

## **Romans 8:26 The Holy Spirit and our prayer life**

### **Introduction**

Paul in Romans 8 has drawn our attention to a number of aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit. He began with highlighting the fact that it is the Holy Spirit that helps and enables us to fulfil God's law (Romans 8:2-8); secondly the Holy Spirit helps us to overcome the desires of the sinful nature, so that we are enabled to make right choices rather than wrong ones (Romans 8:9-13); thirdly through our adoption into God's family the Holy Spirit assures us we are secure in His love and part of God's family for ever (Romans 8:15-17); fourthly He is the guarantee to us that God keeps His promises and has our future taken care of, both within and beyond this life (Romans 8:18-25); fifthly He assists us in our prayer-life (Romans 8:26); sixthly He helps us to obey the will of God for our lives (Romans 8:27). Too many Christians have in practice restricted their understanding of the Holy Spirit and His work to a handful of interventions in the life of a believer, namely in the period leading up to and including our conversion; then maybe one or more special experiences post conversion and possibly associated with the giving of certain spiritual gifts. To read Romans 8 provides a comprehensive challenge to such a restricted view of the person and work of the Holy Spirit who is intrinsically involved in the daily lives of Christians, each day of our time here on earth! The Holy Spirit is not an 'it', an impersonal power as the Jehovah's Witnesses claim, but emphatically a person who is sent by the Father in Jesus' name to assist His children in living the lives He has called us to lead. In John 16:13-14 Jesus said this concerning the Holy Spirit to His disciples at the Last Supper: *But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on His own; He will speak only what He hears, and He will tell you what is yet to come.*<sup>14</sup> *He will glorify Me because it is from Me that He will receive what He will make known to you.* Here in Romans 8:26 the apostle draws attention to the assistance He gives to us to help us in our prayer lives.

#### **1. The difficulties we have with prayer** (Romans 8:26) *We do not know what we ought to pray for...*

Is there anyone here who finds prayer easy? Hours can pass by as the words flow and your concentration is total as you pour out your heart to God! Is there anyone who can honestly testify that this is your typical experience? No! by contrast it is the spiritual discipline that most Christians find the hardest to practice. There are times when we wonder what to pray for. Or how to pray in a situation; or what might God want me to do in this situation where a number of options appear to be legitimate and plausible. Do I need to summon up great faith as I pray so that my prayers will be answered? The opposite of that is that if I doubt my prayers will 'work' am I concerned that nothing will happen at all! What is the relationship between prayer and God's will? No wonder that the disciples of Jesus felt led on one occasion to ask Him: *Lord teach us to pray...* (Luke 11:1). You may have wondered what happens if I pray for the wrong thing by accident? Can prayer do harm? Is prayer about making God change His mind or is prayer more about Him directing my preferences and desires? Or more fundamentally, if God is truly sovereign over all why do I need to pray at all if His will is going to be done on earth as it is in heaven? On the contrary, if God is limited in power and ability and doesn't know the future, as the novel 'Open Theism' viewpoint claims, prayer won't change anything because such a God could send the equivalent of a supernatural sympathy message, but not a great deal more! However, that particular theological viewpoint is more about reconstructing God in our image, rather than

us in His and can safely be forgotten! However, God knows that we struggle in prayer and does not leave us to carry out this work alone. Here in Romans 8:26 Paul draws attention to the work of the Holy Spirit in assisting us in our prayers.

## 2. **The assistance of the Holy Spirit in our prayers** (Romans 8:26) *In the same way...*

The consistent message of Romans 8 is one of encouragement to stand firm in our faith and going forward in our witness for Christ through the tough times as well in the encouraging ones. The major focus under girding the points he raises is the assistance of the Holy Spirit to equip and enable each believer to be who we are called to be in Christ. Paul has been speaking about the *hope in which we were saved* (Romans 8:24), which in the biblical usage of that term is not the aspirational wishes of a person joining hundreds of others applying for a job interview; or the dream of a National Lottery player! It is something that is guaranteed to happen because God has planned it. However, He has only allowed us to catch a glimpse of what will be revealed in the future. But enough of that future has been shared to encourage us to keep our focus on it in the present time. Now Paul will briefly mention two topics in Romans 8:26 and 8:27, prayer and the will of God, in order to encourage us as we engage in the former and seek to live in conformity to the latter. Here in Romans 8:26 Paul is offering encouragement to these Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome to keep on valuing prayer and in trusting in the real effects that its exercise can accomplish. Too easily when the requests we make appear to get ‘no’ for an answer; or nothing appears to be happening at all, we can become discouraged and either stop praying for something, or simply go through the motions to avoid further disappointments. However, if this is how readers or hearers of Paul’s letter were feeling he wishes to remind them –and us- that in prayer the Holy Spirit comes to our aid and joins us in this great work entrusted to us. This is the correct word ‘work’. Anyone who has prayed for any length of time persisting in prayer for something will find it as hard to accomplish as some of the tasks in their daily work routine.

## 3. **Acknowledging our struggles in prayer** *the Spirit helps us in our weakness...*

(a)**Avoiding the obvious problem** If we are wilfully involved in sinful misconduct we will have problems in our prayer life! Psalm 66:18 reminds us: *If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; Or Isaiah 59:1-2: Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.<sup>2</sup> But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.* Assuming we are in a right relationship with God and no sins to confess to Him or other problems needing to be addressed then we come to the starting line assumed by Paul when he speaks about *our weakness...*

(b)**The difficulties we need assistance to overcome** There are many issues that are personal challenges at different times in our lives, but others that are more general difficulties that will be experienced by all of us at some time or other (i) **Physical weakness** In Mark 14:32-42, in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus asked the disciples so spend time with Him in prayer. *They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to His disciples, ‘Sit here while I pray.’<sup>33</sup> He took Peter, James and John along with him, and He began to be deeply distressed and troubled.<sup>34</sup> ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,’ He said to them. ‘Stay here and keep watch.<sup>35</sup> Going a little farther, He fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from Him.<sup>36</sup> ‘Abba, Father,’ He said, ‘everything is possible for you. Take this cup from Me. Yet not what I will, but what You will.<sup>37</sup> Then He returned to His disciples and found them sleeping. ‘Simon,’ He said to Peter, ‘are you asleep? Couldn’t you keep watch for one hour?’<sup>38</sup> Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.<sup>39</sup> Once more He went*

away and prayed the same thing.<sup>40</sup> When He came back, He **again** found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to Him.<sup>41</sup> Returning **the third time**, He said to them, **'Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners.'**<sup>42</sup> Rise! Let us go! Here comes My betrayer!' Jesus had told His followers a lot of information about what would happen to Him in the near future and even more about the future work of His disciples after He had gone back to heaven (see John's Gospel chapters 13-17); it was now late in the evening, at a time when they would normally have been sleeping in bed. Although they meant well, they were physically exhausted and needed to rest. It was most unfortunate that this situation arose when they were not in the best place to handle it. However, we have all been faced with problems that late at night seem far greater than had they been declared to us during office hours. When we are physically tired and especially when suffering from health problems we can struggle to pray. Sometimes the underlying problem is our health issue –in such times we need to rely more than usual on other people praying for us. (ii) Mental exhaustion (I Kings 19:1-5) *Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.*<sup>2</sup> So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, 'May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.'<sup>3</sup> Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there,<sup>4</sup> while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. 'I have had enough, Lord,' he said. **'Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.'**<sup>5</sup> Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. Only a day earlier Elijah had the greatest moral and spiritual victory of his life when he stood alone for the God of Israel against the 400 prophets of the debased Canaanite religions. The mental strain of remaining strong throughout that encounter left him totally vulnerable to the slightest challenge or attack in the days that followed. He needed time off to get away completely from his work; it was not a personal defect in this man or cowardice he needed a holiday. In addition, prior to that situation he had lived on the run for more than three years evading the evil rulers of the country. We may not face that specific pressure, but mental strain over weeks, months or even a few years eventually takes its toll. No wonder a person might struggle to pray –or do a range of other things in their regular routine having faced such pressures. (iii) Emotional trauma (John 20:11-16: *Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb*<sup>12</sup> *and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.*<sup>13</sup> *They asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying?'* 'They have taken my Lord away,' she said, 'and I don't know where they have put Him.'<sup>14</sup> *At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus.*<sup>15</sup> *He asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?'* **Thinking He was the gardener**, she said, 'Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I will get Him.'<sup>16</sup> *Jesus said to her, 'Mary.'* She turned towards Him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means 'Teacher'). Jesus had died and lies buried in the tomb. Mary Magdalene goes to the grave to pay her last respects. It is Easter Sunday morning. Mary is beside herself with grief. This is perfectly natural. When she does see the risen Jesus she confuses Him with a gardener entrusted with maintaining the grounds around these tombs. Now we can be in a good place and misidentify someone –if we didn't expect to see them in that place for a variety of perfectly legitimate reasons. In a time of emotional trauma it is possible to get our words jumbled up and be confused in prayer or any conversation with other people. Recognising the range of factors that may hinder our prayer life or behaviour in other contexts is important. (iv) Ignorance of key facts concerning the subject of our prayers At best we have partial knowledge of our own and other people's life circumstances. We may be in a right relationship with God, but still face serious problems that do not make sense. The story of Job in the book of that name is so helpful pastorally when we consider the subject of prayer. Job 1:8 states very clearly how God viewed this man at this time in his life.

Then the Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered My servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; **he is blameless and upright**, a man who fears God and shuns evil.' When God gives you a character reference like this it is clear this man had lived an outstandingly moral life. Yet as the story unfolds it is one disaster after another. His business goes bankrupt through no fault of his own; his children die in a natural disaster; to top it all his health breaks down and he is unable to work. Anyone of us hit with such a range of trials in a relatively short space of time would be less than human if we didn't wonder why it had happened. Job's anguish is clear from his recorded thoughts. For example Job 3:11: "Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?... "Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul,<sup>21</sup> to those who long for death that does not come, who search for it more than for hidden treasure,<sup>22</sup> who are filled with gladness and rejoice when they reach the grave?<sup>23</sup> Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in? (Job 3:20-23).

Job's friends had a neat and simple theology that covered every situation with ease, but not the one whom God commended as an example of a godly man. He would declare: "Therefore I will not keep silent; I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit... Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden to you? (Job 7:11a, 20b) The lesson of this account of Job's life is that we may be living in the right way honouring God and working well with other people and still be permitted to endure serious heartaches and difficulties, setbacks and disappointments. In time Job would come through these trials to a place of greater blessing and honour and be vindicated. However, it was most probably some years before his integrity was vindicated. Over the longer term God honours those that honour Him, but in the short term there are things we have to live with at times that admit of no easy resolution or display no obvious redemptive features. (v) Accepting the answer when God's says 'no' The classic example here is Paul and his *thorn in the flesh*. It was an issue with which he struggled for some years, before he was enabled to accept and live with the limitations imposed by this (probable) health condition. In II Corinthians 12:7-10 he wrote these words: *Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*<sup>8</sup> *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.*<sup>9</sup> *But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness."* *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.*<sup>10</sup> *That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* It takes a lot of grace and courage to make such a statement. On this point we cannot avoid mentioning our Lord's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, immediately prior to His arrest and subsequent crucifixion. In Luke 22:39-44 it states: *Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and His disciples followed Him.*<sup>40</sup> *On reaching the place, He said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation."*<sup>41</sup> *He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed,*<sup>42</sup> **"Father, if You are willing, take this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done."**<sup>43</sup> *An angel from heaven appeared to Him and strengthened Him.*<sup>44</sup> **And being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.** If the Lord Himself could request a 'Plan B' and agonise over going ahead with the revealed will of His Father then there will be occasions in your life and mine when we will have similar struggles over issues that seem big for us. There will be parents who agonise over choices their children make, for example over an unsuitable person as a life partner; it may be over injustices in the workplace; even decisions in Church Meetings. What may be incredibly hard for you may be less so for someone else, but the reverse may equally be true in another situation. When God opens doors we need very serious reasons for declining to go through them. And when He appears to close them it is a cause for serious heart-searching as we seek to discern why He seems to be directing us into a different pathway. We need the encouragement of verses like Proverbs 3:5-6 to assure us and strengthen our faith: *Trust in the*

*Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; <sup>6</sup> in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight.*

**4. The specific work of the Holy Spirit in relation to our prayers *the Spirit Himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.***

There are various references in the Bible to Jesus praying for us in heaven. For example: I John 2:1 states: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* Hebrews 7:25 contains some particularly encouraging words. *Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them.* Here in Romans 8:26 Paul explains that the Holy Spirit who lives within us equipping and empowering us as we seek to live for God as followers of Jesus. Paul is not stating that the Holy Spirit uses some form of speech like ours to convey these prayers to God the Father. He appears remarkably to be following remarks about the *groaning of the whole creation* (Romans 8:22) and believers themselves who *groan inwardly* (Romans 8:23), with a reference to a similar longing and desire on the part of the Holy Spirit for the coming of God's new created order. The wider creation and humanity are acutely conscious of our imperfections and weaknesses and indeed our frustrations with them and have a natural longing for what God has in store for us in the future. It appears that Paul is suggesting that the Holy Spirit in some way identifies with this predicament and presents it to the Father on our behalf. However, He does so in a way that is *in accordance with God's will* (Romans 8:27). We can never find satisfactory vocabulary to express the full meaning of Romans 8:26-27. However, at the human level I think we do grasp what Paul is saying from our own experiences of life. All of us have had times when we were really hurting inside and the last thing we needed was a speech about pulling ourselves together; neither did we require a friend to give us a sympathetic treatise articulating in detail our support. A few words, a hug or some more modest gesture might convey it. Years ago at a difficult time of a big disappointment two Christian men came to speak to me about it. The one uttered a few formal sentences stood at the far end of a fairly long narrow room and then quickly left; the other man, a strong masculine figure, calmly and with tears in his eyes walked over and gave me a hug. The only words he uttered that day were 'I'm sorry'. I barely knew him and our paths haven't crossed in the last couple of decades, but it was a moment I will remember to my dying day. In other words Paul is communicating that the Holy Spirit is standing with us to encourage us to continue and to stand for God when life feel so tough and a real struggle. In those moments when we feel like throwing in the towel, or life seems so pointless He is there alongside us to pick us up and help us on our way again.

**5. The guidance Paul gives for our prayer life**

*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 through wordless groans.*

In very simple terms what lessons does the apostle seek to communicate to us about our prayer life?

(a) **Don't give up on prayer** It is an essential ingredient in the daily life of a Christian as we relate to our heavenly Father. All believers down the centuries have had their struggles in and with their prayer life. Yet God has repeatedly encouraged His people in the Bible to pray because in some mysterious way our petitions are taken into account in the determining and execution of the will of God on earth. Paul in a list to the Church at Thessalonica included

these words: *Pray continually* (I Thessalonians 5:17). The best biblical illustration of the impact of prayer on the will of God is seen in God inviting Abraham to pray for the inhabitants, indeed for the cities situated in the part of the Holy Land in which he was then living. Although God had planned to execute judgement on them, the final shape and form it took was influenced by the patriarch's prayers (Genesis 18:16-33) and later by Lot's SOS prayer (Genesis 19:21); in a different context Jeremiah was led by God to encourage the exiles in Babylon (Iraq) to pray for God's blessing on the city and its institutions in which they lived. Jeremiah 29:7: *Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.* These Jewish believers were asked to pray for God's blessing in effect on the majority of their fellow residents of the communities where they were based who either practised another faith or made no profession of faith. In the same way we too by implication can pray for the city and community where we live asking God's blessing on it, and the people living within its boundaries of various faiths or none. God would only ask His people to pray in this manner if He intended our prayers to have some kind of significant impact.

(b) **Don't be discouraged by your struggles in prayer** it was hard work for Jesus and without exception it will at times be a real effort for each and everyone of His followers. It is a part of the spiritual battle to which at times we will get 'yes' 'no' and 'not yet' as answers. Sometimes we will pray once and see something happen for good very quickly. At other times we may pray for years and apparently have nothing to show for it, but we may never know how God has worked in someone's life for whom we have prayed. It may only be in heaven that we find out that they came to faith or in some other issue were changed by God – in response to our and other people's prayers.

(c) **Don't forget the significance of prayer** In the book of Daniel on two occasions this man of God has been earnestly seeking God through prayer and fasting for some time before he gets an answer to his prayers. Yet it is significant what he was told. Daniel 9:20-23 states: *While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my request to the Lord my God for His holy hill – <sup>21</sup> while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. <sup>22</sup> He instructed me and said to me, 'Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. <sup>23</sup> As soon as you began to pray, a word went out, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. Therefore, consider the word and understand the vision.* Then in Daniel 10:12 a similar statement is made: *Then he continued, 'Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them.* God's answer was quick although the recipient of it only received the answer some time later. Just because we don't see the impact of our prayers does not in anyway indicate that 'nothing is happening'.

(d) **Be encouraged prayer changes things** Paul prioritised prayer for the people of God. I Thessalonians 1:2-3 states: *We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. <sup>3</sup> We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.* Never forget the inspirational words recorded in James 5:16, accompanied with the evidence from the life of Elijah: *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.* Who knows –it might be an answer to one of your prayers this year or in some coming year that might make a huge difference in someone's life or with respect to our collective witness, for Jesus' sake Amen.