

Sighs Too Deep for Words

John 16:12-15; Romans 8:26-27

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Introduction: Chapter 8 in Romans is one of the few places in the Bible where we get a fuller picture of the Holy Spirit. We're going to focus on verses 26-27, but let me summarize what is said earlier in the chapter:

- According to verse 2 the law of the Spirit in Christ Jesus sets us free from the law of sin and death.
- According to verse 4 the Spirit helps us fulfill the just requirements of the law.
- According to verse 6 the Spirit gives life and peace.
- According to verse 11 God will raise us from the dead by the Spirit who dwells in us.
- According to verse 13 the Spirit helps us put to death the deeds of the body.
- According to verse 14 the sons and daughters of God are led by the Spirit.
- According to verses 15-16 the Spirit bears witness in us that we are the children of God and so gives us assurance of our salvation.
- According to verse 23 the Holy Spirit is the foretaste and guarantee of our final redemption.

And now in verses 26-27 the Spirit helps us when we don't know how to pray. Perhaps the place where we need the most help is prayer.

Romans 8:26-27

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Prayer: Lord God, Here among our friends in Christ it is safe to reveal our struggles with prayer. As we explore this short passage, open our very souls to the Spirit that we might be in Your presence and experience Your loving guidance in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

I must admit that very often in my life I have relied on this promise, the promise that the Spirit helps us when we don't know how to pray. More often than not, we don't know what to pray for. When a loved one is suffering, we don't know whether we should pray for healing or release from pain to our Heavenly Father. We don't know how to pray about a new job or a child's athletic hopes. We don't know what to pray for as a country. So much of the time, we just don't know how to pray.

Paul, himself, struggled with the same questions. At one point, he was seeking to know where he should go next. He thought the next place would be Asia, but the Spirit said no. Then he tried to go to Asia Minor, but he was stopped. In the end the Spirit sent him to Macedonia.

In Philippians 1:22-24 Paul couldn't decide whether to pray that the Lord would take him home, which Paul wanted, or preserve his life for more ministry.

Even Jesus prayed that if possible the Father might allow Him to escape from the cross, if it would be God's will.

We all struggle in prayer, but Paul reminds us that the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We don't like to label ourselves as weak, but in prayer, it's not so hard to admit we are weak. The complication is that we usually know what we think we want. We come to God with our list. We come to talk with God, but for the most part we do all the talking, but true prayer means communing with God, sitting in the presence of God, opening our hearts to God's will.

You have probably seen those commercials for Capital One where Samuel Jackson asks, "What's in your wallet?" A more important question is, "What's in your heart?" As long as we hold ourselves at the center of our hearts, our prayers will be weak.

Have you ever seen a riptide? It's a terrible to look out and see your loved ones suddenly getting smaller and smaller as a riptide carries them away. I've only seen this once when I was an exchange student in Australia. We looked out and about 6 people including my host brother were suddenly way out. In Australia they are prepared for riptides because it happens so much on the "Gold Coast" in northeastern Queensland. The thing is that one instinctively tries to fight the riptide swimming hard against it because that appears to be the best way to go. However, in Australia they have teams of lifeguards pulling heavy ropes going not directly out, but coming along almost sideways to the current. If you try to go the way your gut tells you to go – the shortest distance into the shore – you will die. The message from God is the same: "If you come to Me, you will live."

In our weakness, God's strength is perfected. God comes right along side us and prays.

Second, when the Spirit intercedes for us, we gain hope! We are no longer alone in our prayers. I'm sure each of us have had that unsettling feeling that we're talking to ourselves, not God. We try to face things alone. When we allow the Spirit to intercede – to pray with us – we experience a whole new way of being with God.

In 2005 the movie "Ray" about Ray Charles recounted the trials, challenges, successes, and addictions of the late pianist, singer, and composer. The film shows how Ray compensated for his blindness by learning to hear what others couldn't.

As a blind 10-year-old boy, Ray entered his home and accidentally trips on the side of a rocking chair. He falls, yells out in pain, and calls out to his mother for help. His mother steps forward, stops, hesitates, and takes a step back. Ray, lying on a rug on the floor, continues to cry for his mother's help.

His mother silently goes back to her work. Ray hears men chatting and a hen clucking. He stops crying, looks around him, and slowly gets up. He hears more people talking and a metal cowbell clanking. He looks in the direction of a kettle of boiling water. Stretching out his arms, he walks toward a crackling fireplace and feels its heat, pulling back a hand because it is too close. His mother continues to look on, concerned with his every move. Ray listens intently as a horse and carriage go by.

Then he hears a chirping grasshopper close by and walks toward it. He bends down and fumbling a bit, encloses his hand on the grasshopper. Smiling, he picks it up and puts it to his ear. His mother is taken aback and gives a low gasp.

Ray says, "I hear you, Mama. You're right there."

His mother now has tears streaming down her face. She tells him, "yes, yes, I am." She kneels in front of him and gives him a hug.

In the same way, we need to learn to "see" the presence of the Spirit, right beside us. There is hope. We are not alone.

Finally, what are the results of the Spirit speaking with sighs too deep for words? In those sighs we are reconciled with God. As we pray God is looking into our hearts. He is searching our hearts. He sees beyond the sin and imperfections of our yearning and seeking. He sees to the core of our hearts to dig out the true yearning from our new self.

The Spirit does some reforming and cleaning up of our praying. The Spirit does some correcting and re-writing. The Spirit knows the mind and will of God. The Spirit is one with Father and Son in the eternal plan of salvation that is in the mind and heart of God. So as the Spirit takes our prayers, he interprets them so that they conform to the will of God. The Spirit revises our prayers so that they conform to the will of God.

In reconciling our prayers, the Spirit takes all that is wrong with us and reforms it so that we are pleasing to God.

I've been going through my papers at the office. I've thrown away lots of old notes and articles – creating lots of shredded paper – but occasionally, I find a poem or story that I treasure. I found such poem several weeks ago and set it aside on my desk. As I was struggling to find a way to explain how the Spirit transforms our prayers and us, I remembered that poem. Here it is:

"God uses broken things.
Broken soil to produce a crop,
Broken clouds to give rain,
Broken grain to give bread,
Broken bread to give strength.
It is the broken alabaster box
That gives forth perfume. It is Peter,
Weeping bitterly, who returns to
Greater power than ever."
[Vance Havner, Leadership, Winter 1983, 94]

In our brokenness, our weakness, God's power is perfected. Amen.