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The Spirit's Groaning

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The Spirit's Groaning

Abstract

"We may not always pray in accordance with the will of God, but the Spirit does. And God answers."

Posting about the the Holy Spirit's intercession for us from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/the-spirits-groaning/>

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 [inallthings.org/the-spirits-groaning/](http://allthings.org/the-spirits-groaning/)

June 6,
2017

Robert Lancaster

Daily Scripture Texts

[Psalm 104:24-34, 35b](#)

[Ezekiel 39:7-8, 21-29](#)

[Romans 8:26-27](#)

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. 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.

-Romans 8:26-27

The eighth chapter of Paul's Epistle to the church at Rome begins with a wonderful statement: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." The rest of the chapter contains many other verses that those of us who were raised in the church likely have memorized, including the two verses provided for us by today's lectionary.

A couple of days ago, the church celebrated Pentecost. After Christ's ascent into heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit just as He had promised. And, in Romans 8, Paul lays out some of the benefits the Holy Spirit offers to those who are in Christ — to those people to whom the work of Christ has been applied. One of these benefits is the intercession of the Holy Spirit on our behalf.

That brings us to Romans 8:26-27. If we're honest, there have been times in all our lives when prayer has been difficult; and likely there have been seasons when prayer has been almost impossible. Can you think of a time in your life as a follower of Jesus when prayer has felt futile, yet you kept trying to pray? Or maybe a time when you wanted to pray, but circumstances in your life left you wordless? I imagine there are some of you who, at times, simply gave up and stopped trying to pray (at least for a season). Regardless of which camp you have found (or now find) yourself in, the promise in these two verses should bring great comfort. The Holy Spirit intercedes for you at times like these.

But, Paul is saying much more than that. This is not simply a passage to turn to when we feel like our prayer life is not quite what we would like it to be. Instead, Paul is pointing to a universal condition among Christians: "we do not know what to pray for as we ought." It's not just that the Spirit intercedes for us when we are unsure how (or what) to pray. Even when we feel like our prayer life is going along pretty good, we still need the Spirit to intercede for us. But, this is not cause for despair.

So, what is Paul actually saying here? Is he saying that the Spirit prays some sort of inexpressible language to the Father that we, as mere humans, are not able to pray or understand? I would oppose such a reading, for that is not what I believe Paul is saying. Rather, the groans are simply "too deep for words." This makes sense even apart from the context of prayer. Surely, there are times in your life when, even though there were words to express your emotions, those words were not sufficient, so you simply groaned rather than voice words that could not satisfy. Because even a groan has meaning. Even though the groans of the Spirit in prayer on our behalf are wordless, they are not meaningless¹

There are other times in the Bible where groaning is mentioned. Throughout the Old Testament, God hears the groaning of his people Israel. The Psalmist groans and the LORD hears him and responds. In Romans 8:22, the whole of creation groans, and in the next verse (v. 23), we ourselves "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption

as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Stott draws a parallel between the groaning of creation, our groaning, and the groaning of the Spirit. “The Holy Spirit identifies with our groans, with the pain of the world and the church, and shares in the longing for the final freedom of both. We and he groan together.”²

What should bring us even more comfort is that, as the Spirit groans with us and for us, he groans in accordance with the will of God. Romans 8:27 tells us that the Spirit intercedes for us in accordance with the will of God. We may not always pray in accordance with the will of God, but the Spirit does. And God answers.

Footnotes

1. John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 245. ↩
2. Stott, 245. ↩