

# **Romans: The Good News of God**

## **The Intercession of the Holy Spirit**

*Romans 8:26-27*

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# The Intercession of the Holy Spirit

## Scripture

The first verse of the greatest chapter in the Bible—Romans 8:1—says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Everything else that follows in the rest of Romans 8 tells us *why* there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

The first reason why there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus is because there is *no condemnation from the law*. That is what the Apostle Paul teaches in Romans 8:1-4.

The second reason why there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus is because *we have been delivered from the flesh* (or “the sinful nature,” as some versions put it). That is what the Apostle Paul teaches in Romans 8:5-11.

The third reason why there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus is because *we are now the children of God*. That is what the Apostle Paul teaches in Romans 8:12-17.

The fourth reason why there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus is because we have *the hope of future glory*. This is what the Apostle Paul teaches in Romans 8:18-25.

Today, we see a fifth reason why there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, and it is because of *the intercession of the Holy Spirit*. We see this in Romans 8:26-27.

Let’s read Romans 8:26-27:

**<sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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. (Romans 8:26-27)**

## Introduction

Do you ever find yourself asking these questions when you pray?

- What should I pray for?
- How should I pray?
- Can I pray with confidence, “claiming” things by faith?
- Do I always have to add, “If it be your will” to my prayer?
- What happens if I pray wrongly?
- Can prayer do harm?
- Does prayer get God to change his mind?
- Can it change God’s plans?
- If not, does it even matter if I pray?

Prayer is one of the great struggles for Christians. But we have help in this area, the help of the Holy Spirit, which is a great help indeed.

Here is a marvelous truth: the Apostle Paul teaches us that the Third Person of the Trinity is interceding with the First Person of the Trinity on our behalf!

## Lesson

In this sermon we see that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because of the intercession of the Holy Spirit. Let us see how the Holy Spirit intercedes for us.

### I. The Problem of Prayer

First, let’s note the problem of prayer. Paul says in verse 26a: **“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness.”**

Prayer is a problem for us because of **our weakness**. When Paul speaks of **our weakness**, it is important to realize that he is

not speaking of sin. Weakness is not sin.

It is true that as sinners we sin, and that sin is a barrier to communication with God. David said of his prayer life, “If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened” (Psalm 66:18). Isaiah told the Israelites, “But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear” (Isaiah 59:2).

But that is not what is being spoken of here. The problem Paul is concerned with is **our weakness**, and this is not sin but rather it is our *frailty* as human beings.

What kinds of weakness or frailty are there? Well, *physical weakness* is one kind. The story of the disciples who were left by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane to pray provides an illustration. They kept falling asleep even though Jesus had instructed them to stay awake and pray.

But in Romans 8 the weakness Paul has in mind is *ignorance* or a *lack of understanding*. It is expressed in the next phrase that **“we do not know what to pray for as we ought”** (8:26b). This is not a question of *how* to pray but of *what* to pray. Paul means that we do not know what we should ask of God. What is God’s will for others or us? In our human frailty we often simply do not know, and therefore do not know how to pray rightly.

I also want you to notice that when Paul writes the word **“weakness”** he adds the word **“our,”** thereby putting himself in an identical position with us. In other words, the **weakness** that makes prayer difficult is not something that only new, baby, or immature Christians have. It is part of our common human condition.

Even the greatest saints have had this difficulty. Think of Job, for example. God told Satan that Job was a righteous man. “Have you considered my servant Job,” said God, “that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” (Job 1:8). There was no outstanding sin in Job that might have been a barrier between him and God. Yet, because of the things that happened to him, Job was a confused man. He did not know why he was suffering as he was. His

comforters thought they knew. They would not have had any difficulty praying, at least about Job. They had it all figured out—but incorrectly. Job, who knew his own heart, had no answers. He prayed to God, “Why have you made me your mark? Why have I become a burden to you? Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?” (Job 7:20b-21a).

Elijah is another example. This great prophet was a courageous man, having stood against the powerful prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and by God’s provision having won a great victory. Yet after the battle he was so emotionally and physically drained that he retreated to the desert fearing Queen Jezebel, who had threatened to kill him. What did he pray? He asked to die, arguing, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers” (1 Kings 19:4). That much was true; he was no better. But it was still a confused and foolish prayer, since God had more for him to do.

Job teaches that a man can be righteous and still not know what to pray. Elijah teaches that a person can be courageous and also still not know what to pray.

So, prayer is a problem—even for the greatest among us.

## II. The Spirit Helps Us in Prayer

But enough of the problem. We know it all too well. The point of the passage is that **“the Spirit helps us in our weakness.”** Even though **“we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words”** (8:26). We are weakness itself, but the Holy Spirit is all-powerful.

Paul uses two key words in verse 26. First, the Spirit **helps** us in prayer. The Greek word has the idea that the Spirit comes alongside us by bearing our burdens. It pictures our ignorance of what to pray for as a heavy load. We are struggling along under it, as it were. But the Holy Spirit comes alongside and **helps us** shoulder the load. He identifies with us in our weakness, as Jesus did by his

incarnation, and he labors with us.

And second, **the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.** An intercessor is a person who pleads one's case. So the meaning is that the way the Holy Spirit comes alongside us to help and shoulder our burden is by pleading our case with God when we do not know how to do it. We do not know what to pray for, but the Holy Spirit does. So he prays for us, and God, **“who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit”** (8:27), answers his correct and powerful prayers.

Jesus did that for Peter in one of the best illustrations of intercession in the Bible. He told Peter that Satan wanted to sift him like wheat. Then he said, “But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32). Peter did not know what to pray. In fact, he probably wasn't praying at all. Later that evening he even fell asleep while praying. But Jesus prayed for him, and Jesus' prayers were answered, as a result of which Peter was strengthened and went on to many years of useful service.

But none of this is meant to suggest that we have nothing to do in prayer or have no responsibility to pray. We do have responsibility in prayer, which is made quite clear by the word **“helps.”** The apostle says that **“the Spirit helps us in our weakness.”** He does not eliminate our need to pray regularly and fervently.

But what about the second word, **“groanings”**? This is a problem among commentators since they do not agree on who does the groaning. Is it the Spirit? The text seems to say that. Yet the majority feels that the Spirit, being God, does not groan, indeed cannot groan. Martyn Lloyd-Jones is emphatic on this point: “The Godhead does not groan; it is inconceivable for every reason.”

However, if it is not the Holy Spirit who groans, it must be the Christian himself. Is this the correct interpretation?

I think the context is a help here and that it is no accident that the word **“groanings”** occurs three times in verses 22-27.

The first occurrence refers to the inanimate creation. Paul writes that “the whole creation has been *groaning* together in the

pains of childbirth until now” (8:22).

The second instance is ourselves. “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, *groan inwardly*. . .” (8:23).

Since the word occurs a third time in reference to the Holy Spirit (“**the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groaning too deep for words**” in 8:26), there seems to be a purposeful progression from inanimate nature to the redeemed to the Third Person of the Godhead. It is a bold progression, and it appears to be deliberate.

But what does it mean? Obviously it does not mean that the Spirit is unable to articulate his concerns. Yet, if the idea of bearing a heavy burden is still in view, it may be that this is what is governing Paul’s thought. A groan is appropriate to burden bearing.

For example, suppose you are helping someone carry a very heavy load. What is more expressive: a groan as you stagger along beneath it or a great deal of articulate chatter? Suppose your helper says, “My, this piano is heavy. They certainly make pianos heavy, and awkward, too. Probably we should have spent the money and gone ahead and hired professional piano movers. I don’t think I want to do this very often. Have you ever moved a piano before?”

If you are struggling with the heavy load too, that is probably the last thing you want to hear. If someone is chattering away like that, you would probably just want to tell this so-called helper to be quiet and lift the piano. A real burden-bearer groans with you. I suggest that this is the image Paul is using.

The bearing of our prayer burdens does not have to be in words because, as the passage goes on to say that God, “**who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit,**” answers accordingly.

### III. Lessons about Prayer

Romans 8:26-27 imply or explicitly teach so many lessons about prayer that a number of them can be listed as a summary of

what we have been learning. These verses constitute something of a prayer primer for Christians.

*First, we are supposed to pray.* Regardless of the problems we may have with prayer—and we are reminded that Christians all have problems with prayer at times—we are nevertheless supposed to pray.

In fact, the Word of God commands us to pray. We are told to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Anything God tells us to do is for our good, and we are poorer if we fail to do it. Prayer is one of the great spiritual disciplines.

*Second, do not expect prayer to be easy.* Why should it be? Nothing else in the Christian life is easy. Why should prayer be any different?

When we were studying the last half of Romans 7, I pointed out that the Christian life is a struggle and that we should not expect simple or quick fix solutions. Our contemporary American culture has conditioned us to want easy cure-alls. In the area of our sanctification we expect immediate victories either by a formula or spiritual experience.

But God does not work that way. We are called to a struggle, and our perseverance in that struggle is itself a victory, even if the results are not visible or spectacular. And the Holy Spirit will help us bear our burden.

So also in prayer. You do not have to feel good about it, though you will in most cases. You do not even have to see results. What is important is that you keep on, and keep on keeping on.

A few years ago I read the biography of *Chariots of Fire* legend Eric Liddell. He was born to missionary parents in China at the turn of the twentieth century. After he won the 400-meter race in the 1924 Olympics in France he went back to China as a missionary, where he died of a brain tumor in 1945. He was a remarkable Christian man. His biographer makes clear that one of the “secrets” of his wonderful service to the Lord was his faithful commitment to a daily Quiet Time. He rose every morning at 6:00 a.m. and spent 1 hour reading God’s Word and in prayer.



I would go so far as to say that every Christian who is used by God has persevered in prayer and has understood that prayer is not easy.

*Third, realize what you are doing when you pray.* Although the discipline of prayer is itself a struggle and more often than not we do not know what we should be praying for, we nevertheless can know and need to know what we are doing.

In prayer we address ourselves to the great sovereign God of the universe, and we present our adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication (ACTS) to him. He hears these prayers and responds to them consistently, perfectly, and wisely out of his own inexhaustible abundance and perfection.

Does prayer get God to change his mind? Of course not! No reasonable person would want that—because if God’s way is perfect, as it is, to get him to change it would be to get him to become imperfect. If that ever happened, the universe would fall into disorder! Any thinking person wants God always to run things according to his own perfect will, not ours.

But here is a parallel question: Does prayer change things? The answer to that is “Yes”—because God who ordains the *ends* also ordains the *means*, and he has made prayer a means to those ends. He has promised us that prayer is effective. Notice the difference between the two questions.

Does prayer get God to change his mind? No. It does not.

Does prayer change things? Yes, because God has ordained that prayer is a means to change ends.

In other words, God does not change, but things change through prayer.

Jesus has told us, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8).

James wrote, “You do not have, because you do not ask” (James 4:2), adding that “the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (James 5:16b).

So, what changes when we pray? The chief thing that happens in prayer is that prayer changes us.

*And fourth, be encouraged by these verses.* It is true that **“we do not know what to pray for.”** But the Holy Spirit does, and the Holy Spirit has been given to us by God to assist precisely in this area, as well as in other ways. With his help we make progress.

One commentator has compared learning to pray to a man learning to play the violin. At first he is not very good. But he gets the schedule of the classical music broadcasts on the radio, buys the violin parts to the music that he knows will be played, and then tunes in the radio each afternoon and plays along as best he can. His mistakes do not change what is coming in over the radio in the slightest. The concertos continue to roll on in perfect harmony and tempo. But the struggling violinist changes. He gets better week-by-week and year-by-year, and the time eventually comes when he can play along with the orchestra broadcasts pretty well.

Prayer is like that. There are plenty of mistaken notes, and groans, too. But there is also progress and joy and encouragement, since God is continuing to conduct the perfect heavenly symphony and the Holy Spirit is continuing to prepare us for the day when we will be able to take our place in the divine orchestra. In the meantime we can know that the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, like a wise and faithful teacher, is by our side.

Another illustration of this truth comes from Pastor John McGarvey of Cochran, Pennsylvania, as reported in *Leadership* magazine. He says:

One day our church copier broke down. I'm not mechanically minded, but I called the repair shop to see if they could tell me what the problem was and if I could do anything about it. I quickly discovered, however, that I didn't even know how to describe what was broken. I didn't know the names of the parts or what was specifically wrong. I just knew the copy machine didn't work.

So the repair shop sent out a technician. While working on our machine, he also called the shop. Unlike me, he knew how to describe what was needed. He used words I didn't understand, but

the person at the shop did, and soon the copier was repaired. My need was met because someone came and communicated to headquarters in words I could not express.

The Apostle Paul teaches that this is what the Holy Spirit does for us. When we don't know how to pray, the Holy Spirit knows precisely what we need and prays in a way the Father perfectly understands.

### **Conclusion**

Commentator William Hendrickson illustrated this ministry of the Spirit by telling of a pastor who became seriously ill. The congregation dearly loved him and prayed earnestly, "Lord, please restore him to health." But he died.

At the funeral, a minister who had been the pastor's lifelong friend spoke lovingly and with insight. He said, "Perhaps some of you are in danger of arriving at the conclusion that the heavenly Father does not hear prayer. He does indeed hear prayer. But in this case two prayers may have been opposing each other. You were praying, 'O God, spare his life, for we need him so badly.' The Spirit's groaning prayer was, 'Take him away for the congregation is leaning too heavily on him, not upon Thee.'"

The Father answered the prayer that the Spirit offered on their behalf.

The Holy Spirit is constantly helping us when we pray. He is interpreting our prayers correctly and presenting them to the Father. I would not want it any other way. Would you?

This is a great encouragement to us. Because of the intercession of the Holy Spirit we are assured that there is no condemnation for us. May the Lord use that truth to encourage us in our prayer lives. Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons)
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**PRAYER:**

O Lord our God, we thank you for the intercession of the Holy Spirit. We know that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because of the intercession of the Holy Spirit.

Even though we struggle with prayer, even though we do not always know what to pray, we thank you that Holy Spirit takes our prayers and presents them to you in accordance with your will.

Help us to grow in prayer. Help us to grow in our understanding of your will so that we can increasingly pray prayers that are in accordance with your divine will.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.