

When You Don't Know How to Pray

From Groaning Into Glory – Part IV

Romans 8:26-27

Introduction – Review

We conclude today, a three part series on the subject of groaning. We have entitled this series, “From Groaning Into Glory”.

We have discovered, in the word of God, that all of nature is groaning for release from its bondage to decay and corruption.

We have also been reminded that mankind is the steward of nature, not the savior of nature.

Planet earth, in fact, is headed for destruction. There will be a bathing of universal fire, by which God will obliterate everything in judgment. This will occur before He refurbishes a new heaven and a new earth.

Noah preached for more than a hundred years that God was going to swallow the earth with a universal flood. The apostle Peter wrote, in II Peter, chapter 3, verse 6,

. . . the world . . . was destroyed, being flooded with water.

He goes on to say, in verse 7,

But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

According to the Bible, the world mocked Noah. They that heard him, disbelieved his message. So also, the unbelieving world refuses to listen to the message of coming judgment – when the earth will be swallowed, not by water this time, but by fire.

Our groaning, fallen creation is filled with men and women who will perish. And if you could grab every one of them by their lapels and spell it out for them, the vast majority would be offended and would call you intolerant and dogmatic.

To speak of coming danger is nothing less than an irritation to the unbelieving world. Let me illustrate this in another setting.

In 1984, an Avianca jet crashed in Spain. Avianca is the European airlines in Spain. It was a big jet that literally crashed into the side of a mountain, instantly killing everyone aboard. Investigators searched the wreckage for that little black box, the flight recorder. Upon finding it, they made an eerie discovery. The recording of the cockpit revealed that several minutes before the fatal impact, there was a shrill computer synthesized voice in the background. That little computer voice was repeating over and over again, “Pull up, pull up, pull up, pull up, pull up.” It was a warning system. The pilot inexplicably snapped back, “Shut up, Gringo, shut up!” and flipped off some switch that muted the sound of the warning voice. Moments later, the plane smashed into the mountain and everyone died.¹

In the same way, like people in Noah’s day, unbelievers in our day effectively say:

- to God, “Shut up, we don’t want to hear Your voice.”
- to the claims of the gospel, “Shut up!”
- to their consciences, “Shut up!”
- to the design of God in creation, “Be quiet!”

Fallen man refuses to listen to God.

In Romans, chapter 1, Paul has said, “Listen to the voice of God in creation! You can’t miss His unmistakable power and creative majesty.”

Now, in Romans, chapter 8, Paul has said again, “Listen to the voice of nature in creation! You can’t miss the agony; you can’t miss its enslavement to corruption and violence and decay.”

Nature groans for a better day. It longs for the coming day when, as Paul says in verse 21,

... the creation itself . . . will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

The Bible tells us that following the bath of fire, heaven and earth will be remade and Eden will return to planet earth, never to leave it again.

Paul has secondly, noted that every Christian groans as well, for the day when he receives his glorified body – completely and forever free from the body of flesh and sin.

In the meantime, Paul reminded us, we wait with anticipation and confident hope.

Frankly, if that was all that Paul had informed us of, we would all be left somewhat discouraged, right? Creation is groaning and the Christian is groaning, and that is the end of the story, for now. But that is not the end.

We are about to discover that God Himself joins us in groaning too! If you can believe it, the Holy Spirit is, right now, groaning on our behalf.

Paul goes on to write, in Romans, chapter 8, verse 26a,

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness . . .

In the same way as what? With groaning, Paul will explain in a moment. First, however, we are told we need help because of our weakness.

Paul is once again refreshingly honest! Even though we are on the winning team, we are weak! Even though we are sons and daughters of God, we are frail! Every measure of strength and every victory we experience in life is not in and of ourselves, but in and through Jesus Christ, right?

I can do all things . . .

How? By learning some secret to the Christian life? By attending some seminar on the steps to spiritual freedom? By becoming a Bible scholar? No, but as Philippians, chapter 4, verse 13, says,

I can do all things through Him [Christ], who strengthens me.

Jesus said to His disciples something He never wanted them or us to forget, as recorded in John, chapter 15, verse 5b,

... apart from Me you can do nothing.

We are weak. Even though we are saved, we have imperfect perspectives, finite minds, human frailties, spiritual limitations, mental shortcomings, and emotional inconsistencies and imbalances.

Just how spiritually needy, weak, and dependant on God are we? Paul answers in verse 26 of Romans, chapter 8,

... for we do not know how to pray as we should . . .

We cannot even pray right, unless the Spirit of God helps us!

The first point Paul will make could be given with this simple statement that you could write in the margin of your Bible next to verse 26:

The Inability of the Christian!

Whether we want to hear it or not, Paul informs us that we cannot even pray without help.

Why not? Let me give several reasons.

The believer tends to miss what God is going to do in the near and distant future

1. First, because the believer tends to miss what God is going to do in the near and distant future.

We have no idea what the future holds, yet we pray based on what we think God should do, right?!

The believer tends to misunderstand what God is doing now

2. Secondly, believers do not know how to pray because we not only miss what is going to happen, we tend to misunderstand what is happening.

In the middle of suffering, or pressure, or trial, or challenge, we miss what God is accomplishing in our lives.

I happen to be so encouraged by the apostle Paul’s own personal story of misguided prayer, as recorded in II Corinthians, chapter 12, verses 7 through 9. Three times he prayed, “Lord, remove this thorn in my flesh”; three times he prayed, “Lord, take it away.”

Finally, the Lord said, in effect, “Paul, you have no idea what I’m trying to accomplish in your life. You’re praying for the wrong thing . . .

. . . *My grace is sufficient for you, for [My] power is perfected in [your] weakness* . . .

That word “weakness” is the same word used by Paul in Romans, chapter 8, verse 26,

. . . *the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray* . . .

How did Paul know that? He had experienced it!

Even the great saints prayed the wrong way! Isn’t that encouraging?!

The believer tends to mistake what we truly need

3. We, as believers, are in need of help in prayer, not only because we miss what God is going to do and misunderstand what God is doing, but, thirdly, we mistake what we truly need.

Ask the average person on the street, “What do you need?”

The number one answer would probably be something like, “things, possessions, better health, better service, lower taxes . . . more money.”

I was reading the newspaper this past Monday morning, while at Bojangles, one of my favorite hangouts. I am on a high “carb” diet, so I had my buttery egg and cheese biscuit, hash browns and cinnamon twist with extra icing. That’s living, huh?! Probably not as long, but living.

I was reading *USA Today* about the people who received federal payouts due to their loss in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. The average payout per family is 1.5 million dollars.

Would you believe, all that this money has done, in many cases, is blow peoples’ lives apart? Court battles over the money are pitting one generation against another; a victim’s parents against a fiancé or spouse. At least twenty-two same-sex partners are fighting for their share, opposed by the deceased individual’s relatives.

The article went on to tell that women are coming to America from Trinidad, Bolivia, Colombia, and Brazil, claiming to be related to victims, and no one in the family knew.

It also told of one man who had moved to New York from Trinidad, married, and had three daughters. After the attack, a woman arrived to claim his body and the money, claiming to be his wife. She

was able to prove they were married and not divorced, thus making his marriage to his American wife illegal.

Another woman is battling in court against a Bolivian woman who claimed to be the victim’s wife. They are battling over whether or not DNA can be taken from the deceased man’s razor to prove the paternity of remaining children.ⁱⁱ

What do you need? Money! A better job! A relationship! Things! Power . . . popularity . . . a higher GPA. That will solve everything!

I found one article amusing in a recent *World Magazine*. The article chronicles the lawsuit of Timothy Dumouchel against Charter Communications, his Wisconsin cable company. He is threatening to sue Charter Communications because, he says, “the company has turned his entire family into lazy channel surfers against their will.” He says he told them to discontinue the cable service, but they only stopped billing him. After repeated attempts to shut it down – as if he couldn’t just turn it off – he now says the resulting TV addiction has harmed his family. I quote, “I believe the reason I smoke and drink every day and my wife eats too much is because we watched TV every day for the last four years.” In other words, Charter made them addicted to TV. Now listen to this, he says he will, “drop the suit in exchange for free lifetime internet service from Charter.”

Now that’s a healthy switch. That’ll solve the problem.

What do you need? I need to solve my addiction to TV with an addiction to the internet.

I could probably get into trouble for this story, but I will risk it! Someone in the church sent this to me.

Three women wanted a certain kind of husband, and they were very choosy about it. They heard about a recently opened “Husband Shopping Center” in Dallas. Women were allowed one visit and they could choose a husband from among hundreds of men. The center was designed with five floors, with the men increasing in positive attributes as you ascended up the floors. The only rule was, once you went up to another floor, you could not return, you had to choose a man from that floor.

These three ladies decided to go and find their husbands. On the first floor, they noticed a sign saying, “These men love kids and have a job.”

They looked at each other and said, “Well, that’s better than nothing. What do we do?”

They agreed, “Let’s go up another floor and see what’s up there.”

The ladies got on the elevator, went up to the second floor, where a sign in the foyer said, “These men have high paying jobs, love kids and are very good looking.”

“Ooh,” the ladies said, “this is too good to turn down. Well, let’s go up one more floor.”

When the elevator opened to the third floor, the sign on the lobby wall said, “These men have high paying jobs, love kids, are extremely good looking, can cook and love doing housework.”

“Oh my, let’s pick a man here.”

But then they said, “No, there’s even better men further up. Let’s go!”

The sign on the fourth floor read, “These men have high paying jobs, love kids, are extremely good looking, can cook and love doing housework, and have a never ending romantic streak.”

“Mercy me!” they said, “But just think, what must be awaiting us further on?!”

So, up to the fifth floor the ladies go. The door opened, the sign read, “This floor is empty and exists only to prove that women are impossible to please.”

I personally did not think that was funny!

Ladies, do not feel too bad. Someone sent me this story a few weeks later. Kids were asked why their mommies married their daddies. One little girl was asked that question, “Why did your mom marry your dad?”

She responded, “Well, my grandma says that mommy didn’t have her thinking cap on.”

I did not think that was funny either!

For the sake of self-preservation, let us get back to the text!

The bottom line is, we do not know what we want out of life! We do not know how to pray!

Paul says with perfect clarity in Romans, chapter 8, verse 26, “*The believer does not know how to even pray without help!*”

However, here is the good news. God has left us a Helper!

The Capability of the Holy Spirit

It is very important to understand the nature of the Spirit’s help.

The Greek word for “help” in verse 26, is a word used by the Greeks to refer to someone carrying one

end of a log. Just because the Spirit of God prays for us does not mean that we are not supposed to pray.

No, the believer is groaning with his need for wisdom and courage and faith and consistency and purity, praying without ceasing, not knowing exactly what is in the mind of God, but the Spirit of God is helping him by helping to carry the load.

The word “help” indicates, as Kent Hughes wrote, that the Holy Spirit does not just give armchair advice. No, He rolls up His sleeves and helps us bear our weakness. How marvelous this is – we have two intercessors on our behalf; one in heaven – our Lord Jesus who intercedes for our sin – and one in our hearts – the Holy Spirit Himself.ⁱⁱⁱ

When we do not know what to pray for or how to pray for it or when to pray for it or if we should pray for it; when in the midst of pain or suffering or challenge or struggle throughout the normal course of the day, we are told the Spirit carries that end of the load by helping us pray what we should.

How does the Spirit pray?

Paul answers that question with the next phrase in verse 26b through verse 27.

. . . but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

How the Holy Spirit helps us pray

This is how the Spirit helps us pray.

The Holy Spirit personally intercedes for the believer

1. The Holy Spirit personally intercedes for the believer.

Did you notice the personal involvement of the Spirit? Paul wrote in verse 26,

. . . but the Spirit Himself(!) intercedes . . .

You should underline the word “Himself”. The Holy Spirit does not want anyone else to replace Him.

He could appoint cherubim and seraphim to intercede for us. He could command planets to speak our name continually before the Father. He could be satisfied that other believers around the world are interceding for us in prayer. But He is not satisfied unless He is personally involved in praying for us!

Ladies and gentlemen, never, ever fall into the enemy's trap of believing you are in this fight alone! He will whisper in your ear, "On this journey, you are on your own."

It is a lie! Paul proves it in this verse. The Holy Spirit Himself intercedes for "us." You should write your name in the margin, right where the word "us" is found in verse 26b. The word "us" is in italics because it is supplied by the translator for interpretive sense. Go ahead and put your name in its place.

The Holy Spirit Himself intercedes for Stephen . . . for Susan . . . for Bill . . . put your name there. He is involved in your journey, right now.

What are you troubled about? What keeps you up at night? He is praying for God's solution to be worked out in your life.

What are you agonizing over? That is on His prayer list. What are you happy about? That is on His list of praises too.

Can you imagine what is on His prayer list for you? That is how He prays – with personal intercession on your behalf.

The Holy Spirit prays with passionate communion with the Father

2. Secondly, the Holy Spirit prays with passionate communion with the Father.

Look at verse 26b again.

. . . the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words

This is not some sort of charismatic tongue. This is not some sort of gibberish without any rational content. We are told by Paul that the content of this intercession is too deep for words.^{iv}

The verb "stenazo" in the Greek, or "groan," means to deeply sigh; to long after.

This is an amazing description of what theologians call inter-trinitarian communication; that is, divine articulation between members of the Godhead – namely between the Holy Spirit and God the Father.

This is referenced by Paul to the Corinthians, in I Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 11b,

. . . Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.

This communion on behalf of the believer is described in the same way he describes the groaning

of creation for redemption and the longing of the Christian for home.

Dr. Earle wrote, "[Isn't it true that] intercessory prayer reaches its deepest depths when it passes beyond the realm of [anything other than a] groan."^v

Now you would think that because the Spirit's will and the Father's will are identical, and because God is one, Paul's statement seems unnecessary. The idea of communication among and between Father, Son and Spirit seem almost redundant, right? But Paul is pointing up the truth in order to give encouragement to believers.^{vi}

What a mystery – but what encouragement!

Let me summarize the mystery Paul has revealed, "The believer, surrounded by a groaning creation, is groaning himself, while being indwelt by God who groans on their behalf."

The Spirit of God personally intercedes; He passionately communes, and let me give one more.

The Holy Spirit purposefully reinforces the will of God

3. The Holy Spirit purposefully reinforces the will of God.

The first two points tell us what the Spirit does for us. This point tells us why.

Paul writes in verse 27b,

. . . because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Not our will, but His.

Do you know what it means to pray in the Spirit? It means to pray for the will of God because that is how the Spirit prays.

Jude wrote, in verse 20, that the believer is to be,

. . . praying in the Holy Spirit . . .

That means we pray like the Spirit prays. We pray a prayer that the Spirit would not mind repeating!

What do you pray?

I love the answer one kid provided. His pastor was talking with him after church on Sunday morning and said, "So, your mother says a prayer with you every night, huh?"

"Yes sir," the boy responded.

The pastor asked, "And just what does your mother say?"

The kid replied, "Thank God he's in bed."

When we pray, do we have our intentions in mind, or God's?!

When you pray and the Spirit prays on your behalf, it is not a replacement for obedience during tribulation; for faith in the midst of fear; for action when we are tempted to passivity; for trust, for obedience, for submission to God. Prayer is simply the thing that undergirds all of the above.

The best prayer you will ever pray, is the prayer of daily surrender to the Spirit of God who envelopes your every move with intercessory prayer so that you fulfill the will of God. In fact, the best prayer you will ever make is a prayer you do not know how to make, but the Spirit; the Helper makes for you with groanings too deep for words.

Conclusion

We come to the end of a study like this and we must marvel at the:

- goodness of God;
- the strength and persistence of God;
- the work of God on our behalf;

- the security of our salvation because of God;
- the promise of our inheritance because of God (!);
- the redemption which is yet to come because of what God has promised.

And in between here and there – between old earth and new earth; between flesh and immortal bodies – every day, day by day we surrender in advance to our Lord who has sent us a Helper for our journey.

One who will groan with us and for us as we move toward that eternal inheritance in glory.

One who will help us right now:

fight the good fight,

run the race,

bear the cross . . .

. . . 'till we reach that heavenly land where the groan of creation, the groan of the Christian, and the groan of the Holy Spirit cease, and our groaning is exchanged for eternal glory.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/25/2004 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ <http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/FORGIVES/11.6.2003>.

ⁱⁱ USA Today (Jan. 19, 2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, Romans (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 163.

^{iv} John MacArthur, Romans: Volume One (Moody Press, 1991), p. 467.

^v Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament (Baker, 1989), p. 181.

^{vi} MacArthur, p. 469.