

The Spirit's Intercession

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One of the Holy Spirit's ministries in Romans 8 to those whom God has justified is intercessory prayer, i.e. taking personal matters of prayer beyond the believers' own prayer effort. The chapter has the entire walk of the saints in view from the time of their being justified to their future glorification, but the only express example of a specific experience in the Christian life is prayer. The focus is on a weakness of believers, i.e. not knowing what to pray, whereas God knows perfectly. The Spirit prays on their behalf by groanings in which He does not use words. As believers pray about the myriad of life's struggles, the Spirit works in close coordination with their prayers; yet the groanings are distinctly His own, in caring empathy, to secure what is best for them at God's throne. Believers are imperfect and pray with limitations, but God is perfect and unlimited in seeking what is for their good.

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The central focus of Paul's letter to the Romans is justification by faith (1:15-17; 3:10, 21-26). This justification by faith, according to Paul, results in progressive sanctification by faith in the present life (6:1-8:11) and glorification in the life to come (8:17, 18-25, 30).

In bringing righteousness to its full expression, Paul views prayer as a strategic activity, introducing communion with God in the very heart of the epistle (8:26-27).¹ Intercessory assistance, Paul notes, is given to the believers as

¹ This is the only reference to the Spirit of God interceding by prayer, whether in the OT, Jewish apocryphal or pseudepigraphical books, rabbinic writings, Qumran literature, or any known source up to Paul's words in Romans 8. Only a few verses later, Paul adds that Christ also intercedes for the justified, in His case to keep them secure forever (8:34).

the *Spirit* presents prayer from His indwelling presence in them on earth and as *Christ* intercedes from His exalted estate in heaven.²

Romans 8 may well inspire the designation, “The chapter of the Holy Spirit.”³ The Holy Spirit helps with power (8:1-11); the Holy Spirit helps in privilege (8:12-17); the Holy Spirit guarantees the prospect (8:18-25); and the Holy Spirit prays for believers (8:26-27). Help to believers in Romans 8 is clear, then, in the Spirit giving *power*, *privilege* in a family bond, a *prospect* of future glory, and His *prayer* support in the arena of human weakness.⁴ This is the rich context in which the Spirit’s help in prayer is revealed.

THE SPIRIT’S ROLE IN PRAYER

Not only does the Spirit help believers in His role as a present pledge (Eph 1:13-14), guaranteeing the full realization of God’s redeeming work and the glorified estate that sonship with Christ assures, but the saints also enjoy the Spirit’s assistance as a prayer advocate. He undergirds their prayers for the purpose of securing for them whatever might be God’s benefit for them.

“And in the same way” introduces this aspect of divine assistance to believers. Now, in comparison with God giving a sustaining *hope* (vv. 23-25), “in the same way” the Spirit also gives *help* in prayer. Given the predicament of the believer’s own weakness, the Spirit provides strategic assistance.

The apostle notes five things in the passage about the Spirit’s help to the believer in the matter of prayer.

The Assistant (8:26a)

Having mentioned the Spirit’s help in regard to a bracing hope in vv. 23-25, Paul now points to an additional avenue through which the Holy Spirit

² Cf. Mark 14:62; Ephesians 1:19-23; Philippians 2:9; Colossians 3:1; and Hebrews 1:3; 4:14 with Romans 8:34, where Christ is “a great High Priest” ministering on believers’ behalf at the throne of grace.

³ Of 34 instances of πνεῦμα in Romans, 21 are in chapter 8 (so S. L. Johnson, “A Survey of Biblical Psychology in the Epistle to the Romans,” Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary [1949]:49-50). Of these, 18 appear to refer to the Spirit, and 3 do not (8:10, 15a, 16a).

⁴ When Paul ceases to mention the Spirit (v. 28ff), the flow of thought goes on with continuity, arguing the same expectation. God’s encouraging aspects of help are sustained in the one redemptive process in two further, related steps. As to His purpose, God helps believers be confident that He is sure to deliver success in His gospel, since He is energetic to orchestrate all things for their welfare. For example, He carries out phrases that advance to eternal glorification, a theme repeated from vv. 17, 18-25. And as to preservation, Paul finishes Romans 8 with evidences that God is “for us.” God even makes saints super-conquerors whom He protects in His love over every threat that they might fear could separate them away from Him.

assists the redeemed. In doing so, he focuses on a particular example in the Christian experience—prayer.⁵

The antecedent of the adverb ὡσαύτως [*h*□*ō*saut□*ō*s; “in a similar way” or “likewise”] has generated considerable discussion. With what is Paul comparing the Spirit’s prayer help? First, many think that the comparison is with having the “firstfruits of the Spirit” (8:24-25).⁶ This sustains believers through the present suffering as they advance toward glory, subjects introduced in v. 17 and then immediately expanded in vv. 18-25. The suffering involves struggles in which God’s sons (v. 14) “groan,” earnestly longing to be ushered into the future glory which God promises. Next, others relate “likewise” differently, comparing the help by prayer groaning with the *groaning* of creation (v. 22) and the *groaning* of God’s sons in the next verse.⁷ However, even with the threefold groaning as a uniting factor, problems resist explaining the “likewise” as intended by this comparison. First, groaning in prayer is delayed until late in v. 26, removed three verses from the closest earlier groaning. Furthermore, the hope of vv. 24-25 seems to be the more immediate, dominant emphasis leading up to v. 26, prompting the comparison.

A third opinion links the Spirit’s help “in the same way” to His *bearing witness* with believers’ spirits (vv. 16-17). He witnesses to their privilege in having a relationship with God that will eventuate in God glorifying them (vv. 16-17). Then, in a similar zeal for their benefit, He helps them in prayer.⁸ But the distance of vv. 16-17 from v. 26, and the closer intervening progress of emphasis erects a stubborn question over this being the most natural comparison.⁹

⁵ Out of all the specific practices of a godly life experience, only prayer is singled out. Romans 8 makes no reference expressly to study of the Word, use of gifts to edify others, doing good works, serving in church offices, or witnessing.

⁶ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 326.

⁷ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975) 421. Cranfield states his view but does not support it.

⁸ Geoffrey Smith, “The Function of ‘Likewise’ (ὡσαύτως) in Romans 8:26,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 49:1 (1998):29-38; D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans, An Exposition of Chapter 8:17-39, The Final Perseverance of the Saints* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 120-21.

⁹ Cf. the vigorous effort by G. Smith, *ibid.* He argues usage of a single subject to performing two different, compared actions: a common syntactical structure in 8:16 and 8:26 (same subject (πνεῦμα), acting in relation to a compound verb (συμμαρτυρεῖ, συναντιλαμβάνεται), and “our spirit” with “our weakness.” Among other arguments, he seeks to resolve the problem of distance between 8:17 and 8:26 by citing an example (1 Pet 3:1, “likewise”), which is grammatically dependent on 2:18. His logic does not appear to pose a more probable case for closing the gap in Romans 8 by a case in a different writer; also, a closer comparison makes good sense in 8:26 and the verses flowing into it.

The most convincing perspective sees “likewise” as comparing the Spirit’s help with the immediate hope that sustains. Noteworthy is the fivefold heaping up of “hope” in vv. 24-25 leading right up to v. 26. The latter part of v. 23 also moves to an emphasis on believers’ aroused expectation. It is related to the hope that shapes the saints’ outlook. Further, while present groaning is mentioned three times in vv. 22-26, the greater focus for the saints is the future help (deliverance) to which their hope surges forward. The groaning itself is prompted by the earnest longing that prizes God’s help, the bounty itself, the completed stage of redemption. Added to this is the connection between suffering and prayer in vv. 18-27, as in the Gospels.¹⁰

In addition, vv. 24-25 parallel vv. 26-27 in a natural way, presenting a ministering, positive asset for believers against the odds. This is in hope versus frustration and suffering that are due to sin. Verses 26-27, similarly, refer to an asset, i.e. help versus weakness with its limitations. The view allows the conjunction δέ [*de*; and] to indicate a link with what is nearby. And the adverb “likewise” refers to the flow of thought to which δέ is sensitive, linking closely the two verbs: “eagerly expect,” the object for which saints hope (v. 25), and “helps” (v. 26).

The comparison is not expressly with a point many verses away, but with the immediate context. All other 16 NT uses of ὡσαύτως [*hōsautōs*] introduce a similarity with what is immediately adjacent in the context, without intervening material.¹¹ And, a comparison of the Spirit’s prayer *help* with the *benefit through hope* given by God recognizes the larger context of Romans 8.

Paul sees the predicament that calls for the Spirit’s help to be that of “our weakness,” including himself among¹² those who need assistance in prayer.¹³ “Weakness” (ἀσθένεια [*astheneia*]) is used in a variety of ways in the

¹⁰ E. A. Obeng, “The Reconciliation of Romans 8.26f. to New Testament Writings and Themes,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39:2 (1986):172-73. He cites Jesus praying in the distress and sorrow of Gethsemane (Matt 26:36-46). He also notes the Gethsemane reference mingling prayer with suffering in Hebrews 5:7, encouragements to pray during sufferings (Matt 5:44), and early church examples (Acts 7:59; 16:16-40). In Romans 8, as in other NT passages, “prayer is the source from which the Christian draws his strength to endure suffering” writes Obeng (171).

¹¹ Cf. a complete listing of the 17 instances in W. F. Moulton and A. S. Geden, *A Concordance to the Greek Testament*, 5th rev. ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978) 1031: eight in Paul (Rom 8:26; 1 Cor 11:25; 1 Tim 2:9; 3:8, 11; 5:25; Titus 2:3, 6); nine others (Matt 20:5; 21:30, 36; 25:17; Mark 12:21; 14:31; Luke 13:5; 20:31; 22:20).

¹² Paul even uses “I” in Romans 7:7-25 and often in Romans uses personal pronouns (“we,” “our,” “us”), showing his need, along with other believers, of a common response with them to sin or grace (1:12; 4:25; 5:1-11; 6:1-8, 15; 7:5-6; 8:4, 12, 16-17, 22-25, 28, 31-32, 35-39).

¹³ As Paul associates himself with other believers in the prayerful cry, “Abba, Father” (8:15), he sees himself as weak, needing God’s sufficiency (2 Cor 3:5), deliverance (Rom 7:24), and the

NT. At times it refers to bodily weakness which can be the condition in sickness (Matt 8:17). Paul acknowledged his own bodily incapacity through human limitation (Gal 4:13) and candidly notes the ailments of others as well (1 Tim 5:23). On other occasions, NT writers employ the term to denote the human condition of inadequacy, which needs God's grace to supply sufficiency (2 Cor 12:5, 9; cf. 1 Cor 15:43; 2 Cor 11:30). Paul was impressed by his inadequacy for preaching. He even experienced fear and trembling in reference to his own inability, and so was careful to speak the message "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor 2:3; cf. Rom 15:19). The unsaved are weak in succumbing to bodily impulses to sin (Rom 6:19), lacking ability to fulfill the law in that the impulse to do so is weak and nullified on account of the downward pull that the ethical flesh asserts (Rom 8:3). Human weakness also appears in bodily frailty that leaves mankind liable to deterioration and death (2 Cor 13:4; Heb 5:2; 7:28).

The "weakness" in Romans 8:26 might be restricted only to *prayer*, and even in that, its emphasis relates only to weakness in having *hope* to expect the future completion of redemption, i.e. the glory at the end of v. 17, in vv. 18-25, and again in v. 30. Weakness can also be narrowed to matters following vv. 26-27, relating to prayerful misgivings that things will work to assure final good (vv. 28-30), fears about persevering against those perils that people fear might separate them from safety (vv. 31-39). These sections of Romans 8 provide encouragement from God's help to bolster human assurance in such specific matters.

"Weakness" is not limited just in *prayer* or to *hope* about the future, but relates to *all details* of the human condition as the redeemed. Paul adduces prayer as a strategic channel of seeking direct support in life's struggles, in which human weakness can become acutely apparent. Prayer can pervade all the currents in the whole stream of life, taking up concerns about every kind of issue which might provoke anxiety when coping with aspects of the suffering entailed in 8:17-25 (cf. Phil 4:6; Luke 18:1).¹⁴ In Romans 8, the Spirit's power for victory can make its difference in every detail of the myriad issues and challenges of life (vv. 1-11). The privilege of a relationship with God, to which the Spirit bears witness, furnishes encouragement that can distill its reality in all the matters that make up life (vv. 12-17).

When Romans 8 progresses to vv. 18-27, the prospect of future redemptive fullness registers its bright outlook; it is relevant to inspire believers in every

intercessory assistance of fellow saints (15:30-32; Col 4:2-4; 2 Thess 3:2-3) as well as that of the Spirit (Rom 8:26-27) and Christ (Rom 8:34).

¹⁴ So Jesus gave relevant counsel that "men ought always to pray" (Luke 18:1), in faith (v. 8), and not "lose heart" as in a crisis need of legal protection (vv. 3, 5), and for all needs to gain justice (v. 8). In Philippians 4:6, Paul counsels against being anxious about "anything," but in "everything" taking needs to God in prayer.

facet of their experience. Back in 6:19 Paul realizes that the believers' "weakness" can show its reality in all of life, yet they can live in victory, regardless of what life offers. He encourages them to yield their bodily members to God in the new slavery to righteousness, bearing fruit with regard to holiness (6:22). The weakness is evident in the struggle that the saints face in all of life, in temptations to fulfill sin or to obey what one can joyfully concur in from God's truth (7:14-23; cf. v. 22). And the "weakness" in the law's ability to help the believer meet God's standards, due to the sinful gravitation that impulses of the ethical "flesh" exercise (8:3-4), requires the Spirit's power to enable an obedient walk. This reality can be expressed in any aspect of life.

A broad concept of "weakness" in Romans 8:26 is consistent with other Scripture. Believers' inadequacy can bear a profound influence on every part of their lives. In this weakness, they always need the help that God can supply. This was true in OT times (Ps 138:3; Isa 40:19-21; Zech 4:6). It persists in the teaching of Jesus (John 15:5), and is frequent in Paul's writings (2 Cor 3:5; 12:9; Eph 3:16-19; Phil 4:13). Consistent with Romans 8, the writer to the Hebrews articulates this dilemma. Believers are not without a High Priest who can sympathize with their weaknesses. Having Christ, their Great High Priest, and God's open door to enter His throne room, they can pray seeking mercy and grace to help (Heb 4:15-16).

The weakness of Romans 8:26 can surface here in all the praying of believers. Prayers seek help in hundreds of passages in God's Word. God's people humbly sense their weakness in any of the aspects that make up their prayer — i.e., praise, thanksgiving, confession, petition, intercession, asking God questions (Hab 1-2). In Romans, a variety of aspects in prayer emerge. Paul in selecting *prayer* as a strategic channel in which weakness becomes apparent most naturally means prayer in its normal, generally understood sense, as in the overall context in the epistle. It is not limited only to prayer about *hope* for the future, or prayer in *tongues*, or some other narrowed focus.

Romans 8, the nearest context for prayer, has the overall sweep of the Christian life in view--all that is embraced by the saints' "walk" (v. 4). This embraces all that can manifest the life and peace the Spirit gives (vv. 4-6), any facet of life within the panorama of the Spirit's leading (v. 14), all that God orchestrates for the believers' good (v. 28).

Steps in the reasoning of Romans 8 progress in a closely-related sequence that has relevance for the entire life. The Spirit's power in the new life is for all human issues (vv. 1-11); so is the believers' privilege in being God's children and heirs, though suffering now, destined to be glorified (vv. 12-17). All of life can stir prayer burdens for saints living in a creation that groans to be set free from its futility. The believers' groans occur in an overall life of exercising hope and having the firstfruits of the Spirit (vv. 18-25). A broad spectrum seems involved in the "all things" which are parts of God's purpose (vv. 28-30), and all

the things which are not able to wrench saints away from God's love (vv. 31-39). Prayer seems to widely embrace even the Spirit's intercession "according to God" (v. 27), for God's will impacts all details of life. In all of life's challenges "the things of the Spirit" (v. 5) can assert their influence; and in all of them to "serve in newness of the Spirit" (Rom 7:6) can freshen life. As in Philippians 4:6, anything in which believers might weakly succumb to anxiety can rather be part of praying to God "in everything."

Along with this, "the mind of the Spirit" in His intercession (v. 27) would not have relevance limited only to narrowed concerns such as *tongues* or the *hope* to be glorified. This "mind" touches on all of life's issues and more, all things in which the Spirit can tutor saints to have their own minds set on things He prizes, all things related to being subject to God and pleasing Him (vv. 7-8).

Not only this, but Paul, the one who writes of the Spirit's intercession, shows a very broad concern in his own intercessory pleadings for believers, interceding for things which pervade all of life (Rom 15:5, 13; 1 Cor 1:4-9; Eph 3:16-19; Phil 1:9-11; Col 1:9-12). The Spirit's intercessory help to believers in their weakness surely includes concerns as far-reaching and complete.

A very long word for "helps" in Romans 8:26 appears elsewhere in the NT only when Martha wants her sister Mary to help together with her (Luke 10:40).¹⁵ The word unites three words into a compound, 1) σύν [*sun*], "together with"; 2) ἀντί [*anti*] as in assuming a role distinct from another to fulfill part of a task, or working "over against" [in distinction to] the saints' weakness; and 3) λαμβάνω [*lamban* \square ☞], "to take," i.e. receive one's share to do. The basic thought is that the Spirit assists in close coordination or in accompaniment with the saints.¹⁶ This fits well with His role in helping God's people in many ways.¹⁷

¹⁵ E. A. Obeng points out two LXX instances of *συναντιλαμβάνομαι*. Numbers 11:17 uses the word as Moses receives advice to designate helpers who can resolve some of the many issues, and "work together with you, bearing the burden of the people." In Exodus 18:22, Jethro counsels Moses to appoint men to help him in the same kind of burden ("An Exegetical Study of Rom. 8:26 and Its Implication for the Church in Africa," *Bulletin of Biblical Studies* 8, New Series (July-Dec. 1989):90).

¹⁶ Obeng, "Exegetical Study," 90. Obeng says, however, that as when a lawyer represents his client, "one cannot distinguish between the Spirit and his [the believer's] action." In response to Obeng, a lawyer's effort still can be his own, distinct, even when working with a client. And Paul in Romans 8:26-27 can use the compound word allowing the Spirit's own distinctive interceding just as he uses a compound in Romans 15:30. He asks Roman believers to "strive together with me" in prayers, and this is similar to the 8:26-27 passage in these ways: the prayer is intercessory, a compound word appears, σύν is used in the compound, a form of the same word appears for prayer (προσευχῆ), although the verbal form in Romans 15, ὑπέρ ("on behalf of") is used, and the prayer is "to God." The intercessors' praying can be closely related to Paul's, but is quite distinctly that of *others* praying, just as the Spirit's interceding can be intimately related to believers' prayer, but *His own distinct effort* on their behalf. Cf. also 2 Corinthians 1:11.

¹⁷ In Romans, the Spirit circumcises hearts (2:29), bestows God's love (5:5; 15:30), gives newness for service (7:6), is the key to pleasing God (8:4-8), indwells the redeemed (8:9), leads

The Spirit's help, whether denoted by this word or other terms,¹⁸ is not a 50-50 arrangement. His share is much greater than that of the weak one whom He is helping. He even does what the weak are not able to do, even when they responsibly cooperate (Rom 8:3; Phil 2:12-13; cf. John 15:5). Robertson's illustration, which many have cited with favor,¹⁹ is too general to convey the magnitude of the Spirit's help. Robertson points to two people sharing in a task, each helping by holding up his own end. A more definitive example depicts a person who fully or partly does not know what to do in presenting his needs to a king. A high official close to the king knows the supplicant's concerns and what to do to represent him. He does this in a way that accords with the king's mind as to what is fitting, and is zealous to secure an answer that is best.

Another illustration is of a very weak person who needs furniture moved, receives help from a powerful muscleman, and feebly fulfills a relatively small part in moving the furniture. The strong man's superior assistance is the key that assures success. He does the really crucial part, and even places the furniture better than the weak person knew to suggest, so that in the final analysis there is complete satisfaction.²⁰

The saint does not know what to pray to obtain, but the Spirit has perfect knowledge to lead (cf. 8:14). The human does not have an absolute knowledge of or commitment to God's mind, which knows the best way. But the Spirit intercedes to secure what is wise.

The Admission (8:26b)

Help from the Spirit is given for the purpose of (γάρ [*gar*]) assisting the praying believers' weakness. Believers do not know, as in the relative pronoun coupled with an objective pronominal clause, "what (τί [*ti*]) to pray" as "we should," that is, what would be "according to God" (v. 27). The relative pronoun

(8:14), bears witness of God being Father (8:15-17), is vital for truth in the conscience (9:1) and righteousness, joy and peace (14:17; 15:13) and other fruit (Gal 5:22f), sanctifies people reached in ministry to be acceptable (15:16), gives power for supernatural works (15:19), and causes the saved to abound in hope (15:13). Outside Romans, He gives access to God (Eph 2:18), gives strength (3:16), and fills (5:18). He uses the Word as His "sword" helping believers (6:17), lets saints pray in Him (6:18), gives God's thoughts (1 Cor 2:11), teaches things of God to saints, even Christ's mind (2:12-13, 16), gives spiritual gifts with which to serve (12:4-11), baptizes the saved into Christ (12:13), transforms the saints into Christ's image (2 Cor 3:18), and perfects believers (Gal 3:3).

¹⁸ Cf. n. 17 for the varied helps which the vocabulary covers.

¹⁹ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament, Luke*, (Nashville: Broadman, 1930) 156; D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans*, 132, uses two people carrying a heavy load, one at each end.

²⁰ Cf. a fourth illustration by Obeng (n. 16).

τί, used with the neuter, singular article τό [to], has the accusative sense here, forming the object, “we do not know the thing for which we should pray.”

Paul does not expressly say that the justified do not know “how to pray,” for he does not use the word πῶς [po ʔs; “how”²¹], as in v. 32. Writers differ on whether the accusative means the content or the end sought in prayer. Often this becomes a matter of semantics. How one prays in form and content, at times, can mean the same thing as the objective for which he prays. What the content is in prayer can take its form in how and for what benefit one is spelling things out, as in “This is *how* I need help. What I am asking is that You draw my father to salvation in You today.” God may bring the father to Christ, but a year from now, and by a different person’s witness, or by other means than the person imagined. Through such a process, God can develop the requesting believer’s faith, love, patience, and submission to Himself, the One in charge. Paul’s point is that believers can pray desiring God’s will, including the objective which the form of the content articulates (as Mark 11:24), and in this sense including even the manner, *how*. But due to human weakness, God’s people do not know *what* the Spirit’s perfect knowledge perceives is best, what is in concord with God’s will.

Verse 27 repeats the relative pronoun τί in the phrase “what the mind of the Spirit is,” i.e. what is the content His mind sees to be best, how He Himself intercedes for saints. And v. 31 employs τί in a question (“what . . .?”). Here the focus is on the content and not on such matters as the structure (pattern, form) of the prayer, as in the disciples’ model prayer (Matt 6:9-12), or on a particular routine in which Paul elsewhere prays (Eph 1:17-23; 3:15-21; Phil 1:9-12; Col 1:9-11). Nor does “what” entail posture, length, intensity, the order in praying aspects such as praise, confession, or petition. Scripture itself is flexible, displaying many differing forms in such matters for which people can pray.

Paul himself is an example of weakness in not knowing *what* to pray. He prayed to gain sufficiency, pleading for God to remove “a thorn in the flesh,” some problem or person like a thorn thwarting him (2 Cor 12:7-9).²² The specific kind of help for which he prayed to get his need met was not the thing that God thought best. God answered him with *what* he longed to have, but gave it in a

²¹ Peter O’Brien, “Romans 8:26, 27, A Revolutionary Approach to Prayer?” *The Reformed Theological Review*, XLVI:3 (Sept.-Dec. 1987):67; Cranfield, *Romans*, 421, the accusative denoting what to pray for (cf. Mark 11:24), as distinct from the content itself (Luke 18:11; 20:47). Some resolve τί as on occasion having the same meaning as πῶς (so Wm. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902] 213, and in RSV and NEB of Romans 8:26).

²² Some of the many opinions have been eye-trouble, malaria, headache, epileptic seizure, lustful sin, and a persecuting enemy who pestered Paul as a gouging “thorn,” such as in the OT figure of enemies being “thorns” to Israelites (cf. Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Epistle to the Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997] 416-18).

different form. The answer did not come in the problem removed, as Paul in his weakness had requested so passionately, but by God's sufficiency – "My grace is sufficient for you." This was God's supply, though God allowed the trial to remain. The interceding Spirit knew *what* was God's wise will, superseding Paul's weak grasp of the picture.²³

In the total panorama, believers' prayers and petitions which are consistent with God's will receive "yes" answers (cf. 1 John 5:14-15), either exactly or in essence, and either immediately or after a waiting period that God deems best. Prayers in disobedience which gratify misguided notions or selfish ambition can receive a "no."²⁴ God can answer with a "wait" until He brings His child or factors of the situation into proper alignment with His wisdom.²⁵ And in the process, He can develop spiritual fruit (cf. Rom 6:22; 7:4; Phil 1:11).

In our weak Pharisaic fashion (cf. Matt 6:1-18), at times we do not perceive what to pray that will be really for God's glory and not to gain plaudits crediting our prayer performance. The praise aspect of prayer that is pure pleases God, but praise as a flowery performance to elicit human accolades is sin. However, the mind of the Spirit never goes amiss on what He Himself should present before the heavenly throne, and the believer's standing in Christ's righteousness is not affected.

The phrase "as [it] ought [to be]" (καθὸ δεῖ [*katho dei*]) means "even as ought," i.e. what ideally ought to be the content, or "what is necessary" or as fits the standard.²⁶ Immediately following in v. 27, the standard is defined by what the helping Spirit Himself prays. His mind is in harmony with what pleases God (cf. v. 8). It is κατὰ θεὸν [*kata theon*], i.e. "according to God." The mind of the Spirit is in accord with the mind of the Father, reflecting His will and wisdom. Rather quickly in v. 28, Paul shows that what God works for the believers' "good" is "according to [God's] purpose" (κατὰ πρόθεσιν [*kata*

²³ Cf. also Moses petitioning for admission into the land of promise. But God refused, giving what was His wise will for him in his old age, a glimpse of the land, a task of appointing his successor, then death and being in His presence (Deut 3:23-28). Moses, one of the all-time great men of prayer (Jer 15:1; Ezek 14:14, 20), did not always know *what* to pray as he ought according to God's will.

²⁴ As Psalm 66:18 and James 4:3, the opposite of a positive answer when asking in harmony with God's will as in John 15:7; 1 John 3:22; 5:14-15.

²⁵ Cf. Paul's own prayer aims, in which God was sovereign (Rom 1:10-13, 1 Thess 2:18 with 3:10f., and his praying a third time about his "thorn," 2 Cor 12:7-9).

²⁶ The δεῖ, as an impersonal verb, subjunctive, 3d singular, means "it is necessary, fitting as what ought to be." It is used for what is "proper, right" (Acts 19:36; 1 Tim 5:13), for the necessity that God's will governs, such as the coming of Elijah (Matt 17:10) or coming of wars (Matt 24:6), the necessity that law or custom dictates (Luke 22:7), the necessity that is fitting, as the laborer ought first to partake of the fruits (2 Tim 2:6). Cf. BAGD, 171.

prothesin). What is “according to God” as an answer to prayer in v. 27 fits into a picture of God’s comprehensive arrangement to work all things “according to [His] purpose.” In harmony with His purpose, the Father answers to what the Spirit prays. This is consistent with God ordering each phase of His redemptive will listed in vv. 29-30.

The phrase “according to God” features καθὸ [*katho*], an adverb of manner which goes back to the verb “pray” in the principal clause, i.e. as “it is necessary” when we “pray.” The adverb combines with δεῖ [*dei*], an impersonal verb in the present tense, third person singular, from the root δέω [*deo* ᾶ].²⁷ It refers to what is necessary, i.e. to suit the matter in prayer and God’s will for responding to it. What is necessary here is probably intended in the standard that 8:27 itself reflects, “the mind of the Spirit.” His mind is fitted “according to God,” κατὰ θεὸν [*kata theon*] – a comparative clause, parallel to καθὸ δεῖ, which modifies the verb “intercedes.”²⁸ It refers to what the Spirit in His helping perfection prays, but which believers do not know fully due to their “weakness.”²⁹

Quickly in v. 28 Paul shows that what the God of v. 27 works for the believers’ good in all things is “according to [God’s] purpose.” Verse 28 is tied very closely and naturally with the preceding intercession verses. For this “purpose,” v. 28 clarifies, God called those He redeems. What is “according to God” in the Spirit’s quest in prayer in v. 27 includes all that God is working *according to His purpose*. The Father will answer in sensitivity with what the Spirit prays, and the Spirit intercedes in harmony with God’s manner of doing

²⁷ The word meant “to bind” literally or figuratively as in the marital commitment, Romans 7:2 (F. Buchsel, “δέω,” *Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964] 2:60). On the impersonal verb, cf. G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1921) 99; F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, trans. and rev. R. W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) 210; J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1963) 3:139.

²⁸ Cranfield, *Romans*, 421; as in Cranfield, the verb that the adverb καθὸ modifies is “we should pray” (cf. also A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 4:376). The adverb compares prayer in which believers do not know what to pray with the standard expressed in δεῖ, “as is necessary” to fit that standard, which is κατὰ θεὸν, a manner in which the Spirit does know what to pray. Κατὰ θεὸν fits in a comparative clause, modifying “intercedes” (v. 27), just as καθὸ δεῖ modifies “we should pray” (26), both focusing on the manner. And the accusative θεὸν, without the article, looks not so much at identifying God the Father as at the quality of the Spirit’s intercession being according to the standard, i.e. God.

²⁹ Several observations show the very close fusing: the connective “and,” the parallel between κατὰ πρόθεσιν (v. 28) and κατὰ θεὸν (v. 27) and καθὸ δεῖ (v. 26), the Spirit’s help and God’s benefit as He “works,” the “as it is necessary” with “for good,” the words “we do not know” with what “we know,” and the “for us” motif twice in vv. 26-27 with the “God is for us” pattern in vv. 31, 32, 34, borne out so clearly in His fivefold work of vv. 29-30. Another unifying idea is “these things” in v. 31, relating back to vv. 28-30, and God giving believers “all things,” as in prayer that is in the manner the Spirit pursues, “as it is necessary . . . according to God.”

things according to His purpose. What God does in responding to prayer is consistent with His manner in ordering every phase of His will for the redeemed noted in vv. 29-30. It is according to Himself, according to His discretion as the wise God (11:33-36).

Since the word for believers' praying is the general one (*προσεύχομαι* [*proseuchomai*]), it can flexibly embrace every aspect of prayer to God.³⁰ One aspect is in making *petitions* to resolve personal needs, as Paul did in the "thorn" passage (2 Cor 12:7-10). Another aspect is *intercessory* pleadings (1:9; 10:1; 15:30-32). An example is when a believer earnestly prays in weakness for God to use him in witness to a father in a home. Salvation of the father is the objective of the prayer. God's answer may cover more than what was asked by saving *all* the members of the family (cf. Acts 16). Or God does not save the father at that time, but rather inclines a son listening from another room to receive Him, and that son later leads his father to Christ.

Confession is another aspect of prayer. A Christian examines his heart and in weakness does not know precisely or fully *what* to pray. Does he need to confess a sin against another believer, or was it really sin? God knows the Christian's motive, whether pure to do His will or looking for a way to sidestep doing the thing that will please God (Rom 8:8; Col 1:10). God seeks to influence the believer by His will in His word (cf. John 15:7), which the Spirit wants to teach (John 14:26). The Spirit knows how to present a believer's sensitive yearning to be in agreement with God, or to intercede for what is to his benefit even if the human spirit prays amiss and the answer must be negative. The answer that Romans 8:27 idealizes represents that all is well, "according to God," for either a "yes" or a "no" is best when that is God's wise decision, and Spirit and Father are in harmony.

As the emphases of Romans 8:26-27 unfold, the Spirit's intercession leaps into the spotlight.

The Advocacy (8:26c)

The precise idea is that "the Spirit Himself" (i.e. "He, not someone else") is the advocate³¹ helping Christians. No help is said to come from

³⁰ The kinds of prayer denoted by forms of this word include thanksgiving (Phil 4:6; Col 4:2; 1 Thess 1:2); intercession (Eph 6:18-20); possibly all aspects of prayer (Luke 18:1; Rom 12:12); and in Jesus' prayer of Matt 6:9-13, praise (v. 9), petition (vv. 10-11, 13), confession (v. 12), and affirmation to God.

³¹ The help is by intercessory *prayer*, an expression of advocacy distinct from the Spirit's specific *paraklete* help in the Gospels, as Obeng carefully reasons ("The Reconciliation of Rom 8:26f. . .," 168-70). A "paraklete" was a legal advisor assisting a person in an effort to gain a helpful verdict (Johannes Behm, "Παράκλητος," *TDNT*, 5:803). Mark 13:11 expects the Spirit's help for what to say when brought to trial as believers, as realized in Acts 4:8 and 7:55. Texts in John refer to

angels,³² nor is intercessory help from humans in view.³³ That the Spirit makes intercession “for” saints³⁴ is in coordination with Christ’s intercession “for us,” the saints (v. 34). The cooperation of Father and Spirit (v. 27) and Father and Son (v. 34) guarantees this. Though not explicitly referenced in vv. 26-27, the Son cooperates in prayer with the Spirit and with the Father as well.³⁵ This accords with Jesus’ teaching that all God-pleasing prayer is to be “in My name” (John 14:13-14; 16:23-24).³⁶ The writer to the Hebrews underscores Christ’s relation to prayer, noting that Christ, too, sympathizes with believers’ “weakness” when they draw near to His throne of grace (Heb 4:15-16). Jesus promised to give anything which believers ask in “My Name,” saying “I will do it” (John 14:14).

The Spirit’s advocacy is introduced by “but” (ἀλλά [*alla*]), an adversative particle which represents Him as being in sharp contrast to believers who are weak and do not know what to pray³⁷ in accord with God’s will.³⁸ The Spirit is strong and gives strength that avails to lift believers above their weakness and inability (Eph 3:16ff.). In Romans 8:26, the focus is on the Spirit’s capability to intercede. Believers do *not know*, but the Spirit *knows*, as He knows all the deep

His help to believers in accessing truth, His bearing witness to them of Jesus (14:16-17, 26; 15:26), and His testifying to, or convicting the unsaved of sin, righteousness, and judgment (16:7-11).

³² Cf. celestial beings ministering in relation to human prayer in Daniel 9:20-23; Revelation 5:8; 8:2-5.

³³ Paul often refers to human intercession: Romans 1:7-12; 10:1; 15:30-32; Colossians 4:2-4; 2 Thessalonians 3:1; and he begins and closes his epistles interceding for others’ grace and peace.

³⁴ His intercession may feature pleadings to keep the saints secure, as Christ’s interceding in v. 34. Or, it may be an advocacy that helps in all matters affected by their “weakness” in not knowing what to pray, including preservation, but being more inclusive. The latter is probable in view of the Spirit’s ministries all through Romans 8 being relevant for all things in life affected by His power (vv. 1-11), privilege He gives (vv. 12-17), His prospect (vv. 18-25), His purpose (vv. 28-30), and God’s protection (vv. 31-39). Cf. also n.2.

³⁵ One can naturally draw this conclusion from John 14-16. Jesus asked the Father to give saints the Spirit (14:16); Jesus sent Him to them (16:7), it is in His name that the Spirit is sent (14:26); and the Spirit bears witness of Him and glorifies Him (15:26; 16:14). Paul, in Romans 8, shows that the Son died as an offering in the redemptive provision (vv. 3, 34), is the One with whom believers are co-heirs in a relationship of which the Spirit bears witness (vv. 15-17), and is the One to whom saints will be conformed by the process in which they have the Spirit’s power and other privileges.

³⁶ The idea is prayer in harmony with Christ’s will, values, authority, and honor. It has its rooting in OT passages about acting in the Lord’s name.

³⁷ Cf. the strong adversative nature that ἀλλά can have in a contrast, as in Ephesians 5:18.

³⁸ An OT assertion of the Holy Spirit’s power and wisdom being far above man’s is in Isaiah 40:13-14. Paul cites Isaiah 40:13 in 1 Corinthians 2:16 of the Spirit knowing the mind of God (cf. also Rom 11:34); that Corinthian context shows how the Spirit works in believers to give them the benefit of truth that is in accord with God.

things of God (1 Cor 2:10).³⁹ His manner of interceding achieves the benefit of this advantage.

This is the only reference in Scripture to the Spirit's intercessory prayer. He never is mentioned in this role in the OT, the Apocrypha or Pseudepigrapha in the inter-testamental era, or in Jewish rabbinical writings up to the ministry of Paul. Yet it fits naturally as a part of His many ministries,⁴⁰ and is complementary in view of Jesus' promising the Spirit's ministry to believers as an advocate.⁴¹

The present tense "intercedes" (v. 26), reflects the Spirit's on-going effort. The verb's compound form (ὑπερεντυγχάνω [*huperentugchan* □ ☞]) appears only here in the NT, and has not been found in any Greek writer before the NT.⁴² It means "to plead in favor of, intercede on behalf of."⁴³ The word quickly reappears without the prefix (ἐντυγχάνω; *entugchan* □ ☞) in v. 27, as the Spirit goes on helping by interceding. Originally meaning "to complain, meet with, associate, approach to communicate,"⁴⁴ this shorter form developed into the sense of stating a case representing another, making petition, or interceding in prayer. Examples include Acts 25:24, where Jews press a legal suit against Paul, and Romans 11:2 where the word describes Elijah's pleading with God (1 Kin 19:10) to excuse his flight because of Israel's hostility toward him.

Paul employs the basic word, ἐντυγχάνω, twice in Romans 8, not only of the Spirit interceding for believers from His indwelling station on earth (v. 27), but also for Christ's role as advocate in His heavenly exaltation (v. 34). The word depicts Christ's intercession again later (Heb 7:25). The prepositional prefix ὑπέρ [*huper*] in 8:26 adds to other emphases in the context that encourage

³⁹ Cf. n. 38.

⁴⁰ Cf. n.17.

⁴¹ Cf. n. 31.

⁴² Cranfield, *Romans*, 1, 423.

⁴³ Otto Bauernfeind, "τυγχάνω [etc.]," *TDNT*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 8:243. The longer compound, prefixing the preposition ὑπέρ, occurs only of the Spirit's intercession (Rom 8:26). Here ὑπέρ can give a perfective idea to ἐντυγχάνω, accenting the strength of the intercession (M. R. Vincent, *New Testament Word Studies* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971] 97). The idea, "in one's behalf," is more natural here (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4:377). No need exists to focus on the perfect work of the Spirit who already acts perfectly. Acting in others' interest suits the context of the Spirit's various benefits to the redeemed believers' weakness in not knowing what to pray, and the Spirit's helping.

⁴⁴ Bauernfeind, *ibid.*

believers by God's forthright action *for* them. All that He does in redemption in Romans, as Paul now reasons, is for their advantage.⁴⁵

The help with which the Spirit assists God's people, though they pray in "weakness," is in His own "groanings" (στεναγμοῖς; *stenagmois*). The word occurs in the LXX for distressed Israelites' groaning or sighing to God, desperate to gain help (Exod 2:24) or a prisoner groaning to be freed (Ps 78:11 [Eng. 79:11]). Romans 8 refers to three groanings. Creation is said (figuratively) to groan for deliverance from the futility it has been subjected to since the fall (v. 22, cf. v. 20a). God's spiritual sons literally groan, longing for God to bring the fullness of redemption's blessing (v. 23).⁴⁶ The Spirit is also moved to His own groanings in supplying help to believers in prayer.

The groanings of v. 26 are not those of believers, but are expressly referenced to their advocate, the Spirit. He is the One whom Paul specifically says "intercedes with groanings." It is true that God's people groan (v. 23) and can even do so in prayer at times⁴⁷ when they sigh over their grief and yearnings. However, the groanings here are related directly to the Spirit as He intercedes. Verse 27 as well is forthright in its claim that the intercession is the Spirit's; it is not said to be by believers, or even jointly by the Spirit and believers. As Christ's intercession (v. 34) is definitely His own, and *for* saints, not *with* them, the intercession in vv. 26-27 is just as directly said to be by the Spirit and *for* believers. It is also, most plausibly, not *with* the saints. The saints' groanings can occur in close relation to prayer in words, yet be distinct, as in OT cases.⁴⁸ While the Spirit does participate *with* the saints in the sense of making His own intercession on their behalf, His groanings go beyond any of their own sighs and praying words.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ To name a few instances with ὑπέρ, the Spirit intercedes "for" them (v. 27), God is "for us" (v. 31) in that He "foreknew . . . predestined . . . called . . . justified . . . glorified" in vv. 29-30, God delivered Christ up "for us" (v. 32), and Christ intercedes "for us" (v. 34).

⁴⁶ Forms of this word family are used in the LXX for sighings at childbirth (Jer 4:31), when wounded in battle (Ezek 26:15), in connection with prayer and tears but distinct from them (Ps 6:6, cf. prayer in vv. 1-5, 9; 31:10 [LXX 30:10]; 38:8 [LXX 37:8-9]; 79:11 [LXX 78:11]), in grief over an impending terror (Ezek 21:6-7), sighing from which the redeemed will be free in their future salvation, as they are free of sorrow and pain (Isa 35:10). In the NT, the word refers to Israelite groanings in Egypt (Acts 7:34), and believers groaning in their present bodies as in Romans 8:23 (2 Cor 5:2, 4).

⁴⁷ Cf. n. 46

⁴⁸ Cf. examples in n. 46.

⁴⁹ That the Spirit's intercession is distinct from believers' prayers is maintained by many. Cf. Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:423; Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption, A Study in Paul's Soteriology*, 2d ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1982) 72; Ernst Gaugler, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1958) 322-23; Douglas Moo, *Romans 1-8* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991) 562. Cf. also n. 16.

So, to what does intercession in groans without words refer? It does not naturally fit praying in tongues, though some scholars contend that it does.⁵⁰ But a number of significant obstacles to that view exist.⁵¹ First, tongues focus on praise/thanks (1 Cor 14:15-17),⁵² and intercession is not expressly the aspect of prayer mentioned there. Second, speaking in tongues involves words which are expressed in a language,⁵³ whereas the verbal adjective here denotes the idea of “without words” (ἀλαλήτοις [*alalētois*]). Appearing only here in the NT or the LXX, it uses the alpha privative (ἀ [*a*] “without”) as a prefix to the term “words,” causing several to favor this rendering.⁵⁴ Even if a rendering of “inexpressible,” “ineffable,” “too deep for words,” or “which cannot be uttered” is admitted, v. 26 is still saying that this prayer communication is by the *Spirit*, not by *believers*.⁵⁵ To the children of God, the words are both inaudible and inexpressible. However, the Spirit of God has infinite ability and understanding (cf. Ps 139:1-4; cf. Isa 55:8-9). He is God, to whom all things are possible, and

⁵⁰ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 241-42; idem, *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 131-34. Romans 8:26 refers not to a general experience in prayer, but “an unusually audacious conclusion which the apostle draws from highly unusual—that is to say ecstatic—happenings in primitive Christian worship,” even “glossolalic prayer,” 131 (cf. his citing others with a similar view, 131, n. 18); idem, *Paul and Salvation History* (London: SCM, 1967) 256; A. J. M. Wedderburn, “Romans 8.26—Towards a Theology of Glossolalia?” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 28 (1975):369-77, and cf. other sources, 369, n. 3. Wedderburn thinks 8:26 can support a tongues view on two conditions: 1) advocates must leave the idea of speaking in some unlearned but real language and see only wordless sighing at a deep level; and 2) admit expressions of the “weakness” in distinct sorts of groans at various times, as when indignant at injustice or when at a loss for words in a crisis, 377. Cf. also Krister Stendahl, “Paul at Prayer,” *Interpretation* 34 (1980):244.

⁵¹ Cranfield, *Romans*, 423; Thomas Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996) 178-79; Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 561-62; Obeng, “The Spirit Intercession Motif in Paul,” *Expository Times*, 95:12 (Sept. 1984):362; Peter O’Brien, “Romans 8:26, 27,” 70-71; Michel de Goedt, “The Intercession of the Spirit in Christian Prayer (Rom 8.26-27),” *Concilium*, 9:8 (Nov 1972):32-33; Gaugler, *Römer*, 323; W. Brownson, “Protestant Exegesis of Romans 8:26-27, A History and an Interpretation,” Th.D. diss. (Princeton Theological Seminary; 1963) 158-61.

⁵² 1 Corinthians 14:16, 17 refer twice to “giving of thanks.”

⁵³ Edgar shows that tongues, even if angelic, are languages, not groanings without words, nor inaudible words (*Satisfied*, 179). Indeed, the description of the phenomenon in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is γλώσσας λαλέιν, as Brownson emphasizes, “Protestant Exegesis,” 159, 185-86.

⁵⁴ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:423-24, in v. 27 “The Spirit’s groanings are not spoken, because they do not need to be, since God knows the Spirit’s intention without its being expressed.” Cf. also Moo, 561-62; Edgar, 178-79; H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. H. S. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 60; de Goedt, 33; John R. W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994) 245; cf. the detailed study in Mark J. Davio, “The Intercession of the Holy Spirit, Romans, 8:26, 27,” M. Div. thesis, (La Mirada, CA: Talbot Theological Seminary, 1980) 54-57.

⁵⁵ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:423; Gavin, *Resurrection*, 72; and Gaugler, 322-23, see a language of the Spirit, i.e. of heaven, in words beyond mere human comprehension or expression.

thus the words would not be beyond His capability to utter. He is even able to search and know the deep things of God, let alone of men (1 Cor 2:10).

Third, while the Spirit's intercessory help meets a problem that *all* Christians have, as all are subject to this "weakness," only *some* spoke in tongues or had the gift of tongues in NT passages.⁵⁶ Every set of verses in the flow of the passage refers to blessing for *all* believers — encouragement arising from power, privilege, prospect, prayer, purpose, and preservation.

Some have reasoned that the groans of v. 26 must be by believers because the Spirit, as the infinite God, would not Himself have need to groan; He would not be subject to such emotions.⁵⁷ Others understand that the Spirit can and does "groan" as v. 26 seems more naturally and distinctly to say on its own right.⁵⁸ Mounce contends that the Spirit can groan in view of Gethsemane, especially Luke 22:44, where Jesus, as the God-man, shows intense emotional/spiritual involvement in prayer.⁵⁹ Scripture can speak of the Spirit expressing intense emotion. In Isaiah 63:9-10, in all of Israel's affliction, the Spirit felt affliction (, , [s ʔa ʔr], "distressed, in anguish," cf. Judg 10:16). When Israel rebelled, they "grieved the Holy Spirit." In Isaiah 54:8 God has an outburst of righteous anger in turning away from sinful Israel (cf. also 56:17). Hosea 11:8 shows God's emotional feelings, i.e. "My heart is turned over within Me, All my compassions are kindled." Stott suggests that the Spirit groans in identifying with believers' groans and pain.⁶⁰ He has no need to groan for Himself but groans for saints, as He has no need Himself to be filled but fills, no need to be led but leads, no need for wisdom, but imparts it. Ephesians 4:30 exhorts believers not to grieve the Holy Spirit, which shows that He can experience in His realm what human description can call grief.

The prayer in 8:26 should not be narrowed to times of being able only to *sigh* rather than *say* prayer, although sighing is an experience that believers sometimes have.⁶¹ It is not probable that Paul would reduce the focus only to this

⁵⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:10, 28-30; 14:5.

⁵⁷ Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (McDill AFB, FL: MacDonald, 1958) 388. Haldane reasons that the Spirit cannot be subject to such emotions, then three lines later seems to take this back by writing that the emotion here is from the Spirit as He produces, supports, and causes the groans. Similarly, D. M. Lloyd-Jones says the Spirit cannot groan as a member of the Godhead, (*Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 8:17-39* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975] 135-36). Later, the same writer admits (138), "It is the Spirit Himself, ultimately, who is making the intercession through believers." But if the Spirit cannot groan, how can He do it ultimately?

⁵⁸ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:423-24; Robert Mounce, *Romans*, 186; Stott, *Romans*, 245.

⁵⁹ Mounce, *Romans*, 186.

⁶⁰ Stott, *Romans*, 245.

⁶¹ Cf. n. 46.

smaller, occasional experience. The prayer details, in this context, consistently refer to general blessings relevant for Christians at all times. Nor does it appear probable that Paul, in his one reference to believers having the Spirit's intercession as a help, would trim his perspective only to cases of human sighs. This would bypass the great majority of prayers, which are in words, whatever the aspects in these prayers. In the best guidebook for prayer, the Scripture itself, the hundreds of prayers spread through most of the sixty-six books, notably in the Psalms, invariably are with words, even in Hannah's case.⁶²

Neither is it convincing that "without words" means that either believers or the Spirit would be *unable to find words*, i.e. the prayers are *unutterable*. In the Bible's hundreds of references to believers' burdens for which they appeal for divine assistance, the examples involve asking in words, however distressed, whether haltingly or fluently. Believers know how to pray in words (Matt 7:7-11; 21:22), even in cases of asking amiss (James 4:2-3). But v. 26 does not link *believers* with the term "without words." Rather, it is the *Spirit* that is distinctly connected with this interceding. And it is extremely difficult to conceive of the Spirit finding believers' words inexpressible, as God knows all things and challenges man in asking, "is anything too difficult for Me?" (Jer 32:27). Instead, the Spirit's groans are unuttered, because He does not *need* words to communicate with the Father at the throne.⁶³ Likewise the Father does not require words to know the intent.

Even when it is only humans praying, the Father already knows what those who petition Him need before they ask in words (Matt 6:8). God knows the very intent of the heart before words are even formed (Ps 139:1-4). He has perfect knowledge of all things, such as man's motives (Rom 2:16; 1 Cor 4:5) and thoughts (Heb 4:12), and Christ is able to search the hearts to judge and reward (Rev 2:23). Christians can use words in their prayers, as the vast majority of Bible books that mention prayer or its content attests.⁶⁴ The Spirit takes the content to a higher mode of communication, articulating the prayers before the Father *without* words.⁶⁵ No groans of humans would be unfathomable for the Spirit, who knows not only everything about men but even the deep things of God (1 Cor 2:10).

⁶² In 1 Samuel 1:13, Hannah's lips formed words that were on her heart, yet softly or silently; the priest saw the moving lips but could not hear the words. In all of her prayer, she was using words (vv. 11-12, "she continued praying").

⁶³ As a man knows his own spirit's thought even if without words, the Spirit knows the thoughts of God (1 Cor 2:11), and God knows the thoughts of the Spirit (Rom 8:27).

⁶⁴ The only Bible books with no reference to prayer are Esther, Obadiah, and Nahum.

⁶⁵ This does not mean that believers' prayers go only to a "halfway house," to the Spirit, and never get to the Father unedited. God hears them just as He knows all things, yet sees them also with

The Awareness (8:27a)

Paul further clarifies the intercession in v. 27, focusing on the Father searching the *hearts* and not on the idea of *tongues* or *words*. The text emphasizes God's awareness of the intent of the hearts, perceiving the Spirit's mind (φρονήμα; *phronēma*). This occurs as the great Intercessor focuses on His quest, seeking what is true to God, to help the children and heirs of God.

In the context, the same word used for "mind" (v. 27) surfaces twice in 8:6 and again in 8:7. It is the whole mind that is in view, the thought-network of a person as to its orientation and value system, or the focus of its intent at a given time. This is true of a mind devoted to things that the ethical "flesh" prizes, which in God's appraisal are of a worthless (even sinful) quality, nature, or effect called "death" (v. 6a). Or, it pertains to a mind keyed to the values which the Spirit esteems, which are of a treasured quality and effect called "life and peace" (v. 6b). The mind in its system of moral values acclimated to things of the "flesh" is hostile toward God, unable to be submissive toward His Law (v. 7) or to delight in it (7:22). It is incapable of pleasing God (v. 8). A mind drawn to the Spirit is identified with His values and a channel of the fruit that He produces (cf. 6:22; 7:4; Gal 5:22f.), such as freedom (v. 2), life and peace (v. 6), yieldedness to God (v. 7) and whatever pleases Him (v. 8).⁶⁶ The human mind in tune with the Spirit embraces such qualities, for He is the source for the "life and peace" (v. 6).

Verse 27, however, is stated quite differently, referring to the mind the *Spirit* Himself has in His interceding. It is, as in Romans 11:34, the mind invested with God's infinite wisdom and knowledge. Reference to this mind in 8:27 is preceded by the statement in v. 26 that believers habitually do not know what to pray, but (ἀλλὰ, in strong contrast) the Spirit Himself continues to intercede on their behalf. And v. 27 says that "God knows what the mind of the Spirit is." God knows the content which the Spirit is expressing in advocacy as "*He* (the Spirit) intercedes on behalf of the saints according to God." The focus now is not on believers praying, but on the Spirit praying *for* them.

It is reasonable to assume that God the Father is in Paul's thought as the One who "searches the hearts." In the passage, Paul distinguishes Father and Son (8:3, 17, 29, 32, 34, 39), and the epistle as a whole distinguishes Father and Spirit (5:5; 8:3-4, 11, 14, 16; 14:17; 15:13). In Romans 8 the *Father* searches hearts (v. 27), whereas elsewhere the *Son* searches minds and hearts to judge them (Rev 2:23), and the *Spirit* searches all things, even the deep things of God (1 Cor 2:10).

a mind in accord with the Spirit's helping effort. He answers "yes," "no," or "wait until a yes or no can come later."

⁶⁶ In other places in Romans, the Spirit's fruit is in love (5:5), righteousness, joy, and peace (14:17).

God the Father knows the mind (intent) of the Spirit who indwells believers (cf. Rom 8:9). Of course He also searches all the hearts of humans (1 Chr 28:9; cf. Rom 2:16; 1 Cor 4:5), even hearts which are deceitful and wicked (Jer 17:9-10). Scripture states that His eyes run throughout the earth seeing hearts, that He may show Himself strong on behalf of those whose hearts are sound toward Him (2 Chr 16:9). He sees the evil and the good everywhere (Prov 15:3), knows thoughts before tongues express words (Ps 139:1-4), weighs actions (1 Sam 2:3), and knows all, so that He is qualified to assess accounts when rewarding (Ps 62:12; Prov 24:12; Dan 7:10). He tries hearts and minds (Ps 7:9; Jer 11:20), and sees in secret when people pray (Matt 6:4).

It appears arbitrary to argue, as Lenski does, that God's searching of hearts implies that these particular groanings come from the believers who have the hearts. Lenski supposes that if it meant groans by the Spirit, Paul could have used the words "He who searches the deep things of the Spirit," or some other phrase to this effect.⁶⁷ Lenski interjects subjective imagination, guessing what Paul might have said. Besides, both Romans 8:26 and 27 clarify expressly that the Spirit is the one interceding. Hearts are mentioned because that is where the Spirit indwells (vv. 8, 11), and the innermost central place where He ministers (cf. Eph 3:16-17). Lenski's reasoning that the Spirit adds "His intercessory meaning to human groanings" is accurate only if the groanings of v. 26 are seen as distinctly the Spirit's own, totally distinct from the groans of believers.

MacRae proposes another view, that the one who searches the hearts is not the Father but the Spirit.⁶⁸ The Spirit knows the mind of the believer, which He influences in 8:5-6, because the Spirit intercedes for saints according to God's will. This view is not as natural, imposing a strain on the words to manage them to this idea. The One who searches human hearts in Scripture is normally God. Second, it fits very well that the Spirit is in view as the intercessor in v. 26, even in the distinct wording *αὐτὸ τὸ πνεῦμα* (*auto to pneuma*, "the Spirit Himself"), allowing v. 27 to naturally refer to One who is distinct from the Spirit and who responds to His intercession. The "mind" at this point in Romans 8 is more reasonably that of the One whom the immediate context defines as helping

⁶⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1961) 548. It is more natural, and contrary to Lenski, that God is said to search the hearts in view of where the *Spirit* indwells (v. 9).

⁶⁸ George MacRae, "A Note on Romans 8:26-27," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980):227-30. He admits that "virtually all modern translations and most modern commentators, do not question" reference to God (228). His logic that the majority view allows a communication between the divine persons, which is unknown to the NT, is not necessary. In both the OT and NT, communion from one member of the Godhead to another occurs (Ps 110:1 or as in Matt 3:17; 22:41-45; John 12:28; Heb 10:5-9).

believers—the Holy Spirit. When Paul has the mind of believers in view, attendant details make this clear (8:5-6; cf. 14). But that is quite different from 8:26-27.

In 8:27, the statement that the Father knows the Spirit's mind apparently means that He as God knows intuitively, instinctively (οἶδεν, *oiden*). A form of the same word for "knowing" is used three times in succession in vv. 26-28. Saints often do not know intuitively what to pray as they should, but God always knows the Spirit's mind which does grasp this, and both Father and Spirit are faithful to seek what is best. In v. 28, believers do know intuitively by Scripture's tutelage and faith that God works all for their good.

The Agreement (8:27b)

The rest of the verse shows that the Father knows the content of the Spirit's prayers for believers "that" or else "because" the Spirit intercedes according to God. In each saint's prayer, that which comports with His nature, value system and plan, the Father "knows" in His infinite, intuitive and immediate ability. He also knows what does not, where believers' weakness has its limitations, as "we do not know the thing for which we should pray as it is fitting."

Paul does not guarantee the answer by using some phrase as in other prayer passages, such as "and they shall receive," or God will "do it," or "and it shall be done unto them." Yet factors in the passage spark confidence that His answers will be beneficial ones. First, the strongest guarantee is that finally, by the Spirit's assist, the intercession is "according to God." A second voucher is that the One who intercedes is *helping* in bold contrast to the saints' *weakness*. As a result, the spiritual outlook is positive, brightened by the Spirit's sufficiency as He works to secure real assets. All is upbeat in the eagerly expecting *hope* (vv. 24-25); now "likewise" all is optimistic in the *help!* Third, v. 28 is fused very closely with vv. 26-27;⁶⁹ it immediately expands encouragement as saints "know that to those who love God He works all things together for good . . ." It would be unfitting to feel smitten by pessimism, as if the intercession offers no cheer in answers. Fourth, consistently with this, the entire tone of Romans 8 is reassuring: God provides power, privilege, prospect, prayer that helps, purpose, and preservation. True, the passage is realistically candid about the suffering, futility in creation, and the saints' weakness. Still, the Spirit's presence in providing the "firstfruits" which assure full victory for which saints hope, as well as His prayer help, ignites a glow in hearts that can rout any gloom.

The Father knows what is the mind of the Spirit in respect to the Spirit's representing believers with intercessory pleadings. He knows in the sense of perfect perception and intimate, loving involvement, being aware that the prayer is

⁶⁹ Cf. n. 29.

“according to God.” The Spirit who is fully at one with God’s mind in ministering it to *God’s people* (1 Cor 2:9-16) is also wholly in harmony with His mind when interceding about needs of these *saints to Him*.

Some propose a translation in which the Father “approves” (rather than “knows”) what is the Spirit’s mind. They prefer to have the ὅτι (*hoti*) mean “because” the prayer is in harmony with God. The logic for this conception is that the Father “knows” the Spirit’s mind (intent) whether it is according to Him or not; He knows all things. But He can “approve” this mind “because” it is true to Him.⁷⁰ This view is possible, but such wording is not urgently demanded in Paul’s thought. “Because” may not be required in that the Spirit’s mind works in concord with the Father’s in every case. The verse simply states this positive point naturally, as it is (“knows what is the mind [in its true intent] . . . that . . .” it is in harmony with His own mind-set). So, the ὅτι is better taken in an explicative sense (“that”), explaining the content that is the prayer intent (“mind”) of the Spirit, that it is in harmony with God. To render “knows” as “approves” is far from normative,⁷¹ and Hodge furnishes no example. The rendering “knows” makes adequate sense, and while either “that” or “for/because” can be defended, “that” is favored here.⁷²

The Spirit intercedes “for saints.” The preposition “for” (ὐπέρ, *hyper*, “on behalf of”) is frequently employed to describe God’s work on behalf of believers in Romans 8. The preposition is used to convey that the Spirit Himself “intercedes for” God’s heirs (v. 26). Then v. 27 adds that the Spirit “intercedes for” the saints, differing in this instance by using the verb followed by the preposition ὐπέρ. God is “for us” in v. 31, gave His Son “for us” (v. 32), and in v. 34 Christ also “intercedes for us.” Spirit, Father and Son, though distinguished, unite in doing what is good for the redeemed. Verse 28 sums up the entire, panoramic way that God is orchestrating “all things” for the believers’ welfare.

Since no definite article precedes “saints,” attention is drawn not to saints in some distinct category (such as some with particular spiritual gifts, etc.), but to the fact that the intercession is for those in this class, meeting the quali-

⁷⁰ C. Hodge, *Romans*, 279-80; NASB; NKJV. But Hodge argues for rendering “knows” as “approves,” whereas the translations have “knows” and “because,” as Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 563.

⁷¹ Heinrich Seesemann concludes that out of 320 NT times, οἶδα means “to know,” and never gives the sense “to approve” (“οἶδα,” *TDNT*, 5:117; cf. also *BAGD*, 558-59, not listing “approve” among five meanings).

⁷² Forms of the word in Romans 8, even surrounding v. 27, refer to knowing (vv. 22, 26, 28). And ὅτι occurs 7 other times in Romans 8, always here in an explanatory sense of content (vv. 16, 18, 21, 22, 28, 36, 38). Cf. “knows . . . that” in Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:424; W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 273, 278; Lenski, *Romans*, 548; Brownson, “Protestant Exegesis,” 164, 187. Leon Morris sees no way to decide between a causal or explicative sense in *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 329.

fiction that they are saints. The Spirit engages in this prayer on behalf of "saints," beneficiaries of spiritual assets that the epistle describes. They are all whom God redeemed through grace (3:24ff.), all to whom He imputed righteousness not of works but as a pure gift (4:1-5), all whom He justified on the basis of Christ's one act of dying in their place and for them (5:12ff.), all whom He reconciled to Himself on the basis of Christ's blood (5:9-11), all whom He placed in Christ Jesus free from any condemnation (8:1) and safe from any separation (vv. 35-39). And, as "saints," they are enhanced by every other encouragement that Romans 8 advances.

Spirit-performed intercession rises to the standard "according to God" as in the phrase *κατὰ θεὸν* (*kata theon*). What God perceives is that the Spirit's advocacy is in utter sympathy with Him. This fact is conveyed by the word order prior to, and immediately following, the mention that the Spirit "intercedes" (v. 27). The *κατὰ* appears often in the NT with the accusative (as *θεὸν* in the present instance) to focus on the norm, standard or measure in which a matter is relevant. Paul repeats *κατὰ* immediately in v. 28 of saints called "according to [God's] purpose," a manner that is no less than that norm or standard. It is the purpose that God is carrying out by His sovereign design that is crucial to His redemptive plan. "We know," Paul reasons, "that to those who love God He is working all things together for good . . .," and then he gives the overall reason that informs our knowing this. It is "that" (*ὅτι*, v. 29), a word which introduces the facets or "steps" God accomplished to enact this encouraging redemption for those who believe: those He foreknew, He predestined, He called, He justified, and He glorified (vv. 29-30). Prayer "according to God" at the end of v. 27 fits as a part of the more comprehensive "all things" that are "according to" or consistent with God's "purpose" in v. 28.

Paul's bunching *κατὰ* three times in 2 Cor 7:9-11 offers help.⁷³ The Corinthians were grieved "according to God," grieved in a manner consistent with repentance and according to God's standard. In the many occurrences of *κατὰ* with the accusative case referring to God, the idea reflects an emphasis. What is referred to is according to the will, impulse, standard, or norm of; the spotlight is on sensitivity to think, speak or act in a way consistent to that norm.⁷⁴

⁷³ In Paul's writings, *κατὰ* precedes many words in phrases. Examples are "according to the flesh" or "the Spirit of holiness" (Rom 1:4), "truth" (2:2), "grace" (4:4, 16), contrast of "the flesh" or "the Spirit" (8:4-5, 12-13), "election" (9:11), "knowledge" (10:2; cf. 1 Pet 3:7), "love" (14:15), "Christ Jesus" (15:5), "the word of God even our Father" (Gal 1:4), "the good pleasure of His [God's] will" (Eph 1:5), and "God" in creating those He saves in righteousness and true holiness (4:24).

⁷⁴ Cf. *κατὰ* plus the accusative as a standard rule of measure in A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 608-09. In Romans, cf. "according to the Spirit" (8:1, 5), "according to the flesh" (8:5, 12, 13), "according to [God's] purpose" (8:28), "according to Christ Jesus" (14:5), "according to love" (14:15). In each

In harmony with this, the Spirit's prayer *κατὰ θεὸν* in Romans 8:27 is in accord with God, shaped to His faithfulness, His will, His wisdom, His values, His love (5:8), His leading, His generosity to give (v. 32), His protection against all things that can conceivably undo the saved eternally (8:33-39), and what is pleasing in His appraisal. The intercession brings matters to register on what is in concord with God, just as the needle of a reliable compass points to the north.

CONCLUSION

God supports His saints in their passage from justification, through the present life of sanctification, until glorification by supplying the blessings that Romans 8 surveys. God gives His Spirit's power so that believers can live in harmony with His intentions, i.e. the privilege of being in His family and the prospect that He will yet finalize their redemption in the fullest sense. He assures them of His purpose, which He works out in stages that He plans to complete for their good, and His preservation that keeps them securely intact in His love. His provision also includes His Spirit's help in praying for them, taking matters beyond their own prayers about life's concerns. He supports them with intercession, despite their weakness in not knowing what to pray, that matches with what God knows is best.

The Spirit intercedes in His own groanings, showing caring empathy. This does not refer to the saints having prayer groans in tongues or in wordless prayers, but to the Spirit's bringing their issues before the Father without Himself needing words. The Spirit seeks to gain, on their behalf, the advantages that infinite wisdom and love can work. These are better for them than being subject to their own limited understanding. As they pray in words, the Spirit intercedes without words. The Spirit's interceding remains faithful (cf. 2 Tim 2:13), whether or not they themselves, in particular matters, pray "in the Spirit." Answers to prayer can vary accordingly (cf. John 15:7; 1 John 5:14-15). The right combination is their "praying in the Spirit" – in tune with God's will (whether or not they grasp it at the moment), coupled with the Spirit's passionate prayer help that is in harmony with God.

example, the idea that fits is "according to the standard of," as God's kind of purpose, will, values. This accords with His will in 12:2; 15:32, with 11:33-36, with glorifying Him (15:6), subjection to Him (8:7), pleasing Him (8:8), and being "acceptable to God" (14:18). Outside of Paul, in regard to prayer, the idea is consistent with John 15:7; 1 John 5:14-15.