

Weakness & Help

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[0 : 00] I would like us to turn together to Romans 8 and we can read again verses 26 and 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.

Now as we've said several times, Romans 8 is an absolutely amazing chapter. It's one of those chapters of the Bible that in many ways you always want to have in your back pocket, because if you are struggling in your faith or if you meet somebody who has doubts or fears or questions, then Romans 8 is a wonderful place to go, because it's very, very likely that you will find help and encouragement in this great chapter.

And the great theme running across this chapter is that it gives us a summary of the astounding blessings and privileges that are ours through union with Christ. If you put your trust in Jesus, then you are united to Him and with that union comes many, many blessings.

And at the heart of these blessings is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. And that's one of the great themes of Romans 8. If you go through the chapter and count how many times you see the Holy Spirit mentioned, it's quite astonishing. Again and again and again the Holy Spirit is mentioned. In the version that we use to ESV in one chapter, 20 times the Holy Spirit is mentioned. And that means that this chapter is giving us a great insight into the work that the Holy Spirit does. At the heart of that is the fact that when we are united to Jesus by faith, God the Holy Spirit Himself comes and dwells within us.

[2 : 17] That's a key and foundational part of New Testament teaching. Whenever anybody comes to faith, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within them. That's why the people of God are described as the temple of God. They are the place where God Himself dwells. So back in the Old Testament, God's dwelling place was a temple in the middle of a city called Jerusalem at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. That's where God was. Now God dwells within His people so that wherever God's people meet, wherever God's people are, God Himself is there through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And Romans 8 tells us that that indwelling Spirit does several wonderful things. The Holy Spirit leads us as verse 14 tells us. That means that we are able to live in a new way. We have freedom to obey God's law and follow

Him. And at the very same time, the Holy Spirit is enabling us to turn away from sin and from all that's wrong, from all that, that, that all the habits and ways of our old sinful nature. God the Holy Spirit is leading us in a new and better direction. The Holy Spirit also assures us of our status as God's adopted children. That's one of the great themes we find in the middle of the chapter. So through the Holy Spirit working in us, we are able to recognize God as our Father and we can cry out to Him. That's one of the great roles of the Holy Spirit to point us towards God the Father. And the Holy Spirit also gives us a foretaste and a guarantee of the wonderful future that we have. So you see the Holy Spirit helps us to turn away from our past, helps us to recognize God as our Father in terms of our status now as God's children. And it also, He also points us towards the future. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a first fruits as Paul describes it. It's a glimpse of what lies ahead and it's a confirmation that all the promised blessings of our future glory are guaranteed to us. So the Holy Spirit is doing a wonderful work in the hearts and lives of all who trust in Jesus. In so many ways, we are being transformed by Him. God the Holy Spirit is making us into the people that God wants us to be. So instead of following an old sinful path, we seek to obey God. Instead of thinking of God as a harsh taskmaster, we recognize Him as our Father. And instead of despairing as we face the struggles of this life, we can look with confidence to the future. Through the indwelling of the Holy

Spirit, we are enabled to be stronger. We are being brought into a far healthier and better condition. So it's amazing what the Holy Spirit is doing. But in recognizing all of these truths, it's easy to make a mistake. And it's easy to think that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is only concerned with what we could call the good aspects of the Christian life.

In other words, we can easily think that the Holy Spirit is only really interested in us when things are going well. And that's a very easy trap to fall into because that's how people tend to treat us. When things are going well in life, we find people tend to rally round us. So for example, in school, the children who are achieving really well, whether it's in work or in football or in music or whatever, very often they're the ones who get the most attention and encouragement. At work, the person who is climbing the ladder the fastest and achieving the most, they're the ones who tend to get the glory. And even in church, it's the places where there is the fastest growth, where new people are coming, where their buildings are getting bigger and better, and where there seem to be great things happening.

They're the places that we hear about the most. And of course, at one level, that's all very good because we want to rejoice in achievement and encouragement and success. But the danger is that we can think if things aren't going well and if we're not successful, then people don't want to know us. And that is very often what happens. When things are going wrong, you don't tend to get the same attention. There doesn't seem to be the same sense of enthusiasm. And very quickly, we can be isolated. And that can slip into our spiritual lives as well. Or we can think that that slips into our spiritual lives because we can easily feel that if we are struggling, that in exactly the same way as people don't tend to want to know us, we can easily think that the Holy Spirit would also want to keep us at arm's length. It's very easy to think like that. Very easy to think that if you are mucking up, God will want to take a step back. But one of the wonderful things that Romans 8 tells us is that, yes, the Holy Spirit brings many positive things and many wonderful changes into our lives, but at the very same time, the Holy Spirit is involved in something else.

[8 : 24] He helps us when we are weak. And that is a glorious truth. And that's what I want us to think about today. And as we think about it, we're going to just have two very simple headings. Number one, Christians are weak. And number two, the Holy Spirit helps us.

So first of all, Christians are weak. That probably seems like one of the most simple and obvious points that we could ever say, but it's incredibly important to highlight because it's incredibly easy to forget. And there's two common misunderstandings in this area. The first is that people can often think that in order to be a Christian, you have to be strong. So we think that Christianity is for the people who have got their lives sorted, for the people who know a certain amount, who have reached that standard, who have that firm faith. And so we think that if we want to be a Christian, we have to reach that standard as well. And we can easily fall into that trap of thinking that to be a Christian, you need to be strong. But the second misunderstanding is perhaps a bit more subtle and a bit more specific. It's not thinking that you need to be strong in order to be a Christian, but it's thinking that the best Christians are strong. And that's probably the easy of the two misunderstandings to slip into. We think that the Christians who are really serving God, the Christians who are really being used by him, they are strong and they don't have the weaknesses that we have. And so we look at people who are famous from the history of the Christian church. We think of people like John Calvin or John Wesley or Martin Lloyd-Jones, even people who are prominent today like John Piper or Tim Keller, well known Christians. Do you think that these people have weaknesses? Do they have doubts?

Do they have insecurities? It's very, very easy to think that they don't. You think these people, they're the best Christians, they are strong. But the clear message of the New Testament is any thoughts like that are a load of rubbish. The New Testament makes it abundantly clear. All Christians are weak. And the New Testament highlights that with great clarity. Think of the big names in the New Testament. If you think of Paul, Peter, Timothy, these men achieved astonishing things for the Gospel and yet at the same time the New Testament reveals weaknesses and vulnerabilities in them all. And the key truth to recognise is this, all Christians have weaknesses. And that word weakness is a really interesting word because it can refer to many things. It can refer to physical ailments. So we might have a weakness in our bodies that causes us to struggle. But it can also refer to feelings, particularly feelings of inadequacy. And that's something that we probably all struggle with.

We look at ourselves and we think that we're just so inadequate. And it can also refer to some kind of incapacity. So you're trying to do something, you know that there's something you should do and yet you feel you just can't do it. You're not capable of doing what you want to do. And that is the experience of all Christians. Of them all. And yet it's not something that we talk about very often, is it? And the result is that we can so easily think that everybody else is doing great. And we are the odd ones out because we are struggling. So often you look at other people and all you can see is how well they're doing.

[12 : 43] And you look at yourself and you think, I'm nothing like that. And so we can then feel that we are the only ones who doubt. We are the only ones who struggle with temptation.

We are the only ones who don't know what certain things mean. And yet the truth is, we all have these weaknesses. So think of just the gathering here today. How many Christians in here have doubts? How many have secret temptations that they would not want anybody else to know about? How many of them don't understand parts of the Bible? How many of them have made mistakes in the past week? The answer is all of them. And this is an important lesson for us in terms of how open we are with one another as Christians. Because often our instinct is to hide our weaknesses, isn't it? We don't want people to know about our weaknesses. We don't want to talk about them. So we try to put on a good impression. How many people, when they're asked how are you, you say fine. No matter how bad things are, we say fine. I suppose that's a cultural thing. But we do. We want to conceal our weaknesses and insecurities. And yet that is the complete opposite of what the New Testament tells us.

Because the New Testament tells us to bear one another's burdens. The New Testament tells us to confess our sins to one another. The New Testament tells us to pray for one another.

So please do not ever think that you have to be a superhuman in order to be a Christian or in order to be an effective Christian. It is not true. We all struggle with weakness.

And sometimes that weakness and that struggle can be with the most basic aspects of Christian living. And that's what Paul highlights for us here. He says we do not know what to pray for as we ought. So Paul is talking about our weaknesses and he immediately uses the example of prayer, which is one of the most basic and fundamental aspects of being a Christian.

[15 : 22] As Christians, we talk to our Father in heaven. It's one of the most wonderful privileges that we have. We can actually talk to God about anything at any time and in any circumstances.

So simple and so wonderful. And it's something that should be part of every single day of our lives. And yet very often because of our weakness, we do not know what to pray for as we ought. Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt that you are rubbish at praying? Have you ever felt unsure what to ask for in a particular circumstance? Have you ever felt that there's an issue that you just can't really talk to God about? Have you ever felt that your prayers are just so poor? Because often our prayer lives is where we feel at the weakest and where we feel a huge sense of failure. And the key question we have to ask is this, in that condition, when you are beset with weaknesses and struggles, even to the point of not knowing what to pray for, what does God want to do with you? When you're in that condition? And our minds can answer that question by saying, well, God is not going to be particularly impressed with my failings. And so God at the very least is going to be weary of us and beyond that he is probably going to want to rebuke us and keep us at arm's length. And he's certainly not going to want to use us in any area of responsibility in his church. We feel that God's reaction to our weakness and our failings is going to be one of disappointment, frustration and impatience. But is that true? Of course it's not. It's not true at all. Because the amazing thing is that when you are weak and struggling and failing, even to the point where you don't even know what to pray for, there is one thing that God wants to do with you. One thing that God wants to do. He wants to help you. The Spirit helps us in our weakness. And so if you think about the Holy Spirit, who's at the top of the Holy Spirit's priority list? If we just use that illustration, if you imagine the list of who's at the top of the Holy Spirit's priority list. Is it the strong? Is it the knowledgeable? Is it the successful? Is it the confident? No. It's the weak. It's the weak. The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. So yes, Christians are weak. But we are being told that in that weakness, the Holy Spirit helps. And that's the second thing that we want to look at in a wee bit more detail together. And verses 26 and 27 give us a wonderful description of the way in which the Holy Spirit helps us. And we're just going to go through it bit by bit. If you look at these verses, you can see that it kind of splits into four distinct phrases. And so I want to go through each one just briefly. The first one is at the start of verse 26. It says, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. And I

want to particularly focus on the word helps, because this is a really, really interesting word. If you were to read the Greek, you'll see that the word for helps is actually a really long word. Sometimes in Greek, you find really, really, really long words. And it's a fascinating word because it basically means to grasp hold of with.

That might sound a wee bit strange, but that's what the word sort of literally means to grasp hold of with. So it conveys the idea of grabbing onto something along with somebody else. So imagine, for example, somebody who's holding a rope, imagine you're holding a rope and you're losing your grip, it's slipping through your fingers, you're starting to struggle, and somebody else comes along and grabs onto it with you. And so you are grabbing on with, holding on at the same time in order to help them. That's what the word means. And it's conveying a remarkable truth. It's telling us that in those moments when you are struggling, when you feel things are slipping through your fingers, when you feel you're unable to hold on by yourself, it is in these moments that God, the Holy Spirit comes right alongside you in order to help. And that means that in your moments of weakness, God has not forgotten you. He is right beside you to help you. And that's simply echoing the great words that

Jesus said in John 14 that we read at the beginning. I'll ask the Father and he'll give you another helper to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth. And that word helper is another brilliant word. It's the Greek word paraclete, which you may have heard of.

It's a wonderful word because it conveys the idea of somebody who is called alongside to help you. So imagine you're holding onto that rope, it's slipping through your fingers and you're calling out, help, help, come alongside. And somebody comes and grabs and holds and supports you and transforms your situation. That's the work of the Holy Spirit helping you in your weakness. So here's a question. When is the Holy Spirit most at work in your life? When's he most active? Is it when you're at your strongest, when you're at your most confident, when things are going well, when you are at your most successful? No. It's when you are at your weakest. Now, I really want you to grasp that. Think about the moment in the past week or the past month when you've mucked up the most as a Christian. When you've felt that your life has just been, you've had a terrible day. And I'm saying this to everybody, those of you who profess faith and those of you who maybe don't know yet if you're a Christian or not or don't know that you are. Just think of that moment when you've mucked up the most, when your day has gone badly. That's the day the Holy Spirit is giving you particular help. And that's why you've come through that time and why you've managed to get past it. And that's emphasised very clearly by Paul when he says,

[22 : 42] God said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then I'm content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities for when I am weak, then I am strong. So if you are feeling weak, if you're feeling rubbish, if you're feeling unable to manage the weak ahead, do not think for one minute that that means that the Holy Spirit has left you behind.

The truth is, he is grabbing on with you. He's right beside you to help you in your time of need. And that is teaching us an incredibly important lesson. It's telling us that the qualification to get help from God is weakness, not strength, weakness. And for that reason, our weakness should always send us running to God. And yet sometimes we find ourselves saying, I can't go to God because I've mucked up so much, I'll have to just get through this on my own. And we think, I'm not going to pray and I'm not going to go to church and I'm not going to listen to God because I've just mucked up so much, I am not going to get through this alone. It's vital that you recognize that a mindset which thinks in that way is not a sign of humility, it's actually a sign of pride. Because you're thinking, I'm so bad, I don't need God. It's a very weird, twisted form of pride. And yet I've thought like that myself in my own life. Never ever think that you honor God by saying that you don't need Him. Because that's just a subtle form of pride. And never ever think that you dishonor God by running to Him for help. Because that's exactly what He wants us to do. The Spirit helps us in our weakness. The second thing we're told is that we don't know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. A key word here is that word intercede. It simply means to plead or to speak on behalf of another. So when we pray for other people, when we pray for Ding Wollan, for that man in China, we are interceding. We are praying for other people. And we are being told that in our moments of weakness, when we don't even know what to pray for, the Holy Spirit Himself intercedes for us. And all of this is raising a very interesting question in terms

of prayer. Because have you ever wondered how your prayers get from you to God the Father? So we pray, we speak, God the Father hears us. But how does that communication take place? It's easy to think that, well, we just talk and He listens, but there's actually more to it than that. We are being told here that the Holy Spirit is involved. And if you read through to verse 34, later on you'll see that Jesus Himself is also interceding for us at the right hand of God. And so whilst there's always a sense of mystery around that, I think that we can look at this in terms of a chain of communication through which our prayers go. It starts with you, a weak person who doesn't really know what to pray for. So I made a wee diagram here. That's you, not even knowing what to pray for. But the Holy Spirit comes right beside you, right beside you to help you and to take up the cause of what you need. And through the Holy Spirit, these prayers are taken to God the Son who is at the right hand of God. And there, at God's right hand, Jesus Himself makes petition to God the Father. So you are weak, stuttering, frail prayers are carried by the Holy Spirit, taken up by the Son and brought to the Father in this beautiful line of communication. And do you know what that means? It means that all the wisdom and grace and holiness and compassion of God the Spirit and God the Son are applied to your prayers on their way to the Father. So can you pray a rubbish prayer? No you can't. Because even when you don't know what to say, God Himself, the Holy Spirit and God Himself the Son takes up your need. And so by the time your prayer reaches the Father, God the Spirit and God the Son have made it very clear what we really need. We've also been told that that intercession is not simply some just mechanical reporting of our condition, it's actually incredibly deep. It says that the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. It speaks of a depth of compassion that's beyond anything that we could imagine.

[28 : 35] Your weakness, your struggles, your feelings, that moves the Holy Spirit to groan with concern, with a longing for your future deliverance. It's just amazing to think of that. You think of when you're at your weakest and that moves the Holy Spirit to groan with a depth beyond anything that we can describe. God's compassion and concern for you is just astonishing. And that concern for our needs arises from the third point that Paul highlights, the fact that God knows us. He who searches hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is. So when we struggle in prayer and when we struggle in life, so often it's because we don't know what to do. So often you find that when you've got a really difficult week ahead of you, at the heart of that problem is very often the fact that we don't know what to do. We find ourselves perplexed by circumstances. We're looking for answers and we're unable to figure out what's going on. And a key part of our weaknesses arises from the fact that we don't know what to say, what to do, what even to pray for. But the wonderful thing that we're being told is that God knows. God searches your heart. He knows and he understands.

And when God, the Holy Spirit, groans on your behalf, even though these groans are too deep for words, God knows every single detail of what's going on. And so, yes, we often find ourselves saying, I don't know what to do when we're faced with difficult circumstances, but we should never, ever forget that God never, ever says, I don't know. God never says, I don't know. God knows exactly what you're going through, exactly what you need.

He searches your heart so that nothing you need is ever left out. So can you ever really say, I'm too weak? Can you say I'm too weak to pray in public? I'm too weak to profess faith? I'm too weak to go to the prayer meeting? I'm too weak to be involved in gospel work in our congregation or in wider community? I'm too weak to invite someone to church?

We feel like that all the time, but it's not true. Because you're not too weak. You're not too weak for God, the Holy Spirit, to take up your need to help you and to work through you. And then last of all, we are being told that the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. I think I should have highlighted that. I don't think I, oh, I did, yes, that's it there. Here I just want to ask one question very briefly. When you are weak and when you are struggling, where is the best place for you to be? And the answer to that question is in the will of God. We want to be where God wants us to be. We want to be doing what God wants us to do. Now, it's important, I think, to recognize that when we see that face, the will of God, we can often think that that applies to the big decisions of life, like a career or a marriage or where we're going to live. That's where our mind can often go when we think of the will of God. And that, of course, is part of it, but it's not the primary thing that we should think about. When we see that face, the will of God, we should be thinking in terms of daily obedience to God's commands.

The will of God is set before us in the Ten Commandments. The will of God is set before us in the Sermon on the Mount. We want to be living the way God wants us to live. We want to be the people that He wants us to be. And that's why the Holy Spirit's intercession is not according to our will. It's according to God's. And God's will is where the priority lies. And this is where we see a wonderful contrast between the start of verse 26 and the end of verse 27, because at the start of verse 26, we have our weakness. And at the end of verse 27, we have the will of God. And there's one more diagram to finish with. We've got these two things, and we can often think that they're kind of incompatible.

[33 : 42] So you look at our weakness and we think that our weakness excludes us from God's will. So you think God wants people to be able to serve Him. God wants people to be able to take up roles in His church. God wants people to be soft and light in the world. And we think our weakness excludes us from that. We're not good enough. We're not capable enough.

And yet the amazing thing that we're being told here is that God, the Holy Spirit, is working to meet us at our point of weakness. So where you are today in terms of your weakness, that's where God will meet you. And then He is working within you, leading you out of your weakness and into God's will. So that even though we are weak, we are able to live life as the people that God wants us to be, God can bring it all together so that we can serve and glorify Him. And that's why in the very next verse Paul can say that for those who love God, all things work together for good. Even in our weakness, the Holy Spirit will not forget us. He comes alongside us, bringing us back into God's perfect will.

So are Christians weak? Yes they are. But thanks be to God that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is concerned with coming to weak, stumbling, failing Christians. And He says to you, I'll help you. Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you so much that you are such a gracious, compassionate and understanding God. And we confess and acknowledge that we are so weak in so many ways and yet your word has told us that you will meet us at that point of weakness and help us. And so we just thank you so much for that. And we pray, oh God, that we would never forget what we are being taught in these words and that all our weaknesses, that they would just drive us to you and that they would enable us to lean on you and rest in you for everything. Please forgive us for all the times that we thought that we could go it alone, help us always just to lean on you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.