

Christianity for Weak People:

How The Holy Spirit Prays for Believers according to Romans 8:26-27

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Abstract

For many Christian believers, especially whose family members suffer a prolonged sickness or multiple disease complications, it is often perplexing for them that God seems delaying to answer their prayers. And in many cases, God seems to let those family members to die. How could it be understood? That is not an easy problem to digest for many believers, especially if they think they already serve God in ministry, or churches, or other occasions. Fortunately, there are also comforting words to encourage us in such a perplexing situation, such as Romans 8:26-27, which suggests that the Holy Spirit also do intercession prayers for believers. And these two verses were followed by verse 8:28, where St. Paul concluded that from the previous two verses, we know that God works through everything for good to them that love God. Probably, that is the origin of a famous phrase: *"God works often in mysterious ways."* This reflective article is intended to shed light on this old question.

Keywords: Pauline eschatology, Letter to Romans, The Holy Spirit's intercession, Christianity for weak people, already/not yet tension.

Introduction

This is a true story. My father had diabetes. He suffered for several years. Finally, he got amnesia. Some Christians commented that probably my father was not living according to God's will. He had sins that need to be confessed. In other words, they perceived that a true Christian will not get sick, or have a car accident, or face any misfortune situation, since he is already saved and God absolutely protects him. Interestingly, such comments can be found among other Christian communities in Indonesia, especially in the Pentecostal community.

The aforementioned real story is from our family. As we hear in many real examples or from our own stories, for many Christian believers, especially whose family members suffer a prolonged sickness or multiple disease complications, it is often perplexing for them that God seems delaying to answer their prayers. And in many cases, God seems to let those family members to die. How could it be understood? That is not an easy problem to digest for many believers, especially if they think they already serve God in ministry, or churches, or other occasions. Fortunately, there are also comforting words to encourage us in such a perplexing situation, such as Romans 8:26-27, which suggests that the Holy Spirit also do intercession prayers for believers.

This review article will discuss this perplexing question by exploring hermeneutics of NT, especially Letter to Romans.

Methodology

Gunther Borkman said, "Behind the letter to the Romans stands the history of the life, work, preaching and struggles of Paul, and where it has found its expression. This history is not only an external but more especially an inner history; a history particularly of his theological thinking."¹ The writer agrees with

¹*The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried, *Paul's last will, and testament*, by Gunther Borkman (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 29

Borkman in a sense that Letter to Romans involves the wholeness of St. Paul, but he does not agree if Romans is only an expression of Paul's context without concerning to the recipient's context. The book of Romans is an expression of Paul's context considering the concrete situation of the Roman church. In other words, Letter to Romans is truly an 'epistle,' not a 'testament.'

Concerning this matter, the writer agrees with what Karl Paul who suggests, Any study of Romans should proceed on the initial assumption that this letter was written by Paul to deal with a concrete situation in Rome. The support for such an assumption is the fact that every other authentic Pauline writing, without exception, is addressed to the specific situation of the churches or person involved.²

In the same line of argument, J. Christiaan Beker, Professor of New Testament Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, stated, "The letter is not only written from a specific situation but also addressing to a specific situation; therefore, its arguments and structural form are didacted by specific needs and circumstances. So that Romans is not simply a summary or dogmatic substance of Pauline

²*The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl Paul Donfried, *False Presuppositions*, by Karl P. Donfried (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 122

thought." ³

To do hermeneutic review properly, we have to take this perspective as 'eye glasses' to look at Letter to Romans. Therefore, in order to fully understand Romans 8:26-27, this writer would like to use historical-grammatical-syntactical method.

Thesis Statement

Romans 8:26-27, especially v. 26, is surrounded by debatable issues. There are two issues in this passage. First, what does Paul mean by 'weakness' in v. 26?. And second, what does Paul mean by '*groanings which cannot be uttered*'?

Regarding the first issue, according to George T. Montague, Marianist priest and professor of Biblical Theology at St. Mary's University of San Antonio, "weakness" here does not refer to suffering or moral weakness as it often does elsewhere but simply to inadequacy to pray "as is appropriate," that is, as God would have it."⁴ But this writer does not think so, because it is not the issue here. This writer believes that "weakness" in v. 26 refers to v. 18, "our present sufferings;" so the issue is "the suffering of this present time."

³J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 70

⁴George T. Montague, *The Spirit: Growth of a Biblical Tradition* (New York/Paramus/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1976), 210.

In the second issue, Kasemann, professor emeritus of New Testament at the University of Tuebingen, said that "It makes good sense, however, if what is at issue is praying in tongues of I Cor. 14:15."⁵ However, this writer views that the "*groanings which cannot be uttered*" is not applied only through the praying in tongues, but it can be in any expression of unuttered groaning.

Hermeneutics review

A. An introduction to Romans 8:26-27

Following the perception above, the writer thought about unbalanced theology, which has taken root from this perception. What kind of theology influences them? Eventually, the writer found that it was exactly what Gordon Fee, an authoritative expert in New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, meant by "an over-eschatological perspective, emphasizing the *already* to the neglect of the *not yet*."⁶ He said:

On the other side lies some equally strong tendencies toward triumphalism - an exaggerated, sometimes exclusive, focus on the already. This extreme

⁵Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980, 1994), 241.

⁶At least this is what I am thinking to such opinion. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publisher, 1996), 143.

is a special temptation in a culture like late-twentieth-century North America, which rejects pain of any kind as a form of evil and avoids suffering at all costs.⁷

That leads the writer to Romans 8:26-27. Since in this passage, Paul spoke about "weakness" (ασθενεια) and Fee observed that there is a "tendency on the part of some to confuse the term "weakness," that is, life *in* the flesh, with life *according to* the flesh."⁸

Through this passage, the writer then tries to understand Paul's concept of weakness and the role of the Spirit in Christians regarding their weakness and this is due to the answer of misperception that the writer has mentioned above. Also, he attempts to deal hermeneutically with another issue surrounding this passage.

B. Historical Context

St. Paul has probably received a fairly comprehensive report about the church in Rome from Aquilla and Priscilla and his associates who had contacted with the church. He seems to have been aware of certain problems and concerns and set out to answer them. It is necessary to realize that Judaism in Rome was

⁷ Ibid, 142.

⁸ Ibid, 141.

closely tied to Judaism in Jerusalem.⁹ So that Jewish Christianity retained a close connection with its Jewish roots in Jerusalem. The main problem appears to have come from the need to frame what McNeile called "a comprehensive apologia for the principle of a universal religion as set over against Jewish nationality."¹⁰ For this reason, Paul deals with the fundamental Christian principle '*righteousness*' as contrasted with the Jewish approach, and then discusses problems of Israel's failure and her relationship to the universal Christian church.¹¹

There may have been also other practical problems, which are reflected in the apostle's ethical injunctions in Romans 12-15. For example, Romans 14:1-15:13 can be interpreted that Paul wrote to heal potential or real divisions among the churches in Rome.¹²

Moreover, Paul was concerned not just for corporate health of the churches in his care, but also for the well-being of individuals. People mattered to Paul, hence in Romans 16 Paul takes the trouble of greeting over twenty-seven people by their names.

⁹James McClintock and James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, vol. IX (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 852-853.

¹⁰A.H. McNeile, *St. Paul: His Life, Letters, and Christian Doctrine*, 1932 in Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Leicester, England: Apollos, and Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 441.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 441

¹² Hawthorne, Gerald F., and Ralph P. Martin. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letter* (Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 1993), "Roman, Letter to", 840

This writer believes that Paul's letter is a clear testimony of his pastoral heart. Indeed his letters are a product of his pastoral care, for through them Paul exercised a pastoral role concerning the churches, which he or his converts had founded. Along with Paul S. Minear, from Yale University Divinity School, this writer is convinced that the letter "reflects a primary concern with pastoral problems and therefore presents a continuous argument designed to meet specific situations in Rome."¹³

C. Literary Context of Romans 8:26-27

In Romans 8, St. Paul builds carefully from one step to the next in ascending order from the depth of chapter seven to the height of the conclusion in chapter eight. If chapter seven was governed by the principle of the Law, so that the imperative preceded the indicative and the rule of the flesh lead to death and sin. In chapter eight the Spirit is sovereign so that the indicative precedes and the rule of the Spirit lead to life and obedience.

In Romans 8:1-11, Christ has saved the believers from the power of sin and the dominion of death. Accordingly, he has effected a moral transformation in

¹³ Paul S. Minear, *The Obedience of Faith: The Purpose of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans*, 2nd ser. 19 (London: SCM Press LTD, 1971), ix.

human nature. The evidence of this transformation is present possession of the Holy Spirit. Then in Romans 8:12-17, Paul drew consequences of life in the Spirit by contrast of life in the flesh. By living in the Spirit, a believer receives filial relationship with God, and the Spirit himself affords the evidence of reality of this relation by communicating an assured consciousness of it. This consciousness includes expectation of inheritance of glory, to be shared with Christ even as His sufferings have been shared.

In Romans 8:18-30, Paul's thinking comes to the *already/not yet* eschatological tension.¹⁴ Paul lapses into a realistic discussion of the imperfect, limited character of the Christian life. The Spirit of Christ within believers brings transformation, and yet the Spirit cannot bring eschatological perfection. Those who are "*in Christ*" continue to live in a world of suffering, decay, futility, and confusion (Romans 8:18-25). The creation itself longs for redemption (Romans 8:22). All are still subjected to hope. And yet within this darkness, the Spirit

¹⁴ Other than Gordon Fee, there are others who support *already/not yet* eschatology, another term for that view is: "inaugurated eschatology." See for instance: G.E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., July 1996. url: <https://www.amazon.com/Presence-Future-Eschatology-Biblical-Realism/dp/0802815316>. Also Joshua S. Hopping, *KINGDOM MISSION THEOLOGY: AN INAUGURATED ESCHATOLOGY VIEW OF WORLD MISSIONS*. Kuna, Idaho, USA, March 2019. David E. Kentie, *Kingdom Now: A New Pentecostal Paradigm of Mission*. Available at academia.edu. Ben Phillips, *Pentecostal Worldview and Eschatology*. March 10, 2021. Url: <https://northpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Professor-Ben-Phillips-Pentecostal-Worldview-and-Eschatology.pdf>. See also the following remark: "The Kingdom of God—announced, inaugurated and given by and in Christ—stands at the heart of the early Christian faith, and not only as something yet to come but as that which has come, is present now and shall come at the end." —Alexander Schmemmann, *Church, World, Mission*, 29. Summer Institute, DBU. url: https://www.dbu.edu/naugle/summer-institute/_documents/handouts/devotions/devo-06-the-kingdom-of-god.pdf

helps the believers to respond to God despite their weaknesses (Rom. 8:26-27). By understanding this role of the Spirit, the believers know that God is ordering all things for their good according to His Divine purpose (Rom. 8:28-30).

Therefore the role of the Spirit in believers is the key to facing the 'already/not yet tension.' This understanding will appear by looking at Paul's thinking in the following way, "...the Spirit helps us in our weakness...(v.26) *now*¹⁵ we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him (v.28)..."

D. Pauline Eschatology

According to some scholars, it is possible to find one motive in St. Paul's theology that predominates the center from which Paul developed other themes of the Gospel. In other words, it is possible to find a key to interpreting Pauline theology. As Marvin Pate suggested, "*eschatological in nature—the overlapping of the two ages (the "already / not yet" tension produced by the Christ event)—is the key to interpreting the apostle.*"¹⁶ Fee captures the New Testament's

¹⁵ The writer translates $\delta\epsilon$ as transitional particle intended *now* instead of *and* which was taken by most translations. This is a possible translation of particle $\alpha\delta\epsilon$ according to William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 170.

¹⁶ Even Pate applied this concept to Paul's major categories of thought: theology, Christology, soteriology, anthropology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, society, and anthology in his book, C. Marvin Pate, *The End of the Age Has Come: The Theology of Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995): 41.

modification of the preceding Jewish twofold delineation:

The essential framework of the self-understanding of primitive Christianity ... is an eschatological one. Christian had come to believe that, in the event of Christ, the new (coming) age had dawned, and that, especially through Christ's death and resurrection and the subsequent gift of the Spirit, God had set the future in motion, to be consummated by yet another coming (*Parousia*) of Christ. There was therefore an essentially an eschatological existence. They lived "between the times" of the beginning and the consummation of the end. Already God had secured their ... salvation; already they were the people of the future, living the life of the future in the present age and enjoying its benefits. But they still awaited the glorious consummation of their salvation. Thus they lived in an essential tension between the "*already*" and the "*not yet.*"¹⁷

Even he stated, "It seems impossible to understand Paul without recognizing eschatology as the essential framework of his theology thinking."¹⁸

Particularly in the light of what Fee said, the writer proposes that the

¹⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988): 19

¹⁸Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publisher, 1996): 6

Eschatological-Natural is the essential framework to fully understand what Paul meant in Romans 8:26-27.

EXEGESIS PROPER

2.1. The Spirit is a concern to our weakness (Romans 8:26)

v.26a *Likewise also the Spirit assists us in our weakness: for we do not know not what we should pray as we ought.*

(ωσαυτωj δε και το πνευμα συναντιλαμβανεται τη ασθεπεια ημων το γαρ τι προσευξωμεθα καθο δει ουκ οιδαμεν).

“ **Likewise also** ”. At least four different ideas have been proposed by some scholars regarding what is the meaning behind "likewise also" (KJV, RSV), or "in the same way" (NIV). First, the phrase "likewise" is referring to the activity of "groaning" that Paul is setting alongside the groaning of the creation (v.22), and the groaning of the believers (v.23), a third groaning, that of the Spirit (v.26).¹⁹ Second, it is referring to v.24, as hope sustains the believer in sufferings, so, in the

¹⁹ Some scholars who believed that v.26 is referring to the activity of "groan" are Cranfield, James Dunn, John Wesley, Alfred E. Garvie

same manner, the Spirit does also.²⁰ Third, it is referring to the very end of v. 25, that another help to our endurance, our patience is one help to it, but not only one, the Spirit also helps our weakness.²¹ Fourth, "Paul is ...probably intending to draw the argument back into the larger whole by referring back to v. 16."²² Thus the flowing of thought in this idea will be: "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit"; "likewise also the Spirit assists us in our weakness."²³

The "likewise also" points to something in the preceding context to which what follows in these two verses are linked. The question is which context? Let us imagine as the early reader read this passage. The writer strongly assumes that the early reader will refer to the closest context said before this adverb. And the immediately preceding context in vv. 24-25, Paul therefore probably intended to draw the argument back into these verses. Since the issue in vv. 24-25 is hope - '*hope*' was mentioned five times in these verses - thus: "As hope sustains the believer in sufferings, so, in the same manner, the Spirit does also."

"The Spirit assists us in our weakness". The word "assists" (*sunantilambano*) has the indicative mood is, in general, the mood of assertion, or presentation of

²⁰ Charles Hodge, John Stott, William Sanday, John Murray

²¹ Henry Afford, Emerton

²² Gordon Fee has taken this idea. As far as I have been able to discover, no one else has taken it this way, except Gordon Fee, C. Gordon Fee, 576.

²³ Ibid.

certainty. According to Daniel B. Wallace:

This belongs to the presentation (i.e., the indicative may present something as being certain or real, though the speaker might not believe it). To call the indicative mood the mood of certainty or fact would imply (1) that one cannot lie in the indicative, (2) that one cannot be mistaken in the indicative.²⁴

Also, it uses the present tense that may be used to make a statement of a general, timeless fact. "It does not say that something *is* happening, but that something *does* happen."²⁵ The action or state continues without a time limit. The verb is used "in a proverbial statement or general maxims about what occurs at all times."²⁶

In another view, this is what Paul has experienced. This is not just theology or what Paul was thinking, but this is coming from what Paul did experience. The Spirit assists believers in reality in the Christian life and occurs at all times.

The word for "*assists*" found in LXX refers to the support given to Moses by the appointment of 70 elders (Exod. 18:22; Num. 11:17) and in New Testament

²⁴ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 448.

²⁵ William. Grammar Notes. 27.

²⁶ Fanning. Verbal Aspect. 208

reference Luke 10:40 when Martha says to the Lord Jesus concerning Mary, "...Tell her to help me!" The word "assists" (*sunantilambano*) is made up of three words. The first word means "together with," (*sun*). The second word means "over against," (*anti*), and the third word means "to take," (*lambano*). The word 'together' is important for understanding the idea of how the Spirit works and indwells in believers. Fritz Rienecker describes *sunantilambano* as "to lend a hand together with, at the same time with one, to help, to come to the aid of someone."²⁷ The idea is that of two people taking something over against one another. To figure out this idea D. M. Lloyd-Jones illustrated,

Think of a man struggling to carry some heavy load and almost at the point of collapsing. Suddenly someone comes along and says, "Let me get hold of the other end of your load." So that instead of the man having to carry this load that was too much for the one man acting alone.²⁸

Robertson wrote, "The Holy Spirit lays hold of our weakness along with (*sun*) us and carries his part of the burden facing us (*anti*) as if two men were

²⁷ Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, ed. Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 367.

²⁸ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 8:17-39 The Final Perseverance of the Saints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 132

carrying a log, one at each end."²⁹ In this sense, the person helping does not take the entire load but helps the other person in his endeavor. So the Holy Spirit, indwelling the believer, comes to the aid of that believer in his weakness, not by taking over the responsibility.

" **Our weakness** " (τ ε α σ θ ε ν ε ι α). Concerning the case of the word "weakness" Robertson informed that, "The accusative measures an idea as to its content, scope, direction."³⁰ Thus the accusative uses are to describe it as the case of extent, or limitation. This word points to the weakness of believers; it is the direction of weakness. Paul was not talking about the weakness of all humankind. The next question is whether "our weakness" refers to the weakness associated with the present sufferings or to our weakness in prayer itself. As the writer mentioned before, George T. Montague proposed that weakness is simply the inadequacy to pray as appropriate as God would have it.³¹ The writer does not think so if that is the meaning of weakness. Chamberlain suggested that the only scientific way in which to decide this idea is to appeal to the Pauline

²⁹ A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919),573.

³⁰ A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919),468.

³¹ George T. Montague, S.M., *The Holy Spirit: Growth of a Biblical Tradition* (New York/Paramus/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1976),210.

viewpoint as reflected in the New Testament.³² But the writer does not see if we have to investigate all Paul's concepts about weakness in this passage to understand what Paul means.

Then it arises a question, how do we find the meaning of *weakness*? To find the proper answer, we need to investigate this word by researching thoroughly the context. Romans 8:18-30 is the context. In v. 18 Paul considers that believers' present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in them. By that verse, Paul comes to the "already/not yet" tension. We are saved already but we still suffer in this world. Therefore we are very much longing for the redemption of our body (v. 23), even the whole creation (vv.20-22). Fortunately, we have hope of the future glory to maintain our endurance in facing the present sufferings (v.24-25). Moreover, we are not people merely future-oriented, but we also have the Holy Spirit to assist us in our daily present lives (v.26). If the Spirit of God helps us even in our weakness, the necessary result to our understanding is "Now we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him."(v.28).

Then the writer arrives after the meaning of "weakness" according to the context. Clearly that the weakness that Paul was talking about refers to the

³² Chamberlain. *Exegetical Grammar*. 34-35

weakness associated with the present sufferings. Along with Gordon Fee, this writer can say, "Most likely, given the context and Paul's use of this term in such contexts elsewhere, he is referring to the "weakness" which is regularly associated with our "suffering" in this present age."³³

"for we do not know for what we should pray as we ought". "For" (το γαρ), the *το* binding together the clause and here implying 'exempli gratia.' No wonder if Charles Hodge stated: "This is said as an illustration and confirmation of the previous general declaration; it is an example of how the Spirit aids us."³⁴

Even more, Phillip translates this word as "'for example," we do not know how to pray worthily."³⁵ Thus the writer agrees that this phrase is an example of how the Spirit assists us. Because in the preceding sentence, Paul's main point is the Spirit assists us, not the "weakness," therefore it makes sense if in this part Paul gives an example of how the Spirit aids us.

"We do not know for what we should pray as we ought". Some scholars have

³³ Gordon Fee, 578

³⁴ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 278. Also, C.K. Barret suggested, "Paul proceeds to an example of the Spirit aid." In C.K. Barret, *Black's New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans*. Ed. Henry Chadwick (London: A & C. Blak, 1991), 157.

³⁵ Phillips Modern English.

proposed that Paul here is borrowing a Gnostic idea: man does not know the secret words with which to win access to the divinity but once initiated the divine spirit speaks through him the correct formula which may never be communicated to the public. But that is far from Paul's thinking.

Some scholars suggested this phrase is talking about "we do not know how to pray", in terms of the worthy formula. The others suggested about "we do not know what to pray for," in terms of the object of prayer, and the others proposed "we do not know how to word our prayer," in terms, which word should we choose. William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam suggested that *ti proseuchometha* is strictly rather, "What we ought to pray" than "what we ought to pray for," i.e. "how we are to word our prayers," not "what we are to choose as the objects of prayer."³⁶

The writer strongly believes that our "not knowing" does not refer to our not knowing how to pray, as a method or formula. Paul has never taught about a prayer method, because all of which assume that believers do not need instruction on prayer, they already know how to pray. To support this opinion Kasemann said,

The whole of the New Testament encourages us to pray in trust and

³⁶ William Sanday, and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. 5th ed. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1977), 213.

cheerfulness. Vigorously everything heavenly and earthly of which man has need. Prayer, intercession, thanksgiving, and adoring praise are frequently heard in it to an exemplary degree. Paul nowhere shows himself to have any reservation whatsoever, and it is, in general, the case that every prayer in the name of Jesus and prayed from a state of sonship is pleasing God.³⁷

To fully understand what our "not knowing is," first we have to refer to "as we ought" (καθο δει) and second we have to refer to "our present weakness" or "our present suffering." First, the statement stands within the context of Paul's powerful eschatological conviction that God has a purpose for his creation, that it is drawing forward steadily to its (near) climax, and that believers' aspiration in prayer should be to fit their lives into that ongoing purpose.³⁸ Thus we do not know according to God's purpose. Second, sometimes our present sufferings make us frustrated, disappointed, and distressed, as a result, we do not know how to word our prayer. Does it sound familiar in our experience? To get this point the writer would like to offer what Richard W. De Haan, wrote:

³⁷ Ernst Kasemann, *Perspectives on Paul*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1971, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 128.

³⁸ James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 1-8*, vol. 38, ed. Ralph P. Martin (Dallas, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1988), 477.

When intense pain, deep grief, or our inability to know what is best hinders us from articulating specific requests, and we can only say in deep anguish, "Thy will be done," the Holy Spirit comes to our help.³⁹

By the way, the writer does not want to be overlooked on this matter, and he agrees with Kasemann's emphasis,

Primarily it is not a matter of what we can or cannot do but of the work of the Spirit, and he does not take over a share of the work but comes with divine power to aid those who are assaulted on earth.⁴⁰

We still have one question left: why did Paul present prayer as an example? John Murray, a professor of Systematic Theology of Westminster Theological Seminary Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, answered because "prayer covers every aspect of our need, and our weakness is exemplified and laid bare by the fact that we know not what to pray for as is met and proper."⁴¹

³⁹ Richard W. De Haan, *The World on Trial: Studies in Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), 99.

⁴⁰ Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980, 1994), 240.

⁴¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: the English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*. Vol 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1968, reprint, 1977), 311.

2.2. The Spirit intercedes within us (Romans 8:26b)

V. 26b but the Spirit appeals (on our behalf) with inarticulate groanings.

(αλλα αυτο ο πνευμα υπερεντυγχανει στεναγμοι̇ αλαλητοι̇)

“But the Spirit makes appeal (in our behalf).” This sentence is in the form of a “not/but” contrast, which is intended to explain the first one by elaboration. This is how the Spirit assists us in our weakness. The “but” clause is probably best understood as picking up on “our weakness” from the prior sentence: in our present weakness, we do not know what to pray for as we ought. Thus, because we do not know what to pray, “the Spirit himself appeals (intercedes) on our behalf.”

The phrase *auto to pneuma* places emphasis upon the fact that the Spirit is the subject of the action: “the Spirit himself.”⁴² What does the Spirit do? He *uperentugchanei* in our behalf; “*entugchan*” means originally ‘to fall in with,’ and hence ‘to accost with entreaty,’ and so simply ‘to entreat.’⁴³ Relating to our behalf, this word means “to plead or intercede on behalf of someone”. Robertson said, “It is a picturesque word of

⁴² Wayne R. Spear, *The Theology of Prayer: A Systematic Study of the Biblical Teaching on Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 45

⁴³ William Sanday, and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. 5th ed. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1977), 214.

rescue by one who happens on or happens upon another in trouble and in his behalf pleads with 'unuttered groaning' or with 'sighs that baffle words'."⁴⁴

"with inarticulate groanings." Now we come to the most ambiguous word in this passage. What do *stenagmois alaletois* mean? The "*stenagmois*" was translated as "groanings," and it seems to refer to v.22 and v.23. According to v. 23, the noun "groanings" is based in part on an understanding of within ourselves as meaning "inwardly." If we relate this understanding with *alaletois*, then we get a clearer picture that the "groanings *alaletois*" occur within ourselves. Does it mean "wordless"? Gordon Fee argued that "The majority, however, understand it not to refer to audible groaning, without the use of words; rather, they understand it to mean "inexpressible," that is, groaning of a kind that cannot be put into the word at all."⁴⁵

Is there any empirical activity of Christian prayer with which these "groaning of the Spirit" can be identified? Before we determine which empirical activity of Christian prayer can be identified, we have to consider some contextual

⁴⁴ A.T. Robertson. *Word Picture in the New Testament*. 6 vol (New York: Harper, 1930) was cited by Cleon L. Rogers Jr. & Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 331.

⁴⁵ Gordon D. Fee, 580

clues. First, the Spirit was understood as a subject in this passage, and the word "assists" has a sense of "together." Thus, we understand that the way the Spirit assists us is the Spirit praying within us.

Second, why did Paul use an ambiguous word? If Paul intended "inexpressible", why he did not use the appropriate word which unambiguously means? And if he intended "silent," why not simply say so? Even if he intended "speaking in tongues," why not exactly say so? The writer assumes that these questions would not come up to Paul from the early readers. They fully understood what Paul meant. These such questions arise from us, the contemporary reader, because our distance from Paul's own spirituality and from that of the early readers with which he was associated, not to mention from their culture in general, has left us largely in the dark, and therefore with some considerable discussion, as to what precisely he was describing in this passage. Thus, the early readers fully understood certainly what Paul meant. Therefore we can assume that what Paul meant is the common experience of believers or a very known spiritual phenomenon. Third, by reading thoroughly vv. 22-27 we get an understanding that these sentences as a whole and this phrase, in particular, refer to a kind of private praying.

These clues lead us to some crucial points: (a) the Spirit is the subject of

the verb "interceding," that is, the Spirit himself is seen as praying from within us, and (b) the person involved does not understand what the Spirit is saying - or not saying, as the case may be,⁴⁶ (c) this spiritual phenomenon which Paul points out is the common experience of believers in their private praying. Regarding these points, the writer agrees that,

Here the *pneuma* is not thought of as *tertia persona* but as having become one with man. It has entered into union with the human *kardia* and their fashion prayers are a charismatic dealing with God like speaking with tongues, whether with or without the corresponding forms.⁴⁷

When we turn to Paul's other notations about prayer, especially private prayer, the writer agrees with what Gordon Fee concluded, "Finally, since this is the only form of prayer in Paul's letters that is specifically said to be *πνευματι* ("by the Spirit"), and since Paul wishes that all would so pray..., it is arguable, although not certain, that this is (*praying in tongues*) also what he meant when he urged the Ephesians to "pray *εν πνευματι*" (6:18, q.v.).⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Gordon Fee, 581.

⁴⁷ TDNT Vol. I: 376

⁴⁸ Gordon Fee, 582.

2.3. The Spirit intercedes in accordance with God's will (Romans 8:27)

V. 27. But he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

(ο δε ερευνων τας καρδιας οιδεν τι το φρονημα του πνυματος οτι κατα θεον εντυγχανει υπερ αγιον).

“But he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit”. Finally, a few further words are needed as to what Paul says about the Spirit in this final clause. The "but" opposed to "inarticulate groanings," Thus, though it is inarticulate groanings, he who searches our hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit. On the other side, this sentence features that the Spirit is a person, not "thing," So the writer does not agree with the way the KJV translated the Spirit as "it."

“...because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will”.

In this clause, we find the Spirit as an intercessor. It is interesting that only in this verse in the New Testament, the Spirit was interpreted by Paul as an intercessor. Since the concept of the Spirit as an intercessor is only here, we face the difficulty to find the understanding behind it. According to E. A Obeng there is no direct root of the Spirit intercession in the OT and the Jewish writing. But the Jewish

doctrine of intercession is relevant to the emergence of the Spirit intercession motif in two ways:

First, Paul would have been aware of the need for intercession from his OT background a deep sense of intercession lay behind Paul's preaching, teaching, and personal work; a sense which was cultivated from Jewish traditions. Thus, by speaking of the Spirit's intercession, Paul was possibly merely adding a new dimension to an already known doctrine of intercession. Second, ... in the Jewish concept of intercession, heavenly beings were considered effective intercessors. ... The New Testament presents the Spirit as a heavenly being. The relevant passages are Matt. 3: 16,17 and parallel (Lk. 3:21. 22; Mk. 1:10,11), Jn. 14:26; 15:26 and Acts 2:2. The Spirit is the Spirit of God. ... In the context of Jewish heavenly intercession, it would have been easy for Paul to link the Spirit, a heavenly being, to intercession.⁴⁹

Therefore regarding the entire discussion, it seems that Paul was speaking about a common experience of prayer for himself and other believers, and at the

⁴⁹ The Spirit intercession Motif in Romans 8:26 by E. A. Obeng (NT Studies 32: 1986), 622.

same time, he was interpreting that experience as "intercession by the Spirit" on our behalf.

Moreover when the Spirit intercedes for us is according to God's will. What is God's will for us? To fully understand what God's will is for us, we should refer to v. 28 and v. 29. The "God's will" is the "God's purpose" (v. 28), and the "God's purpose" must be understood as the most privileged purpose in our life, that is "to be conformed to the likeness of his Son" (v. 29).

CONCLUDING REMARK

The writer would like to conclude our discussion on several points, and some of his points supposed to be an answer toward misunderstanding of the *"already/not yet"* tension along the journey of the Christian life.

We believe that through Jesus Christ we are saved already, but we still live in the body of flesh and in a world that is full of imperfections. So we still face various kinds of present sufferings, but we have good news from what Paul has mentioned to the Romans: "The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness." No matter how much harm we face in our present sufferings, He is capable to assist us. He works within us. Particularly He helps us in our praying because praying is the

way we communicate to God, our Father in heaven. Thus, the Holy Spirit groans within us with inarticulate groaning, to be an intercessor in our behalf to our Father. Even though we cannot understand these inarticulate groaning, but our Father understands. Moreover, what the Holy Spirit does within us is according to our Father's will. He works within us to make us fulfill God's purpose, to be like his Son, Jesus Christ.

APPLICATION

This exegesis has brought us to several points. First I realize how amazingly God designs salvation for humankind. God is not only delivering us from the bondage of sin, but He also sends the Holy Spirit to help us in day by day that we live until Jesus comes. In this world, we still live in the flesh and blood that is talking about limitation, weakness, and temporary body just as others. But the thing that encourages me is that we have the Holy Spirit to assist us amid trial.

Secondly, I realize that somehow God will not answer the sick' prayer by healing him. But it does not mean that the sick is lacking faith or he has the sin to be confessed, or God is not just. I believe that it could be the mystery of

Christian life that by the knowledge we cannot grasp. The thing that I know for sure is that God is working together in everything for the good of us.

Thirdly, it may not be discussed above, but this is the most important that I must understand. Our weakness, present suffering, and anything that happens in our life, all of them are used by God for good that is to be conformed to the image of His Son.

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