

The Intercession of the Spirit

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

Likewise the Spirit also helps our infirmity: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he who searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because he makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God (Romans 8:26-27).

Much controversy surrounds this passage as to its particulars. In this essay, we will set forth the view that we feel best conforms to the overall context of Romans 8, together with the grammatical particulars that are employed in these two verses.

Romans 8 is a chapter that rings with Christian assurance. One can be confident of his salvation in Christ, provided he does not pursue the life of the “flesh”; rather, he walks after the leading of the Spirit (vv. 1-4), whose guidance is effected through the Scriptures he inspired (Ephesians 5:18; cf. Colossians 3:16; Galatians 5:16; Ephesians 6:17).

The leading of that holy revelation generates “life and peace” (v. 6). Our confidence is grounded in the fact that the indwelling Spirit eventually will be instrumental in effecting life for our mortal bodies by means of the bodily resurrection from the dead (vv. 11, 23). By the leading of the Spirit we may be assured of our status as “sons of God” (v. 14).

Moreover, the Spirit himself bears witness with the Christian’s personal spirit, confirming our child-father relationship with God (v. 16). Our knowledge of the indwelling Spirit, which relationship is a “first-fruits” of that yet promised, enables us to cope with “the sufferings of this present time,” and so to live in hope of the glory that is to come (vv. 18-25).

A cursory reading of the first twenty-five verses of this remarkable chapter clearly reveals the role of the Holy Spirit in this marvelous reliance the child of God may entertain relative to his future destiny. In this section alone, the third person of the Godhead is alluded to no less than fourteen times. This emphasis, we believe, contributes to our understanding of verses twenty-six and twenty-seven. We now direct our attention to a consideration of the precise language of these two passages.

“In like manner”

The couplet begins with the phrase, “In like manner the Spirit also helps our infirmity.” The phrase, “in like manner,” directs the student’s attention back into the previous context. The allusion most likely is to the “hope” just mentioned (vv. 24-25).

Just as our awareness of the Holy Spirit, as a presence in our lives (vv. 9, 11, 23), provides us with hope for the **future**, “in like manner,” we may take consolation in the fact that the Spirit is an abiding companion, assisting with our **present** infirmity.

J. B. Phillips paraphrases as follows: “The Spirit of God not only maintains this hope within us, but helps us in our present limitations.”

“the Spirit”

To what does the expression “the Spirit” refer in this passage? While a few sincere students have alleged that this is an allusion to the human spirit, the overwhelming majority of competent Bible scholars are confident that it refers to the third person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit. The following points, we believe, are worthy of serious thought:

(1) All of the major Bible translations reflect this persuasion (e.g., the King James Version, the English Revised Version, the American Standard Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, the New American Standard Bible, the New King James Version, The Twentieth Century New Testament, the New International Version, etc.). All have the term *pneuma* set in type as “Spirit.”

While this procedure is a translating judgment, it does indicate the prevailing view of these renown scholars. In addition to these, there are numerous one-person versions that join the chorus (e.g., Phillips, Weymouth, Bruce, Goodspeed, Verkuyl (Berkeley), Williams, Wuest, Beck, McCord, etc.).

(2) Numerous other scholarly authorities of New Testament Greek identify “the Spirit” of Romans 8:26-27 as the Holy Spirit. Among these are Arndt and Gingrich, Thayer, Robinson, Green, Chamberlain, Vine, Robertson, etc.

We mention these to emphasize the fact that the unusual view, which alleges that the term “Spirit” in Romans 8:26-27 is the human spirit, does not have the support of the respectable scholarship of the biblical world.

(3) As noted above, the expression “in like manner” ties this context to the apostle’s previous discussion of “the Spirit” (v. 23), which, unquestionably, is the Holy Spirit.

(4) The term “helps” (see below) suggests an assistance from someone other than the person being helped, i.e., beyond the resources of the Christian himself. So, similarly, with reference to the term “intercession” (v. 27); the Spirit makes intercession for the saints.

The “Spirit” here is not a component of the saint himself. One does not intercede for himself (see below).

(5) The grammar more readily lends itself to the concept that the Holy Spirit is in view. For example, the verb “helps” is a third person form, while the pronoun “our” (“our infirmity”) is a first person term.

Similarly, “we know not how to pray as we ought” reflects first person emphasis; yet the phrase “the Spirit itself [himself – ASV] makes intercession” manifests a third person structure.

Moreover, if the human spirit were in view, one would think that pneuma would take a plural form (“spirits”) to conform to the plurals “our” and “we know not,” i.e., the sense would be “our spirits help our infirmity: for we know not how to pray as we ought; but our spirits themselves make intercession for us.”

Quite obviously this does not conform to what the original text actually says, and, frankly, doesn’t express a sensible thought.

(6) There is a contrast in the text between what the Spirit is able to do on our behalf, and what we are not able to do for ourselves, because we do not know how: “[W]e know not how . . . but the Spirit . . .”

The “but” (de) functions as an adversative particle here. Note the contrast in verses twenty-two and twenty-three: “[T]he whole world groans . . . And not only so, but [de] ourselves also.” Clearly the “Spirit” is an entity separate from the “we.”

Let us say the same thing but in a slightly different way. There is the affirmation that “we know not.” Since it is the “spirit” within man that is capable of either “knowing” or “not knowing” (1 Corinthians 2:11), and, as this passage asserts that “we know not,” that is the equivalent of saying that our spirit does not know. But the implication of this passage is that the Spirit (under consideration here) does know. Thus the Spirit, here in view, is not the human spirit.

(7) The Spirit is said to “make intercession for us.” The Greek verb for “intercession” (v. 27) is entunchano, meaning: “A pleading with one party on behalf of another, usually with a view to obtaining help for that other” (Bromiley 1982, 858).

But in verse twenty-six, there is a compound term, huperentunchano, which signifies “to make a petition or intercede on behalf of another” (Vine 1991, 424). The word is multifaceted: the main stem is tugchano, “to happen,” together with en, “in,” and huper, “on behalf of.” The addition of huper onto the front of the word merely intensifies the force of the base word (cf. Chamberlain 1979, 147); it does not imply another intercessor, in addition to the Holy Spirit.

Guy Woods observed that the word suggests “to happen just in the nick of time, for our assistance.” He adds: “How comforting it is, when exhausted and weary from heavy burdens, to have a friend or brother come along, and lend a willing hand until the task is done. Such is the picture presented us in this verb of the Holy Spirit’s aid” (1970, 72).

Note how the term entunchano is elsewhere used. Christ, at the right hand of God, “makes intercession for us” (Romans 8:34). Again, the Lord “ever lives to make intercession for us” (Hebrews 7:25). In addition, a noun form of the word (in the plural) is used in 1 Timothy 2:1, to describe the petitions we make on behalf of others (e.g., rulers).

Here is the point: one does not intercede on his own behalf. The fact that the Spirit intercedes for us is evidence that “the Spirit” is someone other than ourselves.

It is sometimes objected that the Holy Spirit cannot be the one interceding for us, because Christ is said to accomplish that task. What is the problem in having more than one intercessor on my behalf? If hundreds of Christians can intercede for me (1 Timothy 2:1), why cannot both Christ and the Spirit intercede on my behalf? The objection is not logical.

Roy Lanier Sr. observed that all three persons of the Godhead are said to “sanctify” us (1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 2:11; Romans 15:16) (n.d., 60). No one, so far as we can determine, sees any conflict in this. Neither are two intercessors problematic in Romans 8.

For these reasons, at the very least, it is almost incomprehensible to this writer that anyone should take the position that the Spirit in this context is anything other than the Holy Spirit of God.

“also helps our infirmity”

The verb “helps” is most fascinating. In the Greek Testament, it is a present tense form, suggesting sustained activity. The original word is *sunantilambano*, consisting of these elements: *sun* (with), *anti* (over against, facing), *lambano* (to take up).

The picture conveyed is that of two persons sharing a load. The term is used elsewhere in the New Testament only in Luke 10:40, where Martha implores Jesus to bid Mary, her sister, to “help” her. One can almost imagine a heavy piece of furniture that needs moving.

In his massive grammar of the Greek New Testament, A. T. Robertson provides the sense in our present context: “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 carrying a log, one at each end” (1919, 573).

Samuel Green noted that the expression signifies “to help by coming into association with” (1907, 152). It certainly suggests an assistance, other than one’s self, in dealing with our limitations in communicating adequately with God.

The Greek word for “infirmity” is *astheneia*, a compound term signifying “without strength.” The better textual evidence has it in the singular; it is a **common** infirmity shared by all Christians. It suggests an inability to produce a desired result (whatever may be indicated by the context).

While the immediate text focuses upon the Christian’s lack of knowledge in knowing “how to pray” with absolute precision, the Spirit’s function, in assisting with the entire panorama of human difficulties with which we struggle, may be hinted at as well (cf. Murray 1968, 311).

For example, it is entirely probable that the divine Spirit is active in the orchestration of providential benevolence on behalf of the children of God. Jesus once promised that the Father will “give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him” (Luke 11:13). In a parallel reference, God is said to “give good things to them that ask him” (Matthew 7:11).

The use of “Holy Spirit” in Luke’s version appears to be an example of the figure known as metonymy, in this case, the **cause** being put for the **effect** (see Horne 1841, 359). The Spirit is named for the blessings he effects. This strongly hints of the providential activity of the Spirit of God in the lives of the saints.

It is not inappropriate that we briefly discuss what the Spirit of God does **not** do on our behalf. There is a common idea in the community of “Christendom” that the Scriptures are not sufficiently clear for human beings to understand, hence, the Spirit operates in a mysterious way so as to “help” us comprehend the meaning of the sacred text. This concept is called the “illumination” of the Spirit.

Professor Allan Killen argues as follows: “Without an illumination of the Holy Scriptures [by the Spirit], no man can understand God’s divine, infallible revelation. . . [I]llumination [is] the means by which the Scriptures are made clear to the reader” (Pfeiffer, Vos, and Rea 1998, 831).

This notion is false for the following reasons:

(1) In terms of divine knowledge, the Scriptures furnish us completely unto every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). This statement could not be true if the revelation as given is incomplete and thus requires supplementation by the Spirit's direct influence.

(2) We are commanded to "understand the will of the Lord" (Ephesians 5:17). The command is superfluous if, in reality, we cannot understand the will of the Lord as made known in the Scriptures. If one must understand the Scriptures, but does not, whose fault would that then be?

(3) Many who claim to have the "illumination" of the Spirit teach ideas that clearly contradict the Spirit-given Bible.

(4) Many who profess to possess Spirit "illumination" disagree with one another in matters of doctrine. If a person offers an interpretation of the New Testament which he claims is the result of "illumination," how may others check this person's views? Would it be by the Scriptures themselves? If so, how would he know his interpretation of the Scriptures, in evaluating that "illuminated" message, was correct unless he perhaps had an "illumination" by which to verify the previous "illumination."

(5) The fact is, if the Spirit provides ongoing, modern-day illumination, why is there even the need for a book twenty centuries old?

(6) If the Spirit could not make the Scriptures plain when initially providing them, how can we have confidence that he would do any better on the second go-around?

(For additional study on this subject see our [The Holy Spirit Illumination Theory: A Critical Review](#).)

"for we know not how to pray as we ought"

In this phrase, our pitiful, limited knowledge of the ideal will of God is dramatically underscored. We think we have the avenue of prayer perfected, but how woefully mistaken we are. We sometimes pray for things which, if supplied, would be most harmful to us. There is much truth in the saying that "one of life's greatest blessings can be unanswered prayers" (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:8-9).

Too, there are deep needs that we have, but of which we are unaware. Accordingly, we do not think to pray for them. And so, we do not "know" how to pray as we ought.

The verb rendered "know" is *oida*, which Vine suggests has to do more with "fullness of knowledge" (444). Wuest thus renders the phrase: "[W]e do not know with an absolute knowledge" (1961, 366).

Though the verb is a perfect tense form technically, it yields a present tense sense (Arndt and Gingrich 1967, 558), which indicates that we never master the art of expressing our prayer needs adequately. The Christian will always need the Spirit's assistance.

"but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us"

The expression "Spirit himself" is emphatic; it expresses an activity of the Holy Spirit personally, rather than what he may accomplish through a representative medium (cf. John 4:2). While the pronoun *auto* ("itself" – KJV; "himself" – ASV) is a neuter form, it is more appropriate here to render it as a masculine, since the Holy Spirit is a person, not a thing. This has the precedent of Scripture itself (cf. John 14:26 where the masculine *ekeinos* is used of the "Spirit"—a neuter term).

"with groanings which cannot be uttered"

The term "groanings" (*stenagmois*) denotes a sigh or groan. It is used (in various forms) more than fifty times in the Greek version of the Old Testament, and it reflects a "human lament" which suffering people are powerless to remedy on their own (Balz and Schneider 1993, 272). For instance, it describes the anguish of the Israelite people under the burdens of Egypt (Exodus 2:23; cf. Acts 7:34).

The notion that the "groanings" refer to "speaking in tongues" is to be rejected totally. Stott comments: "These groans can hardly be glossolalia, since those 'tongues' or languages were expressed in words which some could understand and interpret" (1994, 245).

But whose groanings are these? Though some would attribute them to the Holy Spirit, the better view appears to be that they are the Christian's groanings, which are conveyed on his behalf by the Spirit unto God. Clearly the term refers to the Christian's plight a few verses earlier in this chapter (v. 23), though a different point of focus is in view.

The context seems to suggest that the groanings originate because "we know not how to pray as we ought" in a knowledgeable and articulate way. It would seem, therefore, more in harmony with the general tenor of the Bible as a whole, then, to conclude that it is the Christian who gives rise to these "**mute sighs**, the expression of which is suppressed by grief" (Thayer 1958, 25), rather than the groanings issuing from the omnipotent Spirit of God.

Hardeman Nichols observes: "Surely the Holy Spirit who has the ability to completely reveal the mind of God to man would have no difficulty in pleading man's cause to God" (1980, 350).

It is not impossible, though, that there may be a blending of two thoughts. Some think that the groanings, though originating with the Christian, actually are "shared by the Holy Spirit and the believer" (McComiskey 1976, 424).

John Stott suggests that "the Holy Spirit identifies with our groans," so that "we and he groan together" (245). One thing is certain: when the groanings reach God, they are perfectly clear to him.

It is imperative, though, that we emphasize this point: it must not be concluded that the Father could not know of our plight apart from the Spirit's intercession; no, rather, it is the role of the Spirit as a companion in the Christian's life that is being emphasized. His work has been divinely orchestrated, consistent with the planning of the entire Godhead.

H. Leo Boles wrote: "Since [the Holy Spirit] dwells in Christians, he helps them in the act of prayer. Prayer is to God the Father in the name of Christ, and by the help of the Holy Spirit. Hence, each member of the Godhead is included in **acceptable prayer**" (1983, 256).

"and he who searches the hearts"

The heart-searcher of this passage is generally conceded to be God, the Father, mentioned subsequently in the verse. God is said to "search" the heart of man.

The word means to examine, to investigate. It is a form of the figure known as anthropomorphism (representing God with human traits), the design of which, in this text, is to emphasize the all-knowing aspect of deity (cf. 1 Chronicles 28:9; Psalms 7:9; Proverbs 17:3; 1 Thessalonians 2:4). Similar expressions are used both of Christ (Revelation 2:23) and of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10).

The present tense form argues for the concept of a God who is ever aware of our needs. The "heart," of course, is the soul or spirit of man, the rational, feeling aspect of the human being—that part made in the very image of God himself (Genesis 1:26-27; Daniel 7:15; 1 Corinthians 2:11; Romans 10:9-10).

"knows what is the mind of the spirit"

Again the verb (*oida*), employed as a present tense (see above), reveals the fact that the Father and the Spirit are constantly in close communication with one another, if we may express ourselves in the same sort of accommodative language discussed just above. God is ever aware of the Spirit's insights into our souls, hence can adequately respond to our needs.

Cottrell suggests that Paul's argument here is one where the reasoning proceeds from the less likely to the more likely: "If God knows what is in the minds of created beings who are qualitatively different from him and relatively independent of him, then surely he knows what is in the mind of the Spirit himself, who is qualitatively equal with God and one in nature with him" (1996, 498).

"because [that – ASVfn] he intercedes for the saints"

The present tense of the verb ("intercedes") depicts the characteristic activity of the Spirit on behalf of the Christian. (For the meaning of "intercede," see above.)

The term “saints,” as used in the New Testament, is a general term for those who are faithful to God. It is commonly used for the members of various congregations of the Lord’s people (cf. Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1). It is linguistically related to the words “holy” and “sanctified.” It refers to a person who, by virtue of his obedience to the gospel plan of salvation (cf. Ephesians 5:26) and his consecration of life has become “separated unto God” (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4, 7; Romans 6:19, 22; Hebrews 12:14).

The Holy Spirit is delighted to operate on behalf of a people dedicated to righteousness. The Roman Catholic concept of “sainthood” bears utterly no relationship to the New Testament Scriptures.

“according to the will of God”

The Greek text simply says, “according to God.” The translators of both the King James Version and the American Standard Version have supplied the words “the will of” (as indicated by the italics) for clarification purposes. God the Father and the Holy Spirit operate in perfect unison in the interest of Christian people.

Perhaps it is not out of place at this point to remind ourselves that, unlike the so-called “gods” of the ancient pagan world, the members of the sacred Godhead are never at variance with one another. They function in absolute harmony.

As we conclude this rather detailed discussion, perhaps we could sum up with a commentary-paraphrase that brings everything together.

Just as we entertain a precious hope for the future as a result of the promised activity of the Spirit of God, in like manner, even now, the Spirit helps us by taking hold with us of our infirmity.

Especially is this true in the matter of our prayers; we just do not know how to fully address our needs in prayer. On this account, therefore, the Spirit personally pleads our case. He takes the sighs which reflect the true needs of our souls, which we are unable to put into words that form a proper request, and he conveys them on our behalf to God.

And God, who is perfectly familiar with the inner workings of the human mind, and who certainly knows the mind of the Spirit, responds to our needs. He honors the role of the Spirit who is making intercession on behalf of those who have been set apart for divine service by virtue of their obedience to the truth.

Yes, God answers according to his will, rather than according to our superficial requests.

Most Bible students would agree that this marvelous pair of verses, dealing with the work of the Spirit of God on behalf of Christians, is one of the most thrilling one can contemplate. Surely there are things about these verses that as yet challenge our understanding.

In spite of the limited scope of our comprehension, there is enough here to almost take away one’s breath! Thanks be to the divine Godhead for their precious interest in those who love them and are submissive to their will.

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