holy Spirit is timely, proper, and exact. Whatever he asks is always in full harmony with the will of God. So when the Spirit intercedes for us, we know that it will be heard. The intercession of the Spirit is very effective.

Perfect and true intercession

If the hearing of prayer depended on my motives and my sincerity, I think that many of my prayers would not go halfway to heaven. Our prayer-life is poor, lax, and off-hand. Sometimes when we pray, our mind is even on totally other things. This must be very annoying to the Father.

But the Spirit's intercession is perfect and true. He knows God's will. He applies that will to us in his intercession. He knows that what God decides is good, what God does, is excellent, and that in all this, we are bound for glory. The Spirit in this way helps us to bear our burdens, to accept our trials, and to look forward in hope, because in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

The Spirit gives us the sense, the knowledge, and the anticipation of complete victory, when also our groaning and yearning will be stilled in eternal peace. It is because of Christ's work of atonement and through the Spirit's work of intercession that our prayers become possible and make sense. When thus grounded in Christ, our praying, too, makes sense and is sent to heaven by the Spirit. In this way our prayer becomes powerful. Our prayers have full effect as well. Our prayers are restored, empowered, transmitted by the intercession of the Holy Spirit. Our prayers do not lose strength but gain it by the effective intercession of the Spirit within us.

I can pray, and the prayer of a righteous person is powerful in its effect, because the Spirit intercedes for me and for you, and for all who call upon God in faith through Jesus Christ.