

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2026

**Sermon Title:** The Spirit Intercedes

**Sermon Text:** Romans 8:26-27

**Rom. 8:24** For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?

**Rom. 8:25** But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

**Rom. 8:26** ¶ 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.

**Rom. 8:27** 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.

**Main Point:** Though our specific requests are often flawed by ignorance, we can pray with confidence because the Spirit perfects our prayers to align with God's will.

## **Outline:**

1. Our Weakness Before the Father
  - a. We are bad judges of what would help us
  - b. We know the general, but not the particulars
2. His Spirit's Intercession
  - a. He Initiates
  - b. He instructs
3. The Perfect Answer According to God's Will
  - a. We pray for harmful things (God gives us better)

b. We pray for untimely things (God's timing is perfect)

## Introduction

I became a Christian in 1997. And by my math, that means I've been following Jesus for 29 years. And I can tell you, one thing that feels like it's never changed in the almost 3 decades that I've walked with Jesus is, I've always felt like my life of prayer was the weakest aspect of my whole walk with Christ. I don't pray enough, I don't pray well. My prayers are often selfish. When I do pray, it's often perfunctory or repetitive. I have the same sorts of themes I tend to roll over and over again. They aren't as Scripturally rich as they could be. They're often lazy and thoughtless. Sometimes they're short. They feel like they're too to the point.

Now, I do believe my prayer life has grown and changed in these 30 years. But I also have to confess that my *feelings* about my prayer life have not changed much.

And I wonder if you relate to this. I think so many believers would say, "Yes, my prayer life is the part of my walk with God that feels the most anemic."

But here's the thing: Something here doesn't seem to square. I have been a Christian for three decades. How did I survive all this time with such a weak and pathetic prayer life??? (Well for starters, we might be critical of our prayer lives, but there is also a difference between a weak prayer life and a non-existent prayer life, but I'm sure that's a different sermon.)

If you've been a Christian for long maybe this thought has crossed your mind, too. When my prayers are so weak, why is *he* still faithful? Now, the truly right—and most fundamental—answer is: the grace of God. But in the case of today's passage I think Paul is showing us *how* God shows grace to us specifically with reference to our weak prayer lives.

Paul's theme here in Romans 8 has been one of hope: one of seeing the bright future that God is at work building in us through Christ by the Spirit.

And here he is talking about what he showed us in Romans over the past few weeks... connecting the hope he previously spoke of... connecting the suffering he

previously spoke of...and bringing it together with our direct experience of these things.

And prayer is where these things we know actually are experienced firsthand. It's where what we believe intersects with our experience and our faith. Prayer is where our faith gains a voice for itself, in a sense. Where we give voice to our sanctified heart's desire, however imperfectly, and where God meets us and answers us.

So, here is the question again: how did I survive 30 years with such a "weak" prayer life? The answer we find in Romans 8 is both humbling and liberating: because it turns out, I didn't survive because I was good at praying; I survived because the *Spirit* is.

If there is one thing that you go home with today, I hope it's this: True prayer isn't ultimately about our eloquence or our discipline—it's about God's faithfulness to hear the needs of our hearts more than our actual words.

You and I have made it this far in the Christian life, not because we always knew the right words, but because the Spirit has been the one initiating the conversation all along. He has been the fire kindling our cold hearts and He's been the voice perfecting our clumsy requests. We are going to see today that while we provide the weakness and the confusion, the Spirit provides the power and the direction. And that means even our weakest prayers are stronger than we think, because they are strengthened by God Himself.

Let's look at three ways the Spirit helps us in our weakness. Our first point is, Our Weakness Before the Father. Our second point is His Spirit's Intercession. And our third point is the Perfect Answer According to God's Will.

Here is my hope for today: that God would use his word to build confidence in prayer in spite of our human frailty. Healthy prayer is not about the eloquence of the one praying; Paul is telling us that it's about the strength of the one who intercedes for us.

## **1. Our Weakness Before the Father (Present the Problem)**

Our first point today is “Our Weakness before the Father.” Verse 26 begins with the Spirit’s helping us, which we’ll get to. But Paul tells us why we need the Spirit’s help in our prayers, and this is where we need to begin. Paul says the reason is because “we do not know what to pray for as we ought.”

Okay, so wait: we might not be *happy* with our prayers, but most people I know are concerned with the *quantity* of our prayers. We instinctively and rightly know that we don’t talk to God as often as we should, we rely on ourselves far too much... but Paul doesn’t necessarily point here to a “quantity” problem. He’s pointing to a “*substance*” problem. We don’t even know *what* we should pray for.

Why is this? I want to mention three reasons that we don’t know how to pray:

First, *we don’t know how we should pray because we’re bad judges of what will really help us.* That’s one reason we don’t know how to pray.

When Peter Martyr talked about this passage he said, we are bad judges of our own advantage. We don’t really know what is good for ourselves, and we often don’t know what will bring glory to God, and so there’s a sense in which we’re praying in the dark. For example, we might pray for wealth or success in something we’re doing. But there are dangers there: wealth, health, and peace bring their own dangers. We might become proud or love the things of the world and fall away from God. Sometimes when God doesn’t give what we ask, he is sparing us something far worse than suffering or poverty. And also, when we pray for God to remove our suffering, we don’t realize we’re praying for God to remove the very thing that he will use to humble or save us. We are bad judges of our own advantage.

Second, *we don’t know how to pray because we usually as believers know in general what we should pray for.*

We should pray for forgiveness, for the glory of God, and for eternal life. But where it can fall apart is in the particulars. We don’t know if we should take this specific job, if this sickness should be healed right now, or whether we should escape specific troubles. We end up guessing. We can’t tell how this specific thing will align with God’s goal of our salvation. And so we don’t know how to pray.

Third, we aren't the first people in the history of God's redemption who didn't know how to pray.

For example, the Apostle Paul prayed three times for the thorn in his flesh to be removed. He thought he was praying for spiritual freedom, but really he was praying for God to take away something that was meant to humble him and increase his love for Christ.

Moses prayed to enter the promised land. He thought it would be a good thing and a blessing, but God knew it was better for him to die before entering the promised land.

James and John (the sons of Zebedee) asked to sit at Jesus' right and left hands. They asked God for glory, but didn't realize they were also asking for a cup of suffering that they didn't yet understand.

All three of these examples show us that we don't really know what is best for ourselves. And this is part of what makes our prayers weak. We're all in the position of Paul and Moses and James and John and every other person in Scripture who prayed and didn't realize what they were *really* praying for. Because of this, we don't know how to pray, and so we pray in darkness, weakness and ignorance. But still we pray.

And because of our weakness, we need what is coming in the next point.

## **2. His Spirit's Intercession (Give the Solution)**

Because second today, we see His Spirit's Intercession. Think of interceding like stepping in on behalf of someone else. Your child is sick, so you pray on his behalf. You want the gospel to reach foreign nations, so you pray on these peoples' behalf that the gospel would reach them. That's intercession.

Look at how Paul talks about this happening in verse 26 and 27:

"The Spirit helps us in our weakness...the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. 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."

Paul says that “he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit.” Why does Paul say that? The first reason is, Paul when he says this is locating our prayer. The Spirit is “in here,” not “out there.” If God were only hearing our external words, he might hear our complaints, our confusion, and our theological errors and mistakes. But Peter Martyr points out that God looks past the “flesh” (which might be screaming for comfort) and instead God finds “the mind of the Spirit” (which is groaning for holiness).

And I’d like to mention a second reason why it is precious that this Spirit searches hearts, and as we think about his interceding for us in our prayers: the fact that He searches hearts validates silent suffering. Suffering often can paralyze us or leave us mute. We’re so crushed by circumstances that we can barely even speak or articulate what we are experiencing. And this is what is so comforting: the Spirit searches hearts. And because God is a heart-searcher, he understands the “language of sighs” without even a single syllable being spoken.

So why does Paul tell us God searches the heart? Because if God only listened to your words, He would hear your confusion. But because He searches your heart, He hears the Spirit. He doesn't listen to the noise of your panic; He listens to the silence of the Spirit's intercession within you... Thank God.

But he does more than search and know our hearts. Paul says that he intercedes on our behalf. How does he do that? I want to mention two ways that he intercedes on our behalf. This is nothing comprehensive, necessarily, but it gives us a sense of how Paul is helping us as sufferers.

*First, The Spirit intercedes by initiating prayer, stirring us up, by kindling us, and making us to pray. Think of Galatians 4:6, where Paul says this: “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”* Notice this: in Romans 8, *we* cry out. In Galatians 4, the *Spirit* cries out. So maybe this is helpful to think this way: The voice in prayer is human, but the impulse is divine. Think of our heart in the midst of suffering as a pile of wet wood that won’t light, no matter how hard we try. The Spirit is the spark to dry the wood and light the flames. In ourselves, we’ve got nothing and there would be no prayer at all,

but with the Spirit's help, we can cry out. The Spirit helps by initiating prayer when we feel too weak.

Second, The Spirit intercedes by instructing, instilling in us what we ought to ask for, directing us in our sighs, and by prompting us in our desires so that we long for good things that we wouldn't ask for otherwise. We suffer from what Peter Martyr called "learned ignorance." We know we need help, but we don't know the vocabulary of God's will for our situation, and so the Spirit helps us to develop right desires in the midst of our confusion. Think of 1 Corinthians 2:11, where Paul writes,

"For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God."

Only the Spirit knows the Father's mind. And so only the Spirit can teach us what to ask for in keeping with the Father's will. Those moments in prayer where your desires might shift – where you pray for one thing, and then stop and say, "But Lord, you may be doing something else here. And that's what I want." That might be an example of what this looks like. That is the Spirit instructing and instilling better prayer in you. And I will say, sometimes I have had that happen by hearing other people pray, too. God showed me that my own prayers were selfish or weren't being made from love because I heard someone else pray in a more powerful way. God instructs us in many different ways.

### **3. The Perfect Answer According to God's Will (The Assurance)**

Now, there is a third way that the Spirit intercedes, and that is by supplying the perfect answer according to God's will.

*The spirit intercedes by helping us to carry our burdens*, by covering our ignorance and the things we don't understand, and by correcting us. He applies a correction to our prayers when we ask for harmful things, or when we ask for them at the wrong time.

Ambrosiaster was an early church writer, and he gives this really helpful insight. He says that the Spirit applies a “double correction” to our prayers. Here is what Ambrosiaster says:

“The Holy Spirit helps because he does not allow anything we ask for before the proper time or against God’s wishes to happen.”

So he says, sometimes we pray rightly, but at the wrong time. And sometimes we directly ask for things that God has not decreed.

“Paul says that the Spirit intercedes for us not with human words but according to his own nature. For when what comes from God speaks with God, it is obvious that he will speak in the same way as the one from whom he comes speaks. For the Spirit given to us overflows with our prayers in order to make up for our inadequacy and lack of foresight by his actions and to ask God for the things which will be of benefit to us.”<sup>1</sup>

So think of what Ambrosiaster is saying. *First, he’s saying that we pray for harmful things*. We mentioned this earlier, but sometimes we ask for things that would actually be very destructive to our faith. God is so faithful that he hears what we really want (holiness) without granting this thing we asked for that would actually hurt us.

*But second, he says, we ask for something in a way that’s “untimely.”* Generally, we want the result of redemption.

We want peace, health, and relief, but without the process that God has ordained to get us there. We want to skip the line.

We want God to make us patient people, but we want that patience *now*. We don’t want to be shaped to be more patient, we don’t want the experience that *forms* a patient person, we just want to *be* more patient. Immediately. In the easiest way possible.

[example] Peter Martyr likens this to a doctor who is giving us medicine to counteract a poison. Perhaps for us today the illustration of the IV would be helpful. Imagine that the doctor administers medicine to you through the IV. It’s

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<sup>1</sup> <https://catenabile.com/rom/8/26>

antivenom for a snake bite. It takes time to drip down into the IV bag and enter our system. Well imagine how impatient we are, and we just want to rip out the IV and be done before it's finished. If we pray for the medicine to stop before the disease is cured, we are asking for a good thing (right? We're asking for relief), but at the wrong time. So the Spirit corrects this prayer by helping us endure the treatment until the cure is complete.

And on this subject of timing, remember even just a few weeks ago, how we explored this idea of hope. Hope is faith stretched out over time. Hope is a certain expectation of something good that's coming that we don't currently have. And so the Spirit works hope in us to shift in our prayers. Instead of praying, "Give this to me now," God changes our heart so that now we pray, "Help me wait for it with patience."

## **Conclusion**

Prayer is difficult. We struggle to see things from God's perspective because we are not God. We often think we know what we need, but deep down, our instinctive prayer is usually: "God, make me happy, but please, make it painless."

But friends, we don't know what we need. We can't see the future, and we often ask for things that would actually harm our souls. This is why we need the Spirit. The Spirit doesn't just take our orders; He transforms our desires.

So, as we close, I really hope this will encourage you: You don't have to know the perfect words. You don't have to fear that you are praying "wrong." You can bring your confusion, your pain, and your 'wrong' prayers to God. Trust that the Spirit is perfecting them—sanctifying our requests for immediate comfort and replacing it with a request for eternal glory. He is turning your prayer for a pain-free life into a prayer for a Christ-like life. And that is a prayer the Father always answers.

This is what gives us our security. This work of the Spirit makes us "unconquerable against all adverse circumstances" (Vermigli). Because the Spirit is sanctifying our prayers so that they align with God's will, even the things that seem to be destroying us are actually being overruled to work for our good. So believer: you don't need to panic when your prayers feel weak or your situation feels hopeless.

You are being prayed for by God the Spirit to God the Father. That means your final victory is not just *possible*; it is *inevitable*.

*Let's pray.*