



Too Weak to Pray?

Grace Reigns: God's Gospel for All Peoples Series #44

Romans 8:26-27

David Sunday

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Open your Bible to hear from God, as He speaks to us and we listen—that is worship. He is going to speak to us from the great Romans 8. We're going to read the passage from last week and then add the verses for this week. Let's worship the God Who speaks. Romans 8:18-27:

¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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.

Thanks be to God for His living, powerful Word to us. Let's pray.

O Father, Your Word is relevant. Your Word is life and light. Open our eyes, that we may behold the wonderful things that are here. We pray, as I preach and we listen, that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts will be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

My Weakness

I want to begin with a quiz this morning. As a good teacher would, I will remind you to please keep your answers to yourself and don't let anyone else see your paper. Just one question: "True or false? No Christian is greater than his or her prayer life." True, or false?

This is something I started believing a long time ago. It motivated me as a young believer. It made me get up early in the morning during high school to go to a meeting our church held on weekday mornings at 6:00 called "Morning Manna." Kate and I would go together, and then afterwards we'd go to Paielli's bakery and get a great chocolate donut with whipped cream in the middle.

That statement, "No Christian is greater than his prayer life," inspired me as I watched the example of my Nana Hazel, my grandmother, who really was a godly and prayerful woman. Sometimes I would attend prayer meetings with her at our church that would go into the wee hours of the morning, and we'd always end at The Spot Drive-In with a fancy hot fudge sundae. So I'm not sure what was really motivating me—the donuts, the sundae, or the prayer.

But I do know that from early on in my Christian life there was a desire to be a man of prayer, and that desire has continued. For years I thought, "If only we could mobilize the church to be stronger in prayer, then we would have the power we need to be the kind of vibrant witnesses in the world that Jesus calls us to be." I must confess that for years I felt a measure of dissatisfaction with the prayerfulness of the church—and with my own prayerlessness.

I find myself stirred by the larger context of that sentence. Listen to what Leonard Ravenhill, a British author and evangelist, wrote:

No man is greater than his prayer life. The pastor who is not praying is playing; the people who are not praying are straying. We have many organizers, but few agonizers; many players and payers, but few pray-ers; many singers, few clingers; lots of pastors, few wrestlers; many fears, few tears; much fashion, little passion; many interferers, few intercessors; many writers but few fighters. Failing here, we fail everywhere.

Mr. Ravenhill was a godly man, and I don't disagree with what he says here. I am sure, from all that I hear, that he really practiced what he preached.

But here's the problem. I'm 45 now, so conceivably at least at the half-way point in my pilgrimage. There's nothing that makes me feel my own weakness more than taking a long, hard look at my prayer life. When I read that statement, "Failing here we fail everywhere," I just feel

discouraged. It made me feel like a failure when I was a teenager; it makes me feel like a failure today.

I've been following Jesus for a long time, and I'm still asking Him, "Lord, teach me to pray," just like the disciples asked Him. It still is a desire of my heart. I still feel like I'm just a beginner when it comes to prayer. As I look around and listen to other believers, I think we generally feel this weakness in our prayer lives, don't we? I mean, if it's true that no Christian is greater than his or her prayer life, how many of us would say, "Well, then I'm a great Christian because of my prayers."

This is what I love about these precious verses in Romans 8:26-27. Paul is not aiming to make us feel like failures in our prayer lives here. He's not chiding us for the poverty of our prayers. Instead, he's assuming that none of us is very strong when it comes to prayer. Paul isn't even thinking of himself as a great prayer warrior here.

Instead, Paul is showing us in these precious verses: Christians, we are not alone in our prayer lives. We are not left to ourselves when we come to praying. With that encouragement, Paul is aiming to set us free to experience the wonderful privilege of which he speaks in verse 15, "*You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'*" Paul wants us to know we're children of a heavenly Father whose very hairs He numbers, whose every care and burden He bears, and that we are welcome at the throne of grace, receiving mercy and help in our time of need when we run to our Father.

But Paul isn't just saying to us in this passage, "Come to prayer," and he's not chiding us if we don't. He is telling us that God has ensured that as His children, our prayer lives will not fail. God is involved in this in such a way that we will be taught to pray and we will experience the grace of this privilege.

Let's look at what Paul teaches in verses 26 and 27, going phrase by phrase. Number one, "*The Spirit helps us in our weakness.*" We come here today with many and varied weaknesses. I don't know where your particular weakness is. You might be asking, "Well, where are we weak?" Ray Ortlund says the better question to ask is, "Where aren't we weak?"

Whether it's knowledge or faith, where we're weak in what we know and believe, or whether we're weak through bodily infirmities that weigh us down, or depression and anxiety that's nipping at our heels, or some passion we find difficult to control, or some temptation that is waging fierce war against us—we come here today with a whole variety of weaknesses. Some of us come feeling spiritually parched, isolated, lonely, defeated and weary.

I don't come to church today as someone who's strong. I come in weakness. Isn't that what we sing together?

I come broken to be mended
I come wounded to be healed
I come desperate to be rescued
I come empty to be filled
I come guilty to be pardoned
By the blood of Christ the Lamb
And I'm welcomed with open arms
Praise God, just as I am

("Just As I Am" by Travis Cottrell)

He welcomes me with all my weaknesses. But notice, Paul doesn't say "weaknesses" in verse 26, does he? He says, "*The Spirit helps us in our weakness.*" There's this pervasive weakness that is sort of like the foundation of everything we do. Our lives are permeated by weakness. That's what Paul is saying here.

I listened several times to a wonderful message by Dr. Richard Gaffin at Westminster Seminary's chapel. He drove the goodness of this text into my heart so out of the abundance of my heart today, Dr. Gaffin is going to be speaking to you. I want to thank him for his teaching.

One of the things he said is that we've got to grapple with this weakness that Paul is speaking of because it's a fundamental thing in our lives. It's a weakness, he said, of deep, primal, profound dimensions, and it affects all of us. Paul is not just talking about the variable weaknesses that differ from believer to believer, or about the weak and the strong as he does in Romans 14.

No, here he's talking about something that includes all of us without exception. There is a great weakness that permeates our lives. It's the weakness of living, as verse 18 says, in "*this present time*." It spans from the resurrection of Christ until His return in glory, when He will fully consummate our redemption, when we the children of God will be seen for what we really are. We will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of our Father, and we will be as holy as Jesus is holy and as beautiful as Jesus is beautiful.

But we're not there yet, Paul told us earlier in this chapter. We're waiting for the completion of our salvation. Our eyes have not yet seen, our ears have not yet heard, it has not yet entered into our hearts fully what God has prepared for those who love Him (1 Corinthians 2:9). But the Holy Spirit is telling us through this passage that the glory God has prepared for us

is so great it's going to make all the sufferings we're experiencing in this present time seem like nothing. They're going to pale in comparison to the glory we are going to experience. Amen.

But right now we're in this present age, an age characterized by suffering, stress and difficulty, by tribulation and persecution. We see words in this passage like "futility" (verse 20), "bondage to corruption" or "decay" (verse 21). We are inhibited from fully experiencing and enjoying the freedom of the glory of God's children (verse 21).

So what we're doing right now is we're groaning. We're groaning inwardly. It's not a groan of despair—it's a groan of hope. Because Paul says we have "*the firstfruits of the Spirit.*" We've tasted the beginning of the harvest, and we know there's greater fruit to come (verse 23). But it doesn't feel nice to groan, does it? It's painful.

Most of you women who have had children would caution me to be very careful here, to not even give a hint that I know what it's like to experience the pain you've gone through. So I won't. But I will tell you this. What believers are presently experiencing in this world is a weakness that is so pervasive there is a profound aching inside us, there are deep groans—painful groans—like Scotty Smith says, "Like the groans of a mother birthing a child in the middle of the wilderness without anesthetics." That's going to characterize our experience in this present age if we're waiting for this glory that's coming.

Along with that groaning there's this sense of, "Everything's broken. Nothing is working the way God designed it to work—including myself. I'm broken. I'm weak." This massive weakness permeates our lives and inhibits everything we try to do. It riddles our best efforts and limits our most holy endeavors—including our prayers. This weakness affects our prayer life, Paul tells us. And it always will in this present age.

Look at the second part of verse 26: "*For we do not know what to pray for as we ought.*" What's the first thing Paul thinks of when he mentions our pervasive weakness? He thinks of our praying. Where does Paul see the weakness of believers most vividly? It's in the area of our prayers. We do not know what to pray for as we ought.

You might think Paul is saying, "That's our experience some of the time. We'll grant that it's not always "Victory in Jesus" and "Now I am happy all the day" and "Every day with Jesus gets sweeter as the days go by." We get that. Sometimes we feel so tired, so perplexed, so overwhelmed with the sufferings of this present age that we don't know how to pray. We can't think clearly. We feel defeated. This is true experientially sometimes in the Christian life.

But notice, Paul doesn't seem to be talking about just sometimes here. Paul is making a pretty comprehensive statement: We do not know what to pray for as we ought. Not just

occasionally. Not just once in a blue moon. This is characteristic of all of us, Paul says, all of the time. There's a fundamental ignorance that we're bringing to our prayers. We don't know what to pray for.

How can Paul say that? Jesus taught us in Luke 11, "This, then, is how you should pray." And Paul himself in his letters gives instructions, in places like 1 Timothy 2 and Ephesians 6, on how we should pray. How can he say we do not know what to pray for as we ought? What does he mean here? Well, Paul is referring to the weakness of life in this present age and he's saying, "Every day, believers, we are confronted by infirmities and burdens that confuse us, perplex us, and leave us uncertain how we should pray."

For instance, when you have cancer—should you pray for healing, for deliverance, or for patient endurance? How should you pray? We don't know for sure. When you're being persecuted, should you pray, "Lord, enable me to stay here and to bear up under the persecution so Your Word can go forward," which Paul sometimes did in his missionary journeys? Or should we pray, "Lord, provide a way of escape so that I can go somewhere else and preach the Word in freedom," which Paul also did in his missionary journeys?

What about your marriage? When your marriage is mired in such a deep conflict that you become alienated from one another—and it's gone on year after year with no change, no relief—should you pray for patience? Should you pray for deliverance? You bow before the Lord and you cling to His promises, but you find yourself at a loss—what to say, what to ask for, what you ought to pray for. Sometimes the weakness just causes us to not know.

Don't misunderstand here. Paul is not saying God hasn't given us guidance in His Word on how to pray. And he's not denying the fact that God has made many great and precious promises to us and that He wants us to bring those promises before the Father in prayer. But Paul is acknowledging the reality that it's not going to be until our salvation is finally completed and we finally obtain the freedom and the glory of the children of God, that we will see how God has brought all those wonderful promises to fulfillment. We're waiting right now for something we can't see, Paul says in verses 24 and 25, and we're waiting patiently.

So right now, when we come to pray, we wrestle with this not knowing. I like how Dr. Gaffin puts it: "Left to ourselves in our praying, always—more or less—we are perplexed. We are uncertain, ambivalent. We lack concentration. We are plagued with doubts." Can there be any doubt that our poverty in prayer is a reality? Any doubt? Isn't it hard to concentrate in worship for an hour? Isn't it hard to concentrate in prayer? Isn't this something every believer knows

about—this inescapable, undeniable reality that there's a poverty to our prayer lives? We all feel it. I'll bet even Leonard Ravenhill felt it. It's in all of us.

So I could just say “amen” here, and we'd all be walking out of here thinking, “Oh, boy. What do I do with that reality? I might as well just quit praying.” And sometimes that happens, doesn't it? We get paralyzed in prayerlessness. We say, “Well, if no Christian is greater than his prayer life, I guess I'm just going to be a pretty mediocre Christian. I'm not going to get very far here.”

I know. There are times in my own journey when I grow tepid in my prayer life, and it gets pretty predictable and rote and shallow and inconsistent. There are times when I feel like I'm hitting a wall in my prayers. And even though I know prayer is something I should do to grow as a Christian, and even though I know it's a great privilege to come to the Father in prayer, at times I grow weary of this weakness and I cool off. And when that happens, it's because I'm forgetting what Paul says next. Look at the third phrase, the last part of verse 26: “*But...*” There's this weakness, there's this ignorance that pervades our prayer lives, “*But the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.*”

God's Solution

Now we're getting to a solution. Now we're hearing the remedy. We saw it at the beginning of verse 26: “*The Spirit helps us in our weakness...*” Just marvel at the simplicity of that statement. The Spirit knows you are weak. He knows that about you! He knows particularly that you have a hard time praying, that you feel defeated and discouraged about your prayer life. And He says, “I understand. I get it. That's what I'm here to do—to help you with this.”

It's the same word that was used for Moses in the Old Testament when Jethro, his father-in-law, said, “Moses, you've got way too many burdens to deal with here. You need to appoint some other men to help you judge the disputes amongst the people.” In Exodus 18:22, Jethro says, “*So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.*” That's what the Spirit comes to do. Not just for Moses, not just for King David. This is also the word that Martha used when she was complaining to Jesus about Mary. She's working away in the kitchen. “I need some help here. I need Mary to pitch in and to bear this burden with me. Tell her to help me,” Martha demanded of Jesus (Luke 10:38-42).

God's Word is telling us, “That's what the Holy Spirit is in your life to do. He is in your life to bear the burden with you, to make it easier.” So the Holy Spirit is saying to us, “Don't you

worry that your weakness is going to mess up God's purposes for you. Don't you be afraid about that. I'm here for this very reason. Will you receive My help? Will you let Me bear that burden with you? I see the anguish you're feeling about your children. I know what you're facing in your marriage. I know how afraid and perplexed you are right now about your wife's illness. I know how lonely you feel.

"I know how weighty that decision seems and how unsure you are about it. I know you're feeling like your ministry is not bearing any fruit. I understand how hostile the opposition is in this present age, as you try to live for Jesus. I see how mightily you are being tempted. And you know what you need to do? You need to pray right now—and I'm here to help you with that. I'm here to help you in your weakness."

How does the Holy Spirit give this help? At the end of verse 26, *"The Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."* This is where there are all kinds of interpretive ideas, so I'll just tip my hand here: I believe this is the Spirit Himself groaning for us, the Spirit Himself praying for us. I believe that from the context. We have creation groaning in verse 22, and then God's children groaning in verse 23. And then finally, underneath all the groaning of creation and within all the groaning of God's children, there is God's Spirit Himself groaning with a groaning too deep for words. The Spirit of God Almighty, Who gives us breath, Who created the universe, Who gives us life, is interceding for us with groanings too deep for words.

Now, forgive me if I can't explain that to you. That's beyond me. That's pretty deep. But it's there for our comfort. It's there to let us know we're not alone, but the Holy Spirit is eager to pray for you, dear child of God. He's not distant from you. He's not emotionally disengaged. He's not aloof. He's not annoyed by your need. He's not irritated by your weakness. He's closer to you than your own body and breath—and He knows what you need. He knows all about what you need.

Handley Moule, a last-1800s British theologian, tried to describe it. I don't think he actually defines it, but I think this is a helpful description. He said, "The Spirit moves in the tired soul and breathes Himself into its thought, and His mysterious groan of divine yearning mingles with our groan of burden." So is Paul saying to us that when we are groaning, the Spirit is groaning too? There's a symphony of groans and sighs going on here: creation, God's children, God's Spirit groaning. When we don't know what to pray for as we ought, and we are absolutely bewildered, the Spirit knows.

I think of it like this: Can you remember a time when you were a little kid and you were really sick? You were just lying there groaning, “Help. I can’t even think. I need help.” And your mother came to your bedside and knew what to do. She knew how to minister to your need. She was caring for you when you couldn’t care for yourself. I kind of get that idea when I read this passage.

That’s the ministry of the Spirit to us. And God wants us to be sure that the Spirit of God Who’s within us is interceding, praying for us. He will always pray for what we need, and every prayer of His will be answered, because “*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*” (8:27). Thank You, Lord!

Let’s just get that straight. Just think about verse 27 for a minute. Is Paul saying that the Spirit of God, Who is God, always prays according to the will of God? Yes, I think that’s what Paul is saying. And you might say, “Well, isn’t that obvious, that God prays according to the will of God? Could it be any other way?” And Paul says, “Yes, that may be obvious, but it’s vital for you to appreciate it because this is the solution to your problem.”

You are called to pray—right? Does every Christian believe, “I’m called to pray”? But you’re pretty weak at it, aren’t you? Wouldn’t every Christian say, “Yeah, that’s true”? You don’t pray as often as you should. You don’t know what to pray for as you ought. That’s a problem for you, right? That’s a difficulty for you, right? But it’s not a problem for the Holy Spirit. He’s always praying for you according to the will of God.

Do you see what God is doing here? Instead of heaping shame on us—“You’re never going to be greater than your prayer life” (at least that’s the way I hear it)—instead of making us feel bad for the poverty of our prayer lives, He’s loading encouragement on us by telling us of the power of the Spirit’s prayer life within our hearts. When I don’t know how to offer up my desires to God for things agreeable to His will—when I don’t know how to do that—when my praying is inadequate and incomplete and weak, the Spirit of God prays for me completely, perfectly, adequately and unceasingly according to the will of God.

Sometimes I’m so burdened all I literally can do is groan. Sometimes all we can say is, “Father—help me! Have mercy on me, for Jesus’ sake.” Have you ever experienced that? You want to pray, but all you can say is, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus”? It’s all you’ve got to give. Just a groan.

But when God searches our hearts He knows exactly what we need. When our Father searches our hearts, He doesn’t look down and say, “Oh, you ignorant, pathetic, weak children. You’re so full of mixed motives. When will you get your act together and offer up a decent prayer

for once?” Never! He Who searches hearts and minds looks into our hearts and finds the Holy Spirit there, praying according to His will—perfectly.

Have you ever tried to pray in public, and your prayers got so tangled up that you sat down and you thought, “Well, what was it that I just said? What did I just do?” He knows your heart. Have you ever worried, “What will happen if I have a stroke, or get dementia? I won’t know how to think straight. What if I forget everything I ever learned about the Bible or theology, and I’m just babbling incoherently?” He Who searches hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, and the Spirit always intercedes for the saints according to the will of God—even when you’re in a senior living facility and you can’t even utter a coherent word. Have you ever wondered, “What would happen if I got hit by a drunk driver and I was bleeding out in the car—what will I say? What if I can’t even think?” The Spirit will be interceding for you then, insuring that nothing will be able to separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord, and that everything in your life is going to work together for good, because you are a child of God. You’ve been *“called according to His purpose”* (8:28).

What a wonderful ministry of the Spirit! And it doesn’t stop there. We’re going to see in a couple weeks that just as the Spirit is interceding within us and with us, Christ Jesus—the One Who died and, more than that, Who was raised—is at the right hand of God and is interceding for us there (8:34). We’ve got a dual Advocate.

I’ve had a wonderful prayer partner for many years now. He tracks me down almost every week by text or phone and says, “We need to pray together.” And I’ve found great strength in that ministry. But we have two Prayer Partners Who never stop—the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and the Holy Son of God, our Savior, at the right hand of the Father. What a powerful team. So Dr. Gaffin puts it like this. “Our prayer lives are in very good hands.” That’s what God wants you to know.

So what do we do with this today?

Application

Number one, this should set us free to be ourselves in prayer. You don’t have anyone to impress. You can be more at home with God than with your closest friend on earth—or even with your spouse, who loves you intimately. You are more welcome in His presence to unburden your heart than you are with any friend on earth.

I think one of the reasons we believers pray so little is we feel so weak. We think our prayers are embarrassing, and we feel ashamed at how prayerless we’ve been. We listen to others

who sound so eloquent and free in their prayers, and we feel inferior. We think, "Because I can't pray like they pray, I'm never going to get any good at this."

But this passage tells us God knows. He knows your weakness. He knows it's going to be a struggle, and He says, "Come here. Come here." I love this statement by a man named Bradshaw:

A deeper hold on this truth would deliver many evangelicals from the grip of a secret legalistic bondage, according to which failure to pray brings ostracism or excommunication from the family of God, necessitating a kind of reconversion. But on the contrary, the New Testament stresses the care of the Spirit for the tired and struggling disciple.

Thank You, Lord. Here's the message of true freedom, that God the Spirit even upholds us in our fear, failure and faithlessness. Praise God! We can be ourselves in prayer.

Secondly, this should strengthen our security in Christ and deepen our sense of need for the gospel. What makes you acceptable before God? It's not your pious prayers. It's not how fervent you are. It's not how much you pray, how long you pray, how loud you pray. This is what makes you acceptable before God: His Son is at the right hand of the Father interceding for you. Jesus died for you, and He's praying for you right now. And His Holy Spirit is within you, praying with groanings too deep for words.

This is what makes us acceptable before God. Only people who believe this are acceptable before God. Did you know that no other religion teaches this? Every other religion says you've got to try really hard. You've got to do a lot of pious devotions to earn God's blessing, to earn God's favor. The Bible says, "You know what? I've seen your prayer life and you're pretty pathetic. You're pretty weak. Your prayer life is not very impressive—but that's okay, because I haven't left you alone. I've given you My Spirit, plus My Son is interceding for you."

So don't think, "I'm only as great as my prayer life." Don't think like that. That might be true, but it's not going to help you very much. Think like this: "Jesus has the greatest prayer life there is, and He's always praying for me. The Holy Spirit is always interceding for me. I can count on that."

Let that encourage you to pray. Pray with freedom. Pray with persistence. Pray through every obstacle. Pray when you feel you're too weak to pray. Pray when you don't know what to pray. Pray when you feel ashamed of how little you've prayed. Pray when you feel inadequate. Pray when your heart is cold. Don't wait for your heart to warm. Spurgeon says, "Pray it into

heat with the help of the Spirit.” Pray when all you can do is groan, because your groaning is not a sign that God is absent. It’s a sign that the Spirit is present in your life.

Thank God for that. Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, we come to You and confess our weakness. We feel our need. We live in an age of suffering. We bear burdens. We groan. We thank You that You’ve not left us alone. We pray, Lord, teach us to pray—but we thank You that even when we fall short, as we often and always do, You are praying for us through Your Spirit, through Your Son, our Savior, Who is at Your right hand. We thank You for the security this brings us and for the joy it gives to approach You in prayer.

Now, together, let’s join in a responsive prayer as the worship team leads us.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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