

“PRAYER, PROVIDENCE, AND GOD’S PURPOSE”

**I. Introduction**

- A. Over the past few years, it has become popular for people to respond to tragedies in their communities by using variations of the slogan “Boston Strong.”
1. While this sort of thing can be inspiring in some respects, it is important to remember that none of us is “strong” in any kind of comprehensive sense.
  2. Most importantly, no human being is in himself “strong” in a spiritual sense.
  3. This is even true for Christians.
  4. This was made clear in the preceding section of Romans 8, where the Christian life is described as a life of suffering and groaning and waiting.
  5. We live in a state of hope, not a state of realization.
  6. Our condition is one of weakness rather than strength.
- B. In the verses that we are considering this morning, we learn two things about how God carries out his saving purpose in the lives of a people who are thoroughly beset with weakness.
1. First, this passage tells us that God has provided us with the Holy Spirit to be our helper in prayer.
  2. Second, this passage tells us that God’s providential control over all things gives us confidence that all things work for our good.

**II. Our Helper in Prayer**

- A. Our passage begins with the word “Likewise”, which tells us that the things that Paul says here about the Holy Spirit are closely related to what he said in the previous paragraph about Christian hope.
1. The Spirit helps us in our state of weakness by sustaining us as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons.
  2. Christian experience is characterized by weakness for two reasons.
  3. On the one hand, we still have to contend with the polluting influence of sin in our own lives.
  4. As Paul explained back in chapter 7, though we want to do what is right, we find ourselves doing the evil that we do not want to do.
  5. On the other hand, we also live in a state of weakness because the world in which we are living is a fallen world.
  6. As Paul said earlier in chapter 8, this world is in bondage to decay.
  7. It has been subjected to futility due to mankind’s rebellion against God.
- B. One of the areas where we experience our weakness most pointedly is in our prayer life.
1. Prayer is a crucial element in the Christian life.
  2. Prayer is the instrument through which we exercise our faith.
  3. The Bible tells us to be steadfast and watchful in prayer.
  4. It tells us not to be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to make our requests known to God.
  5. It tells us to pray without ceasing.

6. Yet here Paul lays his finger on one of the biggest problems that we have when it comes to prayer: we do not know what to pray for as we ought.
  7. Take note of the way this is worded.
  8. Paul does not say that there are certain times in our lives when we don't know what we ought to pray for.
  9. He states it much more absolutely.
  10. He is saying that we never know what we ought to pray for.
  11. This is a real problem, especially when we remember that the Bible tells us that we should not expect to receive anything from God if we do not ask him for it.
- C. The reason why Paul can say that we do not know what we ought to pray for is because the only prayers that we can expect God to grant are those that are in accord with his will.
1. Our problem is that we do not know God's will.
  2. Even though we have access to God's revealed will, we do not know what God has ordained as far as how that will is going to be worked out.
  3. We know that God will bring all of his elect to glory, but we do not know the particulars of what this will look like in our own personal experience.
  4. We know that it is God's will to bring us through all of our afflictions, but we do not know whether it is his will to remove those afflictions or to give us the ability to endure them in faith.
  5. To give a more specific example, the Christian who is told that he has a life-threatening disease does not know if it is God's will for him to be healed of that disease.

6. Maybe it is, but maybe it isn't.
  7. He can certainly pray for healing, but he needs to do so in a spirit that says, 'If it be your will.'
  8. We always have to remember that though we may know what we would like God to do for us, we do not know what is really in our best interest.
- D. The Spirit helps us in the weakness that we experience in our prayer lives.
1. Because he dwells within us, he takes part in our groaning as we wait patiently for the hope of glory.
  2. The term that is translated as "helps" in verse 26 is extremely encouraging.
  3. It indicates that the Spirit takes a portion of our sorrows upon himself in order to relieve us of their pressure.
  4. As John Calvin explains, "there is great force in the Greek word [translated as 'helps'], which means that the Spirit takes on himself a part of the burden, by which our weakness is oppressed; so that he not only helps and supports us, but lifts us up; as though he went under the burden with us."
  5. Though we are weak, the indwelling Holy Spirit keeps us from being overwhelmed by the evil and uncertainty that we experience as we live in this world that is in bondage to decay.
- E. With regard to our weakness in prayer, the Spirit helps us by interceding on our behalf.
1. Paul tells us that the Spirit offers this intercession "with groanings too deep for words."
  2. What does this mean?

3. It is clear that it is not the New Testament gift of tongues.
  4. That gift was only given to some Christians in the apostolic period, but this is something that is the experience of every believer in Jesus Christ.
  5. Neither is Paul speaking of the sort of 'prayer-language' that is practiced by contemporary charismatics.
  6. We can say this with certainty because the text explicitly says that these groanings are inaudible.
  7. They are not groanings that we vocalize.
  8. Instead, they describe the mysterious way in which the Holy Spirit intercedes for us from within our own hearts.
  9. Though we do not know what to pray for as we ought, the Spirit straightens out our weak and jumbled prayers and brings them into line with God's will.
  10. And God knows the mind of the Spirit.
  11. Even though these inward desires are unspoken, God understands them and recognizes them as agreeable to his will.
- F. Prayer is vital.
1. It is the means by which we have access into the riches that we have in God through Christ.
  2. Nevertheless, we are not ultimately dependent upon our own weak efforts in prayer.
  3. While we should not neglect prayer, we can take comfort in knowing that we have the indwelling Holy Spirit interceding on our behalf.

4. On top of that, verse 34 tells us that we also have the ascended Christ interceding for us at God's right hand.
5. The indwelling Spirit helps us in the offering of our prayers, and the ascended Christ presents our prayers before God's throne.
6. The prayers of the Christian are thoroughly Trinitarian.
7. We pray to the Father through the mediation of the Son by the power of the Spirit.
8. The focus in these verses is upon the ministry of the Spirit.
9. The Spirit dwells within us as the firstfruits, the down-payment of the glorious future that awaits us as sons of God.
10. The work of the Spirit in your life is the indispensable link to God's redemptive purpose for you.
11. In the words of Herman Ridderbos, "The Spirit is not only the one who teaches us to stand in this childlike relationship to God and to pronounce steadfastly the name Father in spite of all that still raises itself against this relationship; he is also the one who maintains this living communion. He comes from God to awaken in the hearts of God's people the true consciousness of children, but he also mounts up, as it were, from the hearts of the children to God, because in their inability to find the right words in prayer he enters in for them with unutterable groanings; and God, the great searcher of hearts, will judge them according to this holy intention of the Spirit which is acceptable to God." [*Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 201-202]

### III. Our Confidence that All Things Work for Our Good

- A. This brings us to verse 28, which is one of the best-known and best-loved verses in all of Scripture: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

1. John Stott says of this verse, "On it believers of every age and place have stayed their minds. It has been likened to a pillow on which to rest our weary heads." [246]
  2. It is a verse that every Christian should commit to memory.
  3. This verse makes good sense in light of what Paul has said in previous parts of this letter about the role of suffering in the Christian life.
  4. Back in chapter 5 he said, "we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."
  5. And earlier in chapter 8 he said that our hope of being glorified with Christ in the future is contingent on our suffering with Christ in this present time.
  6. In God's providence, the slight momentary afflictions that we experience in this life are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory that is beyond all comparison.
- B. Verse 28 begins by saying that "we know" that all things work for our good.
1. Notice how this stands in contrast to what was said back in verse 26 about our lack of knowledge of what to pray for.
  2. Though there are many things that we don't know, the truth that Paul expresses here in verse 28 is something that we can know for certain.
  3. We know that God is in providential control of everything that happens in this world.
  4. We know that the things that take place in our lives are not subject to chaos or chance.

5. We know that God's saving purposes for his children cannot be hindered in any way.
  6. He causes everything in this life to work for our ultimate good.
  7. Everything in your life is being used by God to promote your salvation.
  8. Everything that happens in this world is being used by God to advance his kingdom.
- C. All things do not work for the good of everyone.
1. This is a blessing that is only true for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose.
  2. It is only true for Christians.
  3. Only believers truly love God.
  4. We love him because he first loved us.
  5. Only believers have been called according to God's purpose.
  6. This refers to effectual calling, not merely the external call of the gospel.
  7. This is made clear by the way in which Paul uses this language elsewhere.
  8. He says in 2 Timothy 1:9 that God "saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began."
  9. God did not call us to himself because of anything that he saw in us but because of his sovereign grace in election.



10. This is something that we will have the opportunity to explore in greater detail in the coming weeks in our study of this letter.
- D. When Paul says that “all things” work together for our good, he is referring to all of the afflictions we experience in life.
1. It includes suffering that is physical, mental, circumstantial, relational, financial, political, and spiritual in nature.
  2. God uses our trials and troubles to sanctify us and to sustain and perfect our faith.
  3. He uses them to loosen our grip on this life and to cause us to long for the life to come.
  4. God is able to make human evil concur with his good purposes to redeem his elect.
  5. We see this in the example of Joseph in the book of Genesis when he tells his brothers, “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20).
  6. We see it supremely in the crucifixion of Jesus, as Peter made clear when he said in his Pentecost sermon, “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” (Acts 2:23)
- E. The phrase “all things” even extends so far as to include our sin.
1. God causes the sins that you commit to work for your ultimate good.
  2. This does not mean that we should do evil in order that good may result.
  3. If you let yourself think along those lines, you can be certain that your heavenly Father will correct you.

4. And such discipline is painful, so do not think that you have license to go on sinning.
5. Nevertheless, it is a great comfort to know as we look back at our past failings that none of these things can frustrate God's saving purpose in our lives.
6. John Calvin points out that Augustine is correct in saying "that even the sins of the saints are, through the guiding providence of God, so far from doing harm to them, that, on the contrary, they serve to advance their salvation." [*Commentary on Romans*, 315]
7. And John Newton writes the following: "I think we may certainly conclude, that [God] would not suffer sin to remain in [his children], if he did not purpose to over-rule it, for the fuller manifestation of the glory of his grace and wisdom, and for the making his salvation more precious to their souls." [*Letters*, 19-20]
8. God's saving purpose in your life cannot be frustrated by anything.
9. Though you are subject to the same kinds of evils that befall your non-Christian neighbors, God uses all of them for your supreme good.
10. As it says in question 26 of the Heidelberg Catechism, "I trust in him so completely that I have no doubt that he will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul. Moreover, whatever evil he sends upon me in this troubled life he will turn to my good, for he is able to do it, being almighty God, and is determined to do it, being a faithful Father."

#### IV. Conclusion

- A. God will never let your cluelessness about what you really need to get in the way of the accomplishment of his gracious purpose in your life.
- B. God will not let any of your afflictions thwart his good purpose for you.

C. He works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that all who hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

D. As we sing,

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace;  
Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.*