PRAYER AND THE HOLY SPIRIT
Romans 8:26-27

“The one concern of the devil is to keep Christians from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work and prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil . . . mocks our wisdom . . . but trembles when we pray.”
--Samuel Chadwick

Because we are still human and are subject to our sinful human nature, after we become Christians, we desperately need the help of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us by teaching us what it means to pray and reminding us what Jesus has said since He will teach us “all things” (Jn. 14:26) and He comes alongside us and helps us in our “weakness” (Rom. 8:27). Weakness here probably refers to our human condition in general. As human beings we are in need of the Holy Spirit to work in and through us as we are still subject to our human limitations.

Throughout this letter to the Philippians Paul beautifully pictures that divine-human relationship. Speaking of his own needs, he said,

“I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Php 1:19).

The Spirit supplies us with all we need to be faithful, effective, and protected children of God. In the following chapter he admonishes,

“Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose” (Php 2:12-13).

The Spirit of God works unrelentingly in us to do what we could never do alone--bring about the perfect will of God.

To make clear how the Spirit works, Paul turns to the subject of prayer. Although we are redeemed and secure in our adoption as God’s children, nevertheless “we do not know what we ought to pray for” (Ro 8:26). Paul does not elaborate on our inability to pray as we ought, but his statement is all-encompassing. Because of our imperfect perspectives, finite minds, human frailties, and spiritual limitations, we are not able to pray in absolute consistency with God’s will. Many times we are not even aware that spiritual needs exist, much less know how best they should be met. Even when we pray sincerely, faithfully, and regularly we cannot possibly know God’s purposes concerning all of our own needs or the needs of others for whom we pray.
Jesus told Peter,

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Lk 22:31-32).

Fortunately for Peter, Jesus kept His word despite the apostle’s foolish bravado as he promised, “Lord, I am ready to go with You to prison and to death” (Lk 22:33). Not only was Peter no match for Satan but he soon proved that his devotion to Christ could not even withstand the taunts of a few strangers (vv. 54-60). How glorious that our spiritual security rests in the Lord’s faithfulness rather than in our vacillating commitment.

Even the apostle Paul, who lived so near to God and so faithfully and sacrificially proclaimed His gospel, did not always know how best to pray. He knew, for example, that God had allowed Satan to inflict him with an unspecified “thorn in the flesh.” That affliction guarded Paul against pride over being “caught up into Paradise.” But after a while Paul became weary of the infirmity, which doubtless was severe, and he prayed earnestly that it might be removed. After three entreaties, the Lord told Paul that he should be satisfied with the abundance of divine grace by which he was already sustained in the trial (2 Co 12:3-9). Paul’s request did not correspond to the Lord’s will for him at that time. Even when we do not know what God wants, the indwelling Spirit Himself intercedes for us, bring our needs before God even when we do not know that they are or when we pray about them unwisely.

Paul emphasizes that our help is from the Spirit Himself. His divine help not only is personal but direct. The Spirit does not simply provide our security but is Himself our security. The Spirit intercedes on our behalf in a way, Paul says, that is totally beyond human comprehension, “with groans that words cannot express” or “with groans too deep for words” (Ro 8:26). The Holy Spirit unites with us in our desire to be freed from our corrupted earthly bodies and to be with God forever in our glorified heavenly bodies:

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Ro 8:22-23).

Contrary to the interpretation of most Charismatics, the groans of the Spirit are not utterances in unknown tongues which have no rational content. Although “praying in the Spirit” in 1 Corinthians 14:13-19 does refer to praying in tongues, here it does not. As Paul says explicitly, the groans are not even audible and are “inexpressible in words.” Yet those groans carry profound content, namely divine appeals for the spiritual welfare of each believer.
Hannah provides us an example of this. In I Samuel we read

“As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard.”

(1 Sa 1:12)

Eli thought she was drunk. But she explained:

“Not so, my lord. I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief” (1 Sa 1:15-16).

God answered her prayer:

“. . . and the Lord remembered her. So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, ‘Because I asked the Lord for him’” (1 Sa 1:19-20).

In a way infinitely beyond our understanding, these groans represent what might be called intertrinitarian communication, divine articulations by the Holy Spirit to the Father. Paul affirmed this truth to the Corinthians when he declared:

“For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Co 2:11).

Notice he says “firstfruits of the Spirit.” Therefore we still await “our adoption” as Paul puts it. What he means is our “full adoption.” “Firstfruits of the Spirit then refers to a downpayment. In Ephesus Paul said:

“Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of His glory” (Eph 1:13-14).

Although in one sense the Bible talks about “the fullness of the Spirit” or “being filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18; Ac 2:4; 4:31; 10:45 “poured out”; 19:6 “came on”), in another sense “the fullness” of the Spirit still awaits us when Christ returns. This is why we still need His help after we have been “filled with the Spirit.”
If we are to pray “in the Spirit” we need to be “full,” that is, as full as possible in this age. Even then we are not completely full. For example, Peter still had trouble with prejudice (Ac 10:9-29) after he had been filled with the Spirit (Ac 2:4).

The expressions “praying in the Spirit” occurs twice in the New Testament:

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (Eph 6:18).

“But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit” (Jude 20).

To pray “in the Spirit” means praying according to the Spirit’s promptings and with the power of the Spirit. R. A. Torrey put it:

“It is the prayer that God the Holy Spirit inspires, that God the Father answers.”

Closely related to this is Galatians 4:6:

“Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’”

The “Spirit of His Son” refers to a new “guardian” (Gal 4:2) identified as “the Spirit of God” in Romans 8:9 (Ro 8:2; Eph 1:13-14). The phrase “calls out” is a vivid Greek verb expressing deep emotion, often used of an inarticulate cry. In Matthew 27:50 it is used of Jesus’ final cry. The cry “Abba, Father” is expressive of an especially close relationship to God.

We remain justified and righteous before God the Father only because the Son and the Holy Spirit, as our constant advocates and intercessors, represent us before Him. It is only because of that joint and unceasing divine work on our behalf that we will enter heaven. Christ is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them” (Heb 7:25).

Jesus’ divine work of redemption in a believer’s heart begins at the time of conversion, but it does not end until that saint is in heaven, glorified and made righteous as God is righteous—for Christ is His righteousness. That is guaranteed by the heavenly high priestly work of our Lord and by the earthly indwelling Holy Spirit, who also makes secure the divine adoption and heavenly destiny of every believer.
If it were not for the sustaining power of the Spirit within us and Christ’s continual mediation for us as high Priest (Heb 7:25-26), our remaining humanness would have immediately engulfed us again in sin the moment we were justified. If, for an instant, Christ and the Holy Spirit were to stop their sustaining intercession for us, we would, in that instant, fall back into our sinful, damnable state of separation from God, for in us, that is, in our sinful human nature, we are no good (Ro 3:10-12; 7:7-25). Even our righteousness, as Isaiah points out, is but “filthy rags” (Isa 64:6).

Were it not for the sustaining and intercessory work of the Son and the Spirit on behalf of believers, Satan and his false teachers could easily deceive God’s elect (Mt 24:24) and could undermine the completion of their salvation.

Paul continues to address the ministry of the Holy Spirit in prayer with these words:

“And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will” (Ro 8:27).

Similarly Jeremiah, the prophet, said:

“I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind . . .” (Jer 17:10).

In the process of selecting a successor to King Saul, the Lord told Samuel,

“God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart’” (1 Sa 16:7).

At the dedication of the Temple, Solomon prayed,

“. . . then hear from heaven, Your dwelling place. Forgive and act; deal with man according to all he does; since You know his heart (for You alone know the hearts of all men), so that they will fear You all the time they live in the land You gave our fathers” (1 Ki 8:39; 1 Ch 28:9; Ps 139:1-2; Pr 15:11).

When they were choosing between Joseph Barabbas and Matthias as a successor for Judas, the eleven apostles prayed,

“Lord, You know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two You have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs” (Ac 1:24; 1 Co 4:5; Heb 4:13).
The Father knows the hearts of people and the mind of the Spirit. The Father understands exactly what the Spirit is thinking because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. Because the Spirit’s will and the Father’s will are identical, and because God is one, Paul’s statement seems unnecessary. But he is pointing up the truth in order to give encouragement to believers. Because the three persons of the Godhead have always been one in essence and will, the very idea of communication among them seems superfluous to us. It is a great mystery to our finite minds, but it is a divine reality that God expects His children to acknowledge by faith.

In this passage Paul emphasizes the divine intercession that is necessary for the preservation of believers to their eternal hope. We can no more fathom that marvelous truth than we can fathom any other aspect of God’s plan of redemption. But we know that, were not Christ and the Holy Spirit continually on guard in our behalf, our inheritance in heaven would be reserved for us in vain.

We have two intercessors: one in heaven—our Lord Jesus who intercedes for our sins (Ro 8:34) and one in our hearts—the Holy Spirit Himself.