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Help in Weakness

Romans 8:26-27

It is natural to think that since the Bible is dealing with God, the entire Bible as well as redemptive history must be packed with signs, miracles, powers, and prophecy. Yet if you used a timeline and marked every sign, miracle, wonder, or prophetic message you would discover that they are clustered around four redemptive events: the time of Moses, the Former Prophets (Elijah and Elisha), the Latter Prophets (during the theocracy), and the time of Christ.

Now if you could choose any of era in world history in which to live, I would imagine many religious people might choose the era of Moses. Yet if you have a saving relationship with Christ, you most likely would choose the time of Christ! To behold Him, His gentle and lowly demeanor, His miracles, His teaching, His cross work, His resurrection, further teachings, and then His exaltation... GLORIOUS! And that is why Christ's words in the gospel of John speaking of His death, resurrection, and ascension are so amazing:

John 16:7, "But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you."

According to this passage it wouldn't be until Christ left — until He "went to the Father"— that His people would receive the fullness of Divine help!

As unbelievable as that promise is, Romans 8 serves as partial confirmation of it. Paul has been discussing the benefits that flow from Christ. In Christ we receive:

- No Condemnation, Romans 8:1-4a.
- Fellowship with God, Romans 8:4b-8.
- A Transformed Life, Romans 8:9-11.
- A New Priority, Romans 8:12-13.
- Sonship, Romans 8:14-17.
- The Promise of Glory, Romans 8:18-25.

The seventh benefit that he mentions in this text is the benefit of help in the time of our weakness.

[The Nature of Our Help, v. 26a.](#)

In the same way [just as the knowledge of God's promised glory helps us in our sufferings (vv. 18, 23-25)] the Spirit also helps our weaknesses — this is an incredible promise! The word for "help" is a combination of three different words (*συναντιλαμβάνομαι* [*sunantilambanomai*]). It denotes the idea of "laying hold of someone's weakness along with them and helping them carry the burden that is being faced."

A seminarian illustrated this concept with the work he did as a child. He lived on a ranch, and every year they had to fix the fences that bordered their property. And even though he was rather young, nevertheless he had a turn at digging the holes for the new fence posts. Yet, looking back he related how his ability to make any of the holes was solely on account of his father grabbing the post hole digger over his hands AND DIGGING WITH HIM!

In a way, this illustrates the Spirit's aid in our lives. Where we are weak, the Spirit of God "comes along side us and carries our burdens" — or in this case, our "weaknesses."

The term "weak" (ἀσθένεια [*astheneia*]) originally referred to bodily sickness but came to be used of all kinds of weakness, especially that of a spiritual kind. It is one who shrinks back in faith when facing life's struggles. The Hebrew writer speaking of the importance of having priests who are human declares:

Hebrews 5:2, "He can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness."

Moses speaking of one of the consequences that comes when we indulge in sin wrote this:

Leviticus 26:36, "...I will also bring weakness into their hearts... And the sound of a driven leaf will chase them and even when no one is pursuing, they will flee as though from the sword, and they will fall."

And so, to be "weak" in Scripture is to be vulnerable or susceptible to failure. It's to be easily frightened; it's to be one who easily flees. It makes me think of the lame animal who holds their leg up into their body so that it doesn't make contact with the ground. That's the idea with this word. Rather than confronting the difficulties of life, the "weak" shrink back to a safe/comfortable distance.

Such is the state of so many of us. Though we have been saved by grace, nevertheless we have weaknesses. Perhaps yours is a difficult relationship. Whether it be a co-worker or one of your children, you can't seem to make it work. And so, rather than addressing the issue, you've begun to shrink back or give up. Perhaps you have a difficult past. Perhaps you were abused as a child. Or maybe you had some rough college years and for fear of anyone finding out, you have withdrawn.

Or perhaps you are afraid of the future. You've just received an unfavorable diagnosis. Your debts are piling up. You're not sure where you will be working. And so, you've begun doubting God's goodness.

Regardless of the weakness facing you today, the GOOD NEWS is that as a result of God's redeeming grace the child of God has a Comforter who helps them in their weakness.

Romans 8:26a, "And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weaknesses..."¹

Now as wonderful as this truth is, Paul's initial statement could be taken as "pie in the sky" — a wonderful promise, BUT of little real difference for those in the crucible!

Knowing this, Paul gives an example of how the Spirit of God “helps us.”

An Example of Our Help, v. 26b.

Romans 8:26, “for we do not know how to pray as we should.”

It is important to see that Paul is NOT being arbitrary when it comes to his choice of examples. Rather, he has chosen to illustrate the Spirit’s help when it comes to our ULTIMATE weakness: Prayer!

You say, “Wait a minute! Prayer is my greatest weakness? Yes, my prayer life isn’t what it ought to be, but you obviously have never walked in my shoes!” And yet, think about it: is there any greater area of weakness in a mortal’s life than when he is in the presence of God?

We are no more vulnerable, speechless, and weak as Christians than when:

- The finite approaches the Infinite
- The mortal approaches the Eternal
- The ignoble approaches the King of Kings.
- The sinner approaches the Great I Am. ²

Remember Isaiah’s response when he beheld the glory of God’s holiness in Isaiah 6. He pronounced the strongest self-curse that the Hebrew language employed:

Isaiah 6:5, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”

Then there’s Moses, who in the presence of God.

Exodus 34:8, “...made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship.”

Or how about Ezekiel? Who here can begin to understand his description of God as found in Ezekiel 1?

Ezekiel 1:27-28, “...I noticed from the appearance of His loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of His loins and downward I saw something like fire; and *there was* a radiance around Him. As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so *was* the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such *was* the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw *it*, I fell on my face and heard a voice speaking.”

This is the God with whom we have to do!

Truly, time would fail us to consider Job, Habakkuk, the Apostles, prophets, angels and many, many others who before the majesty and glory of Almighty God sat speechless! Speaking of Peter's reaction to Christ in Luke 5 in which Peter asked Christ to leave him, R. C. Sproul wrote:

If we examine this passage carefully we see that there is a kind of similarity between Peter's reaction to Jesus and the reaction of the demons to Jesus. The demons recognized his holiness and were terrified. When Simon Peter saw the awesome power of Christ, he too was terrified, because he recognized something of the majesty of Christ, the holiness of Christ, that was showing through. Human beings are always terrified in the presence of the Holy. ¶ John Calvin, reflecting on the reaction of the Old Testament saints to the appearance of God in his holiness, said that men uniformly were filled with dread and terror..." (Sproul, 2020, p. 83)

And so, when it comes to the sinner approaching God... *IN PRAYER*... we discover that we are indeed weak! What mortal can approach an eternal and holy God and not be inadequate? John Bunyan explained it this way:

I find that my heart is slow to go to God; and when it does go to Him it does not seem to want to stay with Him; so that very often I am forced in my prayers, first to beg of God that He would take my heart and set it on Himself, and then when it is there, that He would keep it there. (Morris, 2012, p. 327 See Footnote 113)

One of the ancient church fathers said, "There is no work quite so difficult as praying to God." (Luther, 2003, p. 176)

And so, Paul is NOT being arbitrary when it comes to his example of our weakness. No! When it comes to a sinful being approaching a holy God, there is no better example of our greatest weakness. AND YET NOTICE: It is at this point of weakness that the Spirit enters in and helps us.

Romans 8:26, "but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

In other words, as we struggle when it comes to approaching God, we can take comfort in knowing that the Spirit is also praying with and for us; He is helping us in our weaknesses! As much as some might insist, you cannot read tongues into this verse (if for no other reason than Paul is describing ALL Christians — and not everyone spoke in tongues in the Apostolic age).³

And so, as the Spirit prays for us, He prays with “groanings too deep for words” — which carries the idea that the Spirit’s prayer on our behalf is profound... words cannot express it.

And so, just as Christ intercedes for us in the courts of heaven (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1), so also the Holy Spirit intercedes for us in the theatre of our heart (John 14:16, 17) by which we overcome our greatest weakness as mortal men: Communion with God!

And yet, as wonderful and comforting as this is, it raises a question: How certain is the Spirit’s help here? Is the Spirit’s “help” able to be thwarted? Can Satan, man, or my sin mess up God’s plans? Notice finally the certainty of our help.

[The Certainty of Our Help, v. 27.](#)

Romans 8:27a, “And He who searches the hearts...”

This has obvious reference to God, the Father. In Scripture, only God is the One who can search the heart of man (cf. Psalm 7:9; Proverbs 17:3; Acts 1:24; 1 Thessalonians 2:4; Revelation 2:23). And so, if God knows the heart of a weak and sinful man, certainly He also:

Romans 8:27b, “...knows what the mind of the Spirit is [who dwells within the heart of man]...”

Much could be said about this phrase: specifically, the words used and their influence on the overall meaning of this verse. And yet, let me try to simplify the idea here. That God knows the mind of the Spirit is to say nothing less than God hears the Spirit’s prayer on our behalf, approves of them, and thus answers them. That is the force of “know”! And so, to say that God “knows” the mind of the Spirit is to say that God approves of that which occupies the Spirit’s mind.

This leads to the conclude that the prayers of the Spirit are effectual! Whatever the Spirit prays on our behalf WILL take place! The Spirit’s prayers cannot be thwarted! Now if there was any doubt remaining, Paul added this:

Romans 8:27c, “...because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

This is an important addition to Paul’s argument. Recall the promise God made when it comes to prayer.

1 John 5:14, “And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us

in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.”

John 14:14, “If you ask Me anything in My name [in accord with God’s character], I will do *it*.”

See, when we go to God in prayer and ask for that which He already is going to do — asking “according to His will” — we have the confidence that God surely will answer that prayer in the affirmative. And yet, this is where the problem arises! We do NOT always know how to ask according to God’s will. And so, like Paul, at times we can be found asking for that which is not God’s will, and the answer we receive is “No.”

Now, as difficult as that can be for us, the incredible news is that the Spirit never has this problem. He always prays according to God’s will — which leads to the conclusion that the Spirit’s help in the area of prayer is always effective! AND if He is effective in the area of our greatest weakness — Prayer — we know that the Spirit’s help in all other areas of our lives will likewise be effective!

And so, whether it is in the realm of prayer, ministry, family, work, conflict, or tragedy, the Spirit’s workings on our behalf are always effectual!

Now this is an important truth to understand when it comes to our lives on this earth. See, at any given moment in your life there are two that are working: You and the Spirit...:

- When you Witness: It is you EMPOWERED by the Spirit.
- When you Struggle: It is you SUPPORTED by the Spirit.
- When you Grieve: It is you COMFORTED by the Spirit.
- When you Fall: It is you PROTECTED by the Spirit.
- When you Sin: It is you CONVICTED by the Spirit.
- When you are Restored: It is you STRENGTHENED by the Spirit.
- When you Pray: It is you AND the Spirit... what a glorious truth!

Yet this is NOT without its struggles. Because of our feeble frame and mind, there will be many times in our lives when we work at cross purposes with the Spirit. Yet let me encourage you. It is at these times — when it doesn’t work out as we have labored and prayed — that we must NOT doubt God’s goodness, kind intentions, or will.

What would you think of a marriage where upon the first fight, both couples immediately began threatening divorce?

Or how about parents who in the heat of the moment of a rebellious child threaten to put them up for adoption?

We'd say, "That's awful! You should never go there in your marriage or parenting (cf. Philippians 4:8)!"

Yet we go there all the time in our walk with God. When things don't go as we want, we question His character, judge Him, and perhaps at times even wonder why we are in His service. Christian! We should never go there in our walk with God!

Why is that? We might give a slew of reasons BUT let me give you just one this morning. We must willingly submit to the wisdom of God and trust Him for He sees the end from the beginning! That means everything He is doing on this side of the grave is for our lives on the next side of the grave. And so, in all that He does, He has the end game in mind! Accordingly, we must live by faith in God's future blessings, glory, and grace!

William Hendriksen gives this example:

A pastor, loved by his people, became grievously ill. The congregation prayed, 'Lord, please restore him to health.' But he died. At the funeral a minister who had been a lifelong friend of the departed made this remark to the assembled mourners, 'Perhaps some of you are in danger of arriving at the conclusion that the heavenly Father does not hear prayer. He does indeed hear prayer, however. But in this particular case two prayers were probably opposing each other. *You* were praying, "O God, spare his life..." *The Spirit's* unspoken prayer was, "Take him away, for [his work is done]." And the Father heard that prayer.' (Hendrickson, 1992, p. 274)

And so, at those times when our circumstances don't turn out the way we want, we must NOT doubt whether the Spirit of God is there helping us, BUT RATHER, we must know that such is the will of God for our good and so continue to trust Him!

References

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End Notes

¹ Other examples are Philippians 1:19 and 2:12-13.

² Another example is the Seraphim of Is. 6. Do you remember them, how they constantly cry out, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts..”? What makes this cry significant is that these angels are without sin! See we tend to think that “Holy” is a declaration of one’s sinlessness- but it’s not. “Holy” in the Bible first and foremost means “different” or “other.” And so, as the sinless Seraphim minister in the presence of God, they are shocked and amazed at His Greatness!

³ In fact, the object of the “groanings” in this verse is not the believer, but the Spirit of God.