

When the Holy Spirit Intercedes

BY TIMOTHY J. WIARDA

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.

In Romans 8:26-27 the Apostle Paul says the Spirit intercedes for Christian believers: “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” (my translation).

What does Paul mean in this passage and how can what he says impact our lives? As a first step towards answering these questions we must establish whether Paul actually means to say that the Holy Spirit prays for us. This issue must be faced because, when we think about it, the idea that the Spirit communicates with God on our behalf is puzzling. There are at least two reasons why this is so. First, if on the basis of the total testimony of Scripture (including that of Paul himself) we believe in one God who eternally exists in three Persons, then to speak of one Person of the Godhead interceding with another seems to run counter to what we understand about the unity of God. It would imply that one Person needs to inform another of something

he does not already know, or seek some benefit for us that God the Three-in-One does not already plan to give. Second, Paul together with other New Testament writers typically portrays the Spirit directing his actions earthward and human-ward. The Spirit opens hearts, strengthens faith, influences behavior, engenders praise, and enables response to God. When the Spirit communicates, he communicates to and through people on behalf of God. An action of the Spirit directed purely toward God would therefore break this Pauline and wider biblical pattern.

This latter factor has resulted in interpreters taking two significantly different approaches to Paul's words. Many commentators think that Paul speaks about the Spirit working in or alongside believers, helping *them* to pray. According to this view, at least part of the Spirit's intercession happens in and through the prayers he enables *us* to utter. But other interpreters insist that Paul is not thinking about our prayers at all. Instead, he is referring to actual communication that takes place directly and entirely between the Holy Spirit and God. For our present purposes it is not necessary to prove one of these views absolutely right and the other absolutely wrong. But we do need to establish where Paul's *primary* point and rhetorical emphasis lies. Is he primarily telling believers about the Spirit's activity in them or does he instead highlight something the Spirit does in relation to God? To put it another way, is Romans 8:26-27 primarily a text about Christian experience or Christian spirituality, or is it primarily designed to tell us something about God and his care for us?

I argue for the latter, that Paul points his readers first and foremost 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. But before explaining why this is the best way to understand Paul's words, let me mention two strong arguments that might be made in favor of the alternative interpretation, that Paul refers to the Spirit's work of enabling believers to pray. First, it must be admitted that a work in and through believers fits the predominant pattern of the Spirit's activity as Paul depicts it throughout his epistles. Second, in Romans 8:15, just a few verses before his reference to the Spirit interceding, Paul describes Spirit-enabled believers crying out, "*Abba, Father.*" So Paul definitely does teach that the Spirit helps believers to pray. And what is even more striking, in a closely parallel statement in Galatians 4:6 Paul changes his wording to say that it is the indwelling *Spirit* who cries out, "*Abba, Father.*" It is thus clear that Paul can speak of Spirit-influenced prayer as something the Spirit himself does. These arguments show that there is nothing unbiblical or un-Pauline about the idea that the Spirit works in the hearts of believers, helping them to pray, guiding their prayers, or even praying through them. But it is unlikely that this is the focus of Paul's thought in Romans 8:26-27.

Several factors support the view that Paul's primary thought concerns an activity that takes place entirely between the Spirit and God. I will

mention three. The first and most important is simply that Paul speaks twice of the Spirit *interceding*. This term normally refers to communication one party undertakes on behalf of another.¹ Paul specifies that the Spirit intercedes for the saints. As the prayed-for party, the saints stand somewhat apart from the Spirit in this process; they do not intercede for themselves. It is thus hard to see how Paul could use this particular form of expression to describe a kind of partnership in which the Spirit prays in and through the prayers of believers. Second, to further accentuate the distinct and direct nature of the Spirit's intercessory action, in 8:26 Paul includes an intensifying pronoun: "The Spirit *himself* intercedes."² Third, when Paul says the Spirit intercedes he uses language and imagery that are not easily assimilated to the language he uses elsewhere when describing the Spirit's believer-directed acts. This distinctive imagery points to a genuinely distinct concept. Even if these unique comments about the Spirit's intercession strike us as surprising, then, we should not quickly force them into a more familiar pattern.³



If it is indeed true that the Spirit prays for us, when does he do so? Paul does not indicate any boundaries to the Spirit's intercessory activity, but he does highlight two factors, and imply a third, that link this intercession to particular times and circumstances. First, Paul connects the Spirit's intercession with the believers' experience of weakness, waiting, and groaning. He introduces the thought that believers share in the suffering of Christ in Romans 8:17. The themes of suffering and waiting then dominate 8:18-25. So in 8:26, when Paul speaks of his readers' "weakness" as the occasion of the Spirit's intercessory help, he clearly refers to a situation marked by suffering. To be more precise, he links the groaning intercession of the Spirit to the believers' experience of groaning described in 8:23. Second, Paul indicates that the Spirit intercedes for believers who are in a state of ignorance – they do not know what they should pray. In saying this Paul is probably not specifying particular times when the Spirit intercedes (as if there were other occasions when believers did know exactly what they should pray) so much as calling attention a particular ongoing circumstance, our present ignorance, that makes the Spirit's intercession necessary.

Third, while Paul does not directly say so, a few factors suggest that he links the Spirit's intercessory action especially to times when believers themselves are trying express their thoughts, feelings, needs, and concerns in prayer. If we reflect on the concept of intercession we see that it can actually take two different forms. In one variety the intercessor makes an appeal on behalf of another person based simply on what he or she observes about that person's need; the one who benefits from this intercession is not trying to make a request and may not even be aware of his or her need.

Moses's prayer for the people of Israel (Exodus 32:31-32) and Jesus' prayer for Peter (Luke 22:31-32) exemplify this first type of intercession. In a second form of intercessory activity, however, the mediator takes up an appeal that another party is already concerned to communicate. Samuel's intercession for the people of Israel at Mizpah (1 Samuel 7:5-9) provides a good illustration of this kind of situation. In cases like this the mediator's role is to present the appeal in a more acceptable way than the needy party can do on their own. Two small clues imply that this second model comes closer to what Paul has in mind in Romans 8:26-27. First, he introduces his reference to the Spirit's intercessory action by saying that "we do not know what we should pray." This implies a situation in which the believers themselves would like to pray or are trying to pray. Second, Paul links the Spirit's groaning with the groaning of believers (mentioned in 8:23). Since "groaning" is a form of communication—it includes the idea of expressing as well as feeling suffering—it is easy to suppose that at least some of the believers' groaning enters into their prayers to God. If this is so, it implies that the Spirit intercedes by taking up the believers' own groan-filled attempts to communicate with God. So perhaps the Spirit carries out his intercessory activity especially at times when we ourselves are trying or wishing to pray.



We must now tackle another question. If the Holy Spirit communicates with God on our behalf, what kind of content does he convey? We know that whatever the Spirit conveys is fully received by God. Paul says that "the one who searches hearts *knows* the mind of the Spirit." "The one who searches hearts" is a common biblical description of God, and knowing "the mind of the Spirit," in this context, can only mean knowing what the Spirit seeks to communicate. Does this imply that God comes to know things about us and our needs through the Spirit's intercession that he would not know otherwise? This question admittedly brings us into areas of mystery. To say there are things that God does not know unless the Spirit informs him, or things he is not ready to do until the Spirit asks him, would seem to threaten fundamental Christian doctrines concerning God. But on the other hand, to say the Spirit's intercession communicates nothing that God does not already know would seem to empty the strong statements in Romans 8:26-27 of all their significance.

This dilemma becomes especially acute if we envisage the Spirit's intercession to be largely a matter of communicating information, ideas, or requests. Paul's comments suggest this kind conceptual content does form at least part of what the Spirit brings to God. He says believers do not know *what* to pray (or pray for). This implies that the Spirit makes up for our ignorance by saying or asking for more appropriate things than we

ourselves have sufficient understanding to say or request. But Paul also describes the Spirit's action in a way that points beyond the simple conveyance of better conceptual content and in so doing he may provide a clue to how it is that the Spirit can offer something distinctive and necessary without bringing God's omniscience or any other aspect of God's character into question. Paul says the Spirit intercedes "with groans *not expressed in words*." The term I have translated "not expressed in words" is *alalētos*. Other translation options include "which cannot be uttered" (KJV), "too deep for words" (NRSV, ESV), and "that words cannot express" (NIV). All of these choices hint that what the Spirit conveys to God exceeds mere conceptual content. Even more striking, perhaps, is that Paul depicts the Spirit's intercessory utterance as a matter of *groaning*. Groaning is a strongly emotive kind of communication. Rather than convey messages, groans typically express painful feelings, whether physical or emotional. So Paul implies that what the Spirit communicates, and what the heart-searching God thereby comes to know, includes a sizeable measure of feeling, particularly feeling relating to the believers' experience of suffering.

Before attempting to understand how the Spirit comes to know our experience well enough to communicate it to God, let's reflect a moment on what makes a good intercessor. 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. In the case of the Spirit,

we know that he stands in perfect union with God and that God fully and willingly receives all he communicates on our behalf. Not only does Paul highlight that God knows the mind of the Spirit, he also says that the Spirit intercedes for us "according to God's will." While it is possible to take this last phrase as a description of the content of the Spirit's prayer (in the sense that the things the Spirit

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seeks for us accord with God's will), it is probably best to connect it with the act of praying itself: Paul is saying that it is God's own desire that the Spirit should carry out this ministry of intercession. So as far as relation to God is concerned, the Holy Spirit is perfectly positioned to intercede for us.

But what of the Spirit's position in relation to believers, and particularly to their experience of suffering? Does the Spirit come into especially close

touch with believers? If so how? Once again we need to acknowledge there is much we are not told about the Spirit's intercessory activity. Paul nowhere directly explains why the Spirit is especially suited to this ministry or how the Spirit comes to know our sufferings intimately enough to groan on our behalf. Nevertheless, 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. 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.

To sum up our discussion to this point, Paul explicitly says the Spirit communicates with God on behalf of believers and that God receives what the Spirit communicates. In a less direct way, yet one that is signaled by a number of indicators in the text, 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. This last thought is quite significant because the question of whether God knows or is impacted by human suffering has been a concern for many Christian believers in recent years. On the one hand, many believers have felt that God must feel our pain if he is to enter into genuinely loving personal relationships. On the other hand, Christian theologians have traditionally held that the idea of God being impacted by suffering amounts to a denial of his transcendent holiness and perfection. Paul's brief comments about the Holy Spirit's intercession cannot resolve the deep theological complexities surrounding the question of God's passibility. But they may nevertheless offer an additional helpful perspective for those who wrestle with this issue. This is because 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. It encourages us to affirm

two things at the same time: God is indeed holy, and he knows our struggles in a way that goes beyond mere conceptual understanding.⁴



We must finally ask why Paul tells his readers about the Spirit's intercession. Or to put this question a little differently, why does God include this intriguing picture as part of his word to us? The answer must be that, 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. That the Spirit prays for us is a reality that occurs 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. So Scripture tells us about the Spirit's intercessory action. This brief passage in Romans also adds one more element of abundance to Scripture's already enormously rich portrayal of God's love for us. In his love for us God knows our hearts and is intimately acquainted with our groaning. And that should cause us to love and praise him.

NOTES

1 In Romans 8:26 Paul uses the term *hyperentynchanō*, in 8:27 the expression *entynchanō hyper*. The latter expression appears again in 8:34, where Paul refers to Christ interceding for believers.

2 The phrase in Romans 8:26 is *auto to pneuma hyperentynchanei*.

3 For more detailed discussion of these and other exegetical issues relating to this passage see T. Wiarda, "What God Knows When the Spirit Intercedes," *Bulletin of Biblical Research*, 17.2 (2007), 299-304.

4 For further discussion of God's passibility in relation to both the Spirit's intercession and that of Christ, see T. Wiarda, "Divine Passibility in Light of Two Pictures of Intercession," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 66 (2013), 159-173.



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