

Romans 8:26-27 **“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. ²⁷ 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.”**

Dear Believers Who Love to Speak to Your Heavenly Father:

A young man came to catechism class. He was concerned about leaving his bicycle outside. The pastor said to him, *“Oh, don't worry. The Holy Spirit will watch it.”* During class the pastor asked the students, *“Who can tell me what words we speak when we baptize babies?”* The young man raised his hand and said, *“We say, ‘In the name of the Father and of the Son. Amen.’”* The pastor asks the boy, *“What happened to the Holy Spirit?”* The boy says, *“He's outside watching my bike, remember?”*

Sometimes we forget about the Holy Spirit. We forget about his continual calming presence and that he is an integral part of our daily lives as Christians. The apostle Paul reminds us today that even in something as common as prayer, the Holy Spirit is helping us. Be encouraged by the good news that **“The Holy Spirit Has You Covered.”** (1) ***Because I struggle with prayer*** and (2) ***Because his prayers are perfect.***

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Paul is reassuring his readers in Rome that, as they struggled with persecution and life itself in a sinful world, their prayers were being heard and answered by a loving God. As one who called himself a **“wretched man”** and the **“chief of sinners,”** he knew how we often struggle with our lives of prayer. So he says, ***“The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for...”***

Our prayer weaknesses come in many sizes and shapes:

(1) Sometimes our prayer weakness is caused by something as simple as distractions -- keeping our hearts focused on the task at hand. Martin Luther told the story about the man who bet his friend a horse that he couldn't make it all the way through the Lord's Prayer without his mind wandering. The man accepted the bet, began to pray, and then halfway through the prayer he looked up and asked his friend, *“Does that horse come with a saddle or not?”* Unfortunately, our minds are capable of going places far, far away during prayer!

Another illustration about prayer comes from the Luther family dinner table. This story is from *Tabletalk*, a book of quotes recorded by the frequent guests who sat at the Luther family table: ***“When Luther's little puppy...looked for a morsel from his master, and watched with open mouth and motionless eyes, Martin Luther said, ‘Oh, if I could only pray the way this little dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. He has no other thought, wish, or hope.’”***

That's zeroing in with total focus -- also our goal when we pray.

(2) Sometimes our prayer weakness is caused by emotional upheaval. I know that some of us have experienced this grieving after the death of a loved one. In the thick fog of grief, prayer can be so hard! You still have faith in Jesus, but you can't find the words to speak to him. You feel all tapped out, totally drained, in an alternate universe, and nothing comes out but bone-shaking groans of pain from the inner recesses of an aching heart.

(3) Sometimes our prayer weakness is caused by the inability to grasp God's will. That's what Paul is getting at when he says, ***“We do not know what we ought to pray for...”*** We don't have a crystal ball, so sometimes we ask, *“If only I knew what the Lord wanted me to do with this particular problem, or what path he wants me to follow...Which job offer should I choose? Should I have this medical procedure or not? What's best for me or for my family?”* And so we wonder...

(4) Sometimes our prayer weakness is caused by Christian battle wounds. Living faithfully for Jesus Christ can be hard in a world that often despises him and his people. ***“Pressing on toward the***

goal” takes its toll in the relentless battle against the devil, world, and sinful flesh. We feel beaten up and exhausted.

We struggle with all these things and more. These challenges can make praying difficult. It’s like **Charlie Brown** who just messed up by throwing a bad pitch, getting his kite caught in a tree, or Lucy pulling the football away just as he’s trying to kick it. With head back, mouth open, filled with frustration he shouts: Arrrrgh! Isn’t that often exactly our prayer? Arrrrgh!

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But take heart! The Holy Spirit has you covered. He’s got your back! Through all our feebleness, he understands and is working for us. He is the God who loves you. He cares about you. So he edits our prayers and fixes them. He takes the chaotic yearnings of our muddled hearts and conveys what he knows we need to our heavenly Father. ***“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.”***

Twice Paul uses the word ***“intercedes.”*** Literally that means to *“go between.”* An intercessor is a mediator or an advocate. E.g, those of you who have tried to navigate the often bewildering world of healthcare and the often frustrating world of health insurance know how wonderful it would be to have an advocate. An advocate could help communicate your questions or concerns. They could help explain what the doctor just said in the foreign language of the medical world. That advocate would give us some peace of mind.

The Holy Spirit ***“intercedes for us.”*** He’s our Advocate. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He made you. He gave you faith at the baptismal font when you were just weeks old. He has been strengthening that faith your whole life long whenever you read or hear the Word and receive the Lord’s Supper.

And when the Holy Spirit ***“intercedes for us,”*** he intercedes for us *perfectly*. Paul says, ***“The Spirit intercedes for the saints (that is, all believers in Jesus Christ) in accordance with God’s will.”***

What is God’s will? The answer to that question is a sermon in itself. And I know nobody wants 2 sermons today for the price of 1, so here’s a very brief summary:

(1) God’s primary will is that all people believe and be saved. He wants all people to believe in Jesus and come to live in heaven with him forever!

(2) God’s secondary will is that those who believe in Jesus and are saved live their lives according to his Word. God’s Word reveals what he wants us or doesn’t want us to think, do, and say. The better we know God’s Word, the more in tune we will be with the will of God.

So in effect, prayer is surrendering to the will of God. If I throw a rope from the boat to tie to the dock, do I pull the dock to the boat or the boat to the dock? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but aligning my will to God’s will. And that’s truly where we need the Holy Spirit. Where we lack, the Spirit does not.

His intercession gives us great comfort and peace. That’s why the Spirit is often called “The Comforter.” The whole world can be falling in around us, but the Holy Spirit calms us. He steadies our flailing hearts. He lifts them up and directs them to the Father. As the psalmist says, ***“He restores my soul.”***

So, as that pastor asked the boy, “What happened to the Holy Spirit?” He’s not just outside watching our bikes or our cars. He has us covered. He’s praying perfectly for us all the time!

Amen.