



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 When the Holy Spirit Intercedes
(Pentecost, pp. 37-43)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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When the Holy Spirit Intercedes

The Spirit prays for us whether we are aware of it or not, but for our own comfort and confidence it is important that we should be aware of what the Spirit is doing on our behalf. God knows our hearts and is intimately acquainted with our groaning. And that should cause us to love and praise him.

Prayer

Father, through your Holy Spirit
you create us and sustain us.
Open our hearts and minds to your presence now
as your Spirit moves among us.
Draw from our mouths
all of the glorious wonder, love, and praise
that you desire and are due.
We pray in the name of Jesus,
and through your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:26-27

Reflection

When the Apostle Paul describes how life is marvelously transformed for those who are set free from sin and death by Jesus Christ, he admits they'll groan over the damaged creation and long for the completion of God's redemptive work (Romans 8:2, 18-25). But he promises in their prayers to God, they will not be alone. They will be joined by...God's Spirit (8:26-27). What does Paul mean by this, and how does it impact our discipleship?

To help us better understand this mysterious role of the Holy Spirit in our lives, Timothy Wiarda explores these questions:

- ▶ *Does the Spirit pray for us, or help us to pray?* Since usually "the Spirit...communicates to and through people on behalf of God," Wiarda admits Paul may be saying "the Spirit's intercession happens in and through the prayers he enables us to utter." Yet, he thinks Paul is pointing primarily "to an activity of God's Spirit lying outside of our own experience, an activity of communication, mysterious though it may be, directed toward God," because twice Paul mentions the Spirit *interceding* – which is speaking on behalf of another – and emphasizes "the Spirit *himself* intercedes."
- ▶ *When does the Spirit pray for us?* Perhaps, at any time; but Paul highlights believers' suffering or groaning, and their not knowing what they should pray. Thus he might be "calling attention a particular ongoing circumstance, our present ignorance, that makes the Spirit's intercession necessary," but mainly when we are trying to express our suffering to God.
- ▶ *What content does the Spirit convey to God?* Something that is news to God, or something God already knows? The first view threatens God's greatness and the second trivializes Paul's teaching. "This dilemma becomes especially acute if we envisage the Spirit's intercession to be largely a matter of communicating information, ideas, or requests," Wiarda notes. The Spirit's *groaning* may suggest the intercession goes beyond sharing information. "Paul implies that what the Spirit communicates, and what the heart-searching God thereby comes to know, includes a sizeable measure of feeling,



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particularly feeling relating to the believers' experience of suffering." How would the Spirit know? "In Romans 5:5, for example, Paul says the Spirit pours out God's love in the hearts of believers. While passages such as these typically portray communication and influence flowing from the Spirit to the believer, they nevertheless show that Paul understood the Spirit to be in intimate internal contact with the inner life of believers. It is hard to divorce Paul's statements about the Spirit's groaning intercession from this larger picture of the Spirit indwelling believers' hearts."

So, if the Spirit is praying for us whether we are aware of it or not, why does Paul tell us about this? Or, put differently, "why does God include this intriguing picture as part of his word to us?" Wiarda concludes: "as with so much of what Scripture tells us about God and his redemptive work on our behalf, this picture is given to encourage us, comfort us, and give us hope – especially at times when we are conscious of the suffering, weakness, waiting, or groaning Paul describes in Romans 8."

Study Questions

1. On Timothy Wiarda's interpretation, what is Paul saying in Romans 8:26-27 about the Holy Spirit's activity? What does Wiarda think it means to say the Spirit prays for us?
2. How, according to Wiarda, is the Holy Spirit supremely positioned to be an intercessor for the saints before God? Consider whether the Spirit's intercession pushes God further away or draws God closer to humans in their weakness.
3. Many Christian theologians think that God's greatness includes the attributes of omniscience (knowing all that can be known) and impassibility (not being tossed about by feelings). How does this view of the Spirit's intercession fit with those divine attributes?
4. Read Romans 8, the immediate context of Paul's teaching on the Spirit's intercession. What encouragement should we take from this activity of the Spirit?

Departing Hymn: "Spirit of God, Descend on My Heart" (vv. 1, 3, and 4)

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart;
wean it from earth; through all its pulses move;
stoop to my weakness, mighty as thou art,
and make me love thee as I ought to love.

Teach me to feel that thou art always nigh;
teach me the struggles of the soul to bear,
to check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh;
teach me the patience of unceasing prayer.

Teach me to love thee as thine angels love,
one holy passion filling all my frame;
the kindling of the heaven-descended Dove,
my heart an altar, and thy love the flame.

George Croly (1854)
Tune: MORECAMBE

When the Holy Spirit Intercedes

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore how the Holy Spirit intercedes for the saints before God.
2. To discuss the implications of Timothy Wiarda's interpretation for larger questions about God's nature.
3. To consider how the Spirit's intercession for us impacts our discipleship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Pentecost (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Spirit of God, Descent upon My Heart" locate the familiar tune MORECAMBE in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Clarence Jordan (1912-1969), the New Testament Greek scholar who founded Koinonia Farm, a small a religious community from which Habitat for Humanity grew, translated the New Testament into his folksy, west Georgia dialect. In the "Cotton Patch Version," The Epistle to the Romans becomes "The Letter to the Christians in Washington [DC]," and the difficult passage of Romans 8:26-27 is rendered as this memorable promise:

Similarly, the Spirit also helps us out in our weakness. For example, we don't know beans about praying, but the Spirit himself speaks up for our unexpressed concerns. And he who X-rays our hearts understands the Spirit's approach, since the Spirit represents Christians before God.

That doesn't clarify everything, does it? But it captures the central idea: though "we don't know beans about praying," it brings us into the mysterious presence of God and there (as Jordan might say) our praying doesn't require our knowing.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer in the study guide aloud.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 8:26-27 as translated by Timothy Wiarda (*Pentecost*, 37):

In the same way the Spirit also helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes with groans not expressed in words. And the one who searches hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because he intercedes for the saints according to God's will.

Reflection

On the occasion of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended with power, it is appropriate to explore the important roles of the Spirit in our discipleship. Paul's discussion of Christian life in the letter to the Romans is framed beginning and end, and filled with references to the Spirit; his teaching about the Spirit's intercession in chapter 8 is a high point.

Study Questions

1. "Paul explicitly says the Spirit communicates with God on behalf of believers and that God receives what the Spirit communicates," Timothy Wiarda writes in summary. "Paul also implies that the believer's felt experience of weakness forms part of what the interceding Spirit brings to God. Our exegetical analysis suggests that Paul sees the intercessory action of the Spirit to be part of the process through which God searches the hearts of believers and comes to know something of their inner life and feelings of suffering."
Wiarda sees the Spirit's praying for us as "actual communication that takes place directly and entirely between the Holy Spirit and God," whether we are aware of it or not, and perhaps all the time, but especially when we are trying to communicate to God our suffering.
2. "In principle an ideal intercessor or mediator should be close and sympathetic to the one with a need or request, while at the same time very close and acceptable to the one to whom appeal must be made," Wiarda notes. Regarding the second condition, the Spirit "stands in perfect union with God and...God fully and willingly receives all he communicates on our behalf." Regarding the first condition, "Paul understood the Spirit to be in intimate internal contact with the inner life of believers," Wiarda writes. "There is reason to think that Paul's concept of the Spirit *indwelling the hearts of believers* underlies what he says about the Spirit's intercession in Romans 8:26-27. He mentions this indwelling three times in Romans 8:9-11, and in 8:15 he mentions 'receiving' the Spirit. Elsewhere he locates the Spirit in the 'hearts' of believers (2 Corinthians 1:22 and Galatians 4:6). He frequently pictures the Spirit acting within believers, influencing and communicating to their inward selves."
Someone might object that there is no need for an intercessor 'between' humans and God, or that an intercessor would only push them apart. But on Wiarda's reading, the intercession is God himself searching the hearts of believers in their suffering.
3. To say the Spirit communicates with God on our behalf may threaten some views of God's omniscience, especially if we think of the Spirit "communicating information, ideas, or requests," Wiarda admits. Paul's description of the Spirit interceding "with groans not expressed in words" may ameliorate the problem, by showing how "the Spirit can offer something distinctive and necessary without bringing God's omniscience or any other aspect of God's character into question." Another solution to the dilemma might be that in the Spirit's intercession the Triune God is speaking to himself, so to speak, which is more like focusing on the suffering of the saints than learning about it.
"Christian theologians have traditionally held that the idea of God being impacted by suffering amounts to a denial of his transcendent holiness and perfection," Wiarda notes. Perhaps Romans 8:26-27 "suggests that God gets in touch with our suffering, but does so in a way that maintains his freedom and holiness. Intercession implies, first, a distance between suffering believers and God that must be overcome and, second, a mediating party who bridges the gap. What comes to God through intercession comes to him indirectly, through the mediation of the Spirit. So this scriptural picture suggests God gets in touch with human suffering even while remaining apart from it."
4. Romans 8 opens on a note of triumph: believers have been "set free" by Christ from their weakened resolve (8:2); as "children of God" they are empowered to "live according to the Spirit" and "set their minds on the things of the Spirit" (8:5, 14). Yet they still endure personal temptations and struggle to live faithfully in the context of a fallen world. In a way, their suffering has been amped up, for they suffer with Christ (8:17) the distortions of their world. Themes of suffering and waiting dominate 8:18-25. The good news is that God indwells them with the Spirit and groans with them. They do not struggle alone, but along with their creator, redeemer, and sustainer.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.