

Exegetical Brief: Romans 8:26,27

The Holy Spirit's Assistance and Intercession In Our Prayer Life

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Calling Paul's Epistle to the Romans "the cathedral of the Christian faith," nineteenth century Swiss scholar Frederick Godet compared it to the great masterpieces of medieval architecture: "We do not know which to admire the most, the majesty of the whole or the finish of the details" (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 1879). When a Christian comes to Romans 8 he or she enters the beautiful inner sanctuary of this impressive cathedral. Surrounding the pilgrim are stunning sculptures and frescoes that teach what it means to walk in the assurance of what Christ has done for us. Prominent in the display is God the Holy Spirit. The Greek word πνεῦμα occurs 21 times in Romans 8. It would appear that only two of these occurrences (v 15a, 16b) do not refer to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit's ministry within Christians and for Christians takes center stage in this most comforting chapter.

As we make our way around this inner sanctuary we come upon this incredible passage, one we pastors have used to preach, teach, and counsel many times:

26 Ὡσαύτως δὲ καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα συναντιλαμβάνεται τῇ ἀσθενείᾳ ἡμῶν· τὸ γὰρ τί προσευξώμεθα καθὼ δεῖ οὐκ οἶδαμεν, ἀλλὰ αὐτὸ τὸ πνεῦμα ὑπερεντυγχάνει στεναγμοῖς ἀλαλήτοις· 27 ὁ δὲ ἔραυνῶν τὰς καρδίας οἶδεν τί τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος, ὅτι κατὰ θεὸν ἐντυγχάνει ὑπὲρ ἁγίων.

In these verses Paul continues to catalog the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's life, more specifically, his or her prayer life. The apostle is inspired to write for our comfort and encouragement as we consider how we bring our petitions to the Father. The comfort and encouragement arise from the Spirit's activity in our prayer life. Paul describes that activity with the verbs συναντιλαμβάνεται and (ὑπερ) εντυγχάνει. While we certainly feel the comfort of these verses, and it is easy enough to understand the meaning of the verbs, it gets a little mysterious when we try to picture what we're told the Holy Spirit does in these verses. What does his assistance in our weakness look like? How exactly does *he* intercede for us Christians in connection with *our* prayers? Through a series of exegetical questions and notes on these two verses we hope to experience fully the comfort of this passage so as to help our flocks appreciate both "the majesty of the whole and the finish of the details."

What comparison is being introduced by Ὡσαύτως?

The function of this adverb is to mark a comparison and it is usually translated "in the same way; likewise; so also." Note that the καὶ serves in its adjunctive use ("also") to further the comparison. But what is being compared? Some commentators point to Paul's reference to hope and perseverance in the verse before. The thought of v 26 would then be "just as the Christian's hope helps him in times of suffering, *in the same way* the Holy Spirit helps too." While this understanding is possible, the placement of the subject and verb (τὸ πνεῦμα συναντιλαμβάνεται) directly after the adverb would seem to be telling us that what is being compared are activities of the Holy Spirit. Such an interpretation is in keeping with the general context of Romans 8 in which the Holy Spirit's work is very much in the forefront. Earlier in the chapter Paul had written of the Spirit's activity of mortification (v 13), attestation (v 16), and service as the firstfruit (v 23). With the Ὡσαύτως that begins v 26 Paul means to draw our attention to a similar working of the Holy Spirit, namely, his assistance and intercession in our prayer life.

What activity of the Holy Spirit is described by the verb συναντιλαμβάνεται?

The only other time this verb is used in the New Testament is in Luke 10:40 where Martha makes the request of Jesus to tell her sister Mary to "help" her. The use of the verb in the story of Mary and Martha is helpful for our understanding of what the Holy Spirit does according to Romans 8:26. Martha was not asking that Mary do all the work. She was asking that Mary "hold up her end" of the responsibility of hosting Jesus and the Twelve in their home. It is this idea of cooperative assistance that Robertson (573) emphasizes as he discusses the force of the prefixes συν- and ἀντι- in the verb: "The Holy Spirit lays hold of our weakness along with (συν-) us and carries his part of the burden facing us (ἀντι) as if two men were carrying a log, one on each end."

What is significant about the rare verb Paul chose for the Holy Spirit's assistance is how both the Christian's work and the Spirit's help are emphasized by the double prefix. On the one hand, the fact that we are weak does not give us Christians the excuse to stop praying. On the other hand, the fact that we are weak does not give us Christians the excuse to despair. With one word God encourages us to keep on praying and to keep on counting on the Spirit's help. There is both strong encouragement and sweet comfort for our prayer life in that one word.

What explanation is provided by the γάρ phrase in v 26?

Most γάρ's are explanatory and this appears to be the function of γάρ in Romans 8:26. That which comes right before the γάρ is "our weakness" (τῇ ἐσθeneίᾳ ἡμῶν). Thus the specific (article) weakness common to each one of us (singular "weakness" paired with plural "our") is explained by the γάρ phrase. As far as our prayer life is concerned, our weakness as sinful human beings is that we do not always know what to pray for as we ought. Every Christian has experienced this inability. "What is God's will for me in this particular situation? What would God have me pray for in these circumstances?" In fact, there are times when our minds are racing so fast as we pray that we find it difficult even to articulate our requests and needs. The indirect question (τί...) that follows Paul's γάρ certainly explains our weakness as we pray.

However, we do well to recognize that Paul's inspired explanation does not end with that indirect question. He continues with an activity of the Spirit that is the complete opposite (ἀλλὰ) of our inability: "the Spirit himself intercedes." Thus it is not entirely accurate to say that v 26b only explains our weakness. It would be more accurate to say that v 26b explains the *Holy Spirit's assistance in our weakness*. The Spirit's helping in our prayer life is explained by his interceding in our prayer life. When we keep this in mind it will help us understand better what Paul is describing in our next exegetical question...

What activity of the Holy Spirit is described by the verb (ὑπερ) ἐντυγχάνει?

Twice in these two verses the Spirit is said to "intercede" (ὑπερεντυγχάνει and ἐντυγχάνει). The verb has to do with advocacy—speaking up on someone's behalf. In the first instance Paul attaches an intensive prefix (ὑπερ-) that heightens the substitutionary idea. Kittel (*TDNT*, Vol. VIII, p 243) suggests "to intercede for as a representative." In the second instance Paul uses the more common ἐντυγχάνω but then tacks on the substitutionary idea with a prepositional phrase (ὑπερ ἀγίων). The emphasis, then, is on the Spirit's work as our advocate in a time of need. The particular need in this context is not knowing what to pray. This activity of the Holy Spirit fits in very nicely with what Jesus called the Holy Spirit four times the night before his death: the Paraclete (ὁ παράκλητος—John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). In Jesus' and Paul's day a paraclete served as an advocate in court, someone to speak up for or testify on behalf of the accused. When Christ referred to the Spirit as the disciples' Paraclete, however, he was not talking about the good legal advice they would get from him. "The Paraclete will *teach* you all things and will *remind* you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26). "The Paraclete will *testify* about me" (John 15:26). As he indwells the Christian, God the Holy Spirit teaches

and reminds and testifies about Christ, just as Paul had written earlier in Romans 8, "the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (v 16).

Only through Christ are we God's children. The Holy Spirit testifies to this truth as he places the gospel promises on our hearts. He is the Great Witness (cf. 1 John 5:6-8). One wonders if this is the way we normally think of the Holy Spirit's assistance and intercession in our prayer life. It does not seem that Paul's picture is one of *external* intercession, that is, the Holy Spirit reformatting our prayers between our hearts and God's ears, as it were. Rather the picture seems to be one of *internal* intercession, that is, the Holy Spirit speaking for us and to us within our hearts as he moves us to focus on the salvation assurances we have in Christ alone, the kind of assurances that fill Romans 8. With this ministry of the Holy Spirit taking place within Christians it is no wonder that Paul would later encourage the Ephesians: "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests" (6:18).

To what is Paul referring with the phrase στεναγμοῖς ἀλαλήτοις?

The dative following the verb provides the manner or means of the Holy Spirit's intercession: "with unspoken groans." Some commentators insist that these groans must be coming from the Christian who is praying rather than the Spirit who is interceding, presumably because groaning would be beneath the Third Person of the Trinity. Yet, there are a number of contextual points that argue against understanding the unspoken groans as coming from someone other than the Holy Spirit. First, the natural way to understand an adverbial dative expression is to attach it to the subject and verb that come right before it. Second, not all groaning is alike. Just because the creation's groaning (v 22) and the Christian's groaning (v 23) express a certain frustration doesn't mean the Spirit's groaning cannot be a perfect advocacy and assistance. Third, these two verses continually focus on the Spirit's activity, not the believer's (note there is no ἡμῶν connected with στεναγμοῖς ἀλαλήτοις). We may not be able to establish exactly what these groans of the Spirit are, but it would seem we can establish that they originate with the Holy Spirit; they are the manner/means by which he intercedes in our prayer life.

Paul says these groans are ἀλαλήτοι. While this adjective has been understood as referring to that which is "unspeakable" because it is divine, the word itself simply means "wordless" or "unspoken." Paul had earlier written of inexpressible, divine language with the phrase ἄρρητα ῥήματα at 2 Corinthians 12:4. In Romans 8:26 he writes of divine language that the Holy Spirit simply chooses not to put into words, unlike his verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, for instance. Beyond that we cannot say much more about the Spirit's language of prayer. It happens with unspoken words, not perceptible utterances. It happens in the heart of the Christian (cf. τὰς καρδίας, v 27), not at the side of God's throne in heaven. Could Paul be talking about the way God the Holy Spirit turns our hearts to focus and trust God's gospel promises even more in times of hardship and confusion, and that in this way the Spirit intercedes in our prayer life as a Paraclete without actually "praying" to God for us? This is the way your exegete has been led to understand Paul's words, but he freely admits that we have no clear biblical parallel to compare to this passage.

How does the ὅτι clause of v 27 function?

Passages like Matthew 6:4 and Acts 1:24 help us understand the ὁ ἐραυνῶν τὰς καρδίας of v 27 as Paul's reference to God the Father. The Father's part in our prayer life, as far as this one verse is concerned, is that he "knows what the mindset of the Spirit is." What comfort for us who pray! The Father perfectly understands the unspoken groans of the Holy Spirit. The ὅτι clause that concludes these two verses gives us the reason why that is the case (ὅτι causal). The Father understands because the Spirit intercedes in a way that is completely in accord with the Father's will. In v 26 our inability to know what to pray for is communicated with a κατά (καθὸ δεῖ οὐκ οἶδαμεν). In v 27 the Spirit's intercession on behalf of the saints is communicated with a κατά (κατὰ θεὸν). These parallel expressions should not be lost on us. Our weakness in prayer is overcome by the Spirit's

intercession being in full agreement with God's will. His work as Teacher and Paraclete within our hearts never veers off the perfect path God has established in his Word.

Who can fully comprehend the grace of God? Yet, every Christian thrills to hear of the χάρις θεοῦ. In the same way, who can fully comprehend the Holy Spirit's assistance and intercession in our prayer life? Yet, pastor and parishioner alike bask in the comfort and encouragement of Romans 8:26,27. With a heart laden with sorrow and a head swirling in confusion, still the Christian prays with confidence. We have God's promise: The Spirit intercedes when we do not know what to pray for. The Father understands when we do not know what to pray for. Pray, Christian, pray!