

DISCIPLESHIP. SUPPLEMENT 9

[HOLY SPIRIT]

THE HOLY SPIRIT SUSTAINS CHRISTIANS AMIDST THEIR WEAKNESSES

Romans 8:26-27 describes God's work in the Christian.

1. Translation of Romans 8:26-27.

And in the same way, the Spirit (*always*) comes to help (lends a hand together) (us) in our weakness. For what we should pray for as one should, we do not know, but the Spirit himself (*continually*) intercedes on behalf of (us) with unspeakable (or unspoken, not expressed in words, too deep for words) groaning. And he who (*continually*) searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit (*continually*) intercedes for the saints in accordance with God ('s will).

2. Explanation of Romans 8:26-27.

"In the same way" means: just as the hope in the liberation of the creation from its slavery to decay and the redemption of our mortal bodies helps the Christian in his present suffering, so the Holy Spirit helps the Christian in his present weakness.

The "weaknesses" may be any kind of weakness: either the ordinary sufferings of a broken world or the specific sufferings for Christ's sake. They may be temptations (Hebrews 4:15) or trials as "thorns in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:5). It is certainly not restricted to their weakness in the matter of prayer!

The Christian is sustained amidst his present weaknesses and sufferings by the continual help of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is represented as humbly taking upon himself a part of the burden of sorrows, which Christians bear and as continuously coming to the aid of Christians.

There is always moral and spiritual failure on the part of the Christian (cf. Romans chapter 1-3 and 7). The Christian always falls short to pray as he ought. Although he knows what to pray for generally (Matthew 6:9-13; Colossians 1:9-12), he often does not know what prayer suits a particular situation, what to pray for in any particular need, difficulty or situation. He is not sure whether the content of his prayer is in harmony with God's will (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Philippians 1:22-24; 1 John 5:14). Often the Christian does not even know the deeply hidden needs of his own heart. Therefore he does not express these needs in his prayer. Or he cannot express these needs in any words.

Prayer is directed to God (the Father) (Matthew 6:9). Because God searches the heart (Jeremiah 17:10; cf. Revelation 2:23) and always knows the mind of the Holy Spirit who lives in the Christian (1 Corinthians 3:16), God always knows the needs of the Christian. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit always prays according to God's perfect will for the very needs of the Christian which the Christian cannot express in words, because he does not know how he should express them in words. Or the Christian does not express his needs, because he does not even realise that he has these needs. As a true Advocate, the Holy Spirit identifies himself with the real needs (temptations or trials) and intercedes with God that these needs may be met!

3. Five important observations with respect to Romans 8:26-27.

(1) The first observation:

It is not the Christian, but the Holy Spirit who intercedes (prays).

Some Christians interpret this passage as dealing with how Christians pray to God. They say that the Holy Spirit causes the Christian to pray with inexpressible groanings, that is, with aspirations, desires and emotions, which words cannot express, which are heard, but not understood. They claim that the Holy Spirit dictates to them what they ought to say in prayer and how they should present their cause in prayer: whether with intelligible words or with unintelligible sounds.

This interpretation would too easily identify the Christian's expressed (uttered, audible) groanings or noises as absolutely an expression of the Holy Spirit praying in and through him. It would also cause the Christian to think that the highest form of prayer, which God approves, is praying in unintelligible words!

Other Christians identify this form of prayer with "praying in tongues" (1 Corinthians 14:14-17). But 1 Corinthians 14 speaks about the praying in tongues of people and not about the praying of the Holy Spirit!

The emphasis in Romans 8:26-27 is not on the praying of Christians, but on the praying (intercession) of the Holy Spirit. It does not say that God knows what the Christian is praying, but that God knows what the Holy Spirit is praying! God the Father does listen to the spoken or unspoken groanings (sighs) *of the Christian* (Exodus 3:7; Romans 6:8), but in Romans 8:26-27 God listens to the unuttered groanings *of the Holy Spirit!*

(2) The second observation:

The intercession of the Spirit (Romans 8:27) is like the intercession of Christ (Romans 8:34).

In the Gospel of John, the Holy Spirit is the Representative (Advocate)¹ of Jesus Christ with people on earth. He represents Jesus Christ and his words and will in the Christian on earth (John 14:16-17,26; John 16;14; cf. Romans 8:9-10).

However, in the letter to the Romans the Holy Spirit is the Representative (Advocate) of Christians and their needs with God in heaven (see Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1-2)! The Holy Spirit takes his stand next to the Christian on earth and presents the needs of the Christian to God the Father in heaven. Thus, the Christian has Jesus Christ as his Intercessor with God in the court of heaven and the Holy Spirit as his Intercessor with God in the theatre of his own heart on earth. Christ's intercession is like a father's prayer for all the family members, while the Spirit's intercession is like a mother's prayer presenting a child's specific needs to God.

(3) The third observation:

The intercessions of the Spirit are not prayers formulated in words that are intelligible for the Christian.

The Spirit's intercession certainly has content, but the content is not revealed to the Christian. The intercession of the Spirit is either expressed and thus heard, or is not expressed and thus not heard at all.

The original Greek text of the New Testament and the Syrian and Armenian translations of the New Testament say: "The Spirit intercedes² for us with unspoken groanings³", that is, "with groanings/sighs too deep for words", "wordless". The groanings are not expressed in words that are intelligible for the Christian, but are nevertheless expressed in unintelligible sounds and are thus heard.

The Latin translation of the New Testament says: "The Spirit intercedes for us with unspeakable groanings⁴", that is, "with groanings/sighs that cannot be expressed", "soundless". The groanings are not expressed at all and are thus not heard.

(4) The fourth observation:

The Spirit's intercession ascends to God's throne in the form of unuttered or unutterable groanings or sighs.

The groanings of the Holy Spirit take place in the heart of the Christian, because God searches the heart and finds these groanings or sighs:

- that are not expressed in intelligible words (unspoken, wordless) (according to the Greek text)
- or are not even expressed in sounds (unspeakable, inexpressible, soundless) (according to the Latin text).

The intercession of the Spirit by means of these unspoken or unspeakable groanings makes use of the Christian as his instrument of prayer. Therefore, the groaning are expressed in:

- either audible sounds
- or only in inaudible sighs.

However, the Christian should be careful not to confuse his own praying in audible sounds or inaudible sighs with the praying of the Holy Spirit! Although the Christian is aware that the Spirit makes use of these unspoken or unspeakable groanings in his heart to intercede with God for him, he cannot claim that what he is praying in either audible sounds (unintelligible words) or in inaudible sighs (soundless) is the intercessions of the Holy Spirit for him! The content of the intercession of the Holy Spirit is not revealed to the Christian! Christians must not forget that God searches the motives and intentions of the heart (Romans 8:27a; Hebrews 4:12-13)! Romans 8:26-27 speaks about how the Holy Spirit intercedes with God for the Christian and not about how the Christian should pray to God!

(5) The fifth observation:

The intercession of the Spirit is in accordance with the will of God.

God continually searches the heart of the Christian (and the non-Christian). He knows everything in it (1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Jeremiah 17:9-10; John 2:25; 1 Corinthians 4:5; Hebrews 4:13). He also knows the content, meaning and intent of the Spirit's intercession for the Christian. Because the Holy Spirit is "the Spirit of God" and thinks exactly like God the Father (and the Lord Jesus Christ), the intercession of the Spirit is always perfect and always effective! The intercession of the Holy Spirit for the Christian cannot fail!

- That is why not a single genuine Christian is ever lost (Romans 8:29-30).
- That is also why nothing happens to the Christian which does not have God's permission and which does not genuinely contribute to the attainment of God's perfect plan for him (Romans 8:28)!

These groanings and sighs in the Christian's heart point to the fact that God does "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20)!

¹ Greek: paraklétos

² Greek: huperentugchanó

³ Greek: stenagmois alalétois (derived from a+laleo which means "not + to speak")

⁴ Latin: inenarrabilis