

“The Spirit intercedes for us”
Romans 8:26-27

Introduction

- 1. Yogi Berra was famous for baseball but also famous for some of the strange things he said:**

“It ain’t over till it’s over.”

“You better cut the pizza in four pieces because I’m not hungry enough to eat six.”

“Baseball is 90% mental—the other half is physical.”

“Nobody goes there any more. It’s too crowded.”

“The future ain’t what it used to be.”

One of his most famous quotes was, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” It may not be as silly as it sounds. When he played for the New York Yankees from 1946-1965 he and his wife Carmen established their home in Montclair, NJ, where I grew up. Yogi Berra still lives there today.

The story goes that when he gave directions to his house there was a fork in the road and you could take it either way and end up in the same place. So, “when you come to the fork in the road, take it.”

- 2. We all come to forks in the road but the decisions we make usually take us to very different places.** The choice may be between jobs in different cities, who to marry, whether to adopt a child or a decision between surgery and chemotherapy.

We gather information, make a list of pros and cons and still can’t decide. When we pray we can’t come up with the right words to say to God. We come to the fork in the road and are stuck with uncertainty.

- 3. We’ve all been there and that’s why I find Romans 8:26-27 so encouraging.**

These lines are not quoted as often as Genesis 1:1 or John 3:16 but they have encouraged me as much as anything the Bible teaches. The British scholar William Barclay wrote that these are “two verses from one of the most important passages on prayer in the whole New Testament.”¹

- 4. Romans 8:26-27**

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.

- 5. OK, I admit that these words are not so easy to memorize.** But, they are profoundly true and profoundly encouraging.

We are weak

- 1. “The Spirit helps us in our weakness.”** While sometimes we may think we are strong the truth is that our humanity is really weak.

- 2. The March 11, 2011 earthquake that struck Japan is a powerful reminder of our collective weakness.** Japan is one of the wealthiest economies in human history. The Japanese are world leaders in technology. And, if there is any nation in the world that has systematically prepared for earthquakes it is Japan—buildings are well constructed; tsunami warning systems are in place; emergency training was well developed.

But, you have seen what an 8.9 earthquake has done. Whole towns have been destroyed. Ships have been flipped over. One million homes have no electricity. Over 500,000 people are immediately homeless. Food supplies and clean water are in short supply. Roads are ruined. Nuclear reactors are melting down. The government is reeling with crisis upon crisis.

- 3. Let us never think that our own nation is exempt.** There are major faults that could cause devastating earthquakes across America. A major influenza outbreak could quarantine our country and bring our economy to its knees.

Or, imagine a scenario like that described by former Secretary of Defense William Perry where a small dirty bomb is exploded somewhere in the USA. Then some group claims responsibility even though they may have had nothing to do with it. They say they have two more bombs that will be exploded within 30 days in Memphis or Miami or Minneapolis. Millions of people get in their cars and start driving away from their cities. Gas stations run dry. Hotels are packed. Cities are vacated. Food supply is disrupted.

- 4. We are not strong enough to handle all the potential national conflicts and catastrophes like the one in Japan.** But, most of us are more likely to deal with the earthquakes, tsunamis and terrorism in our personal lives. Losing a job, crashing a car, dealing with a death—it doesn't take much to let us know we are weak. Life is loaded with challenges that are greater than our muscles or minds.

- 5. So, where do we go and what do we do when we are weak and can't cope on our own?** The biblical and Christian answer is that we go to God in prayer. After all, the Bible makes some spectacular promises:

Psalm 4:1

Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God.

Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer.

Psalm 102:1

Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry for help come to you.

Psalm 102:17

He will respond to the prayer of the destitute; he will not despise their plea.

Psalm 143:1

O Lord, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief.

Proverbs 15:29

The Lord is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous.

Matthew 21:22

“If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” --Jesus

Philippians 4:6

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

James 5:16

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

1 Peter 3:12

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.

6. But, what if we don't know what to pray?

We don't know what to pray

1. Romans 8:26

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

2. An American host brought a group of men from rural Africa to a conference in the United States. His guests spoke English but were very unfamiliar with American towns and cities. So, they wanted to go shopping downtown. The host took an extra precaution and gave each one a piece of paper with his telephone number written on it and told them to call him if they got lost.

Within an hour his phone rang. One of his guests had no idea where he was or where to go. The host asked him where he was and he answered, “In a store.”

The host told him to set down the phone, go outside and read the street signs and then come back in to tell him what they said. Carefully following directions the rural visitor left and then returned a few minutes later. He said, “I'm at the corner of *Walk* and *Don't Walk*.”

3. I've been at corners like that many times when I have prayed. I just didn't know what to say to God. I didn't know what to ask.

Probably every parent who prays has gotten stuck with what to say to God. Every Christian with a chronic illness has been unable to articulate a prayer that is right.

4. I've stood with fellow believers in hospital hallways, after church services and in their homes as they have groaned instead of prayed. The emotions were so great and the words so few that they just made sounds instead of sentences.

5. The reason godly Christians don't know what to pray is uncertainty. You know that uncertainty can be paralyzing—just follow the stock market . . . even bad news seems better than uncertain news.

Because we are weak and mortal we always have uncertainty. We cannot see the future so we don't know what to ask. We truly don't know what is best for us so we don't know what to pray.

We could pray that tomorrow's interview will bring a job offer but what if that company goes bankrupt in a few years and it would be better to wait for a different job?

We could pray for a marriage proposal but maybe this guy will turn out to be a bad husband and a better man will be missed.

Maybe we shouldn't pray for this new drug to work because the side effects will cause worse problems down the road.

- 6. If we could see the future and if we always knew what was best for us, maybe we would always know what to pray.** But we can't see the future and we don't know what is best and so we don't know what to pray. We've come to a fork in the road and the wrong choice could lead to disaster.

The Holy Spirit prays for us

- 1. Now for the very good and encouraging news.**

Romans 8:26

We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

- 2. When we don't know what to pray the Holy Spirit does our praying for us.**

When we are groaning in pain or uncertainty, the Holy Spirit makes sense out of sounds that we ourselves don't even understand. When we would totally mess up our prayers to God, the Holy Spirit will get them right.

How does this actually work?

Romans 8:27

He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

God the Father searches our hearts like the scanning of a computer's hard drive.

He gathers all the data from our thoughts, emotions, history and hope. This scan combines with the Holy Spirit praying on our behalf with prayers that are perfectly aligned with the will of God.

- 3. Think of this as like a case in court.** You are your own lawyer in a major appeal before a powerful judge who will make a decision that will change your life. You quickly realize that you are in over your head—you don't know the procedures; you are unfamiliar with the fine points of the law; you're not smart enough to adequately argue your case. But, you have a skilled and experienced attorney who advises you. He prepares you before trial every morning and debriefs you every night. He sits in the gallery of the courtroom and sends you frequent notes telling you what to say. He is enormously helpful but on the sixth day of the trial you become overwhelmed. You no longer understand what is going on. Your words aren't making sense. The whole case and your whole future are collapsing before your eyes.

Then your lawyer friend steps forward and takes over your case. He is smart and articulate. He argues your cause with words and ideas that you never would have thought about. He has the judge's undivided attention and persuades the court to rule in your favor.

That's what the Holy Spirit does for us! *We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express...the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.*

4. **Yes, I know that there are some who choose to pray to saints in order to get to God but that’s not what I read here.** According to Romans 8:26-27 we are the saints (every Christian is called a saint in the New Testament) and the one who prays for us in the Holy Spirit of God himself. No intermediaries. Straight to the top.
5. **Does this mean that we quit praying and let the Holy Spirit do all of our praying for us?** Of course not. The majority of all our prayers are within our vocabulary. The Holy Spirit speaks to our spirits like the coaching lawyer who sends up notes to help us in that courtroom.

But, when our challenges are overwhelming, when our weakness shuts us down, when we’re at the fork in the road and have no idea which way to go . . . *the Spirit himself intercedes for us.*

Conclusion

Sarah is an ultrasound technician at a Los Angeles hospital. She was on call one Friday night and was summoned to the Emergency Room at 2 a.m. The attending physician told her that he thought the woman in Exam Room #2 was crazy but for legal reasons they needed to run some tests.

Sarah entered the room and saw a very agitated woman in her forties who could barely hold still for the ultrasound. She just kept moving around and complaining about severe discomfort. The patient actually laid down on the examining room floor as Sarah tried to get her in place for the test. While on the floor the patient asked, “Do you believe in Jesus Christ?” With hesitation, Sarah said she did.

Then her patient asked, “Would you pray for me? I just need to calm down.”

Sarah faced a dilemma. What was the professional thing to do? Besides, she had never prayed out loud for anyone before in her life. So, she suggested that the patient pray for herself. She answered, “No. It hurts too much. You do it!”

So, Sarah prayed for God to settle the woman down, show the doctor what to do and take away her pain.

The patient settled down. Sarah was suddenly inclined to recheck her gall bladder where there was a stone causing blockage. The physician was informed, changed his diagnose and ordered surgery.²

It’s not always in a hospital. It’s not often a technician named Sarah. But, be encouraged that wherever you are it is the Spirit.

Romans 8:26-27

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March 19-20, 2011 Wooddale Church
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¹ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, Eerdmans, page 111.

² Bill White, “Jesus Discomforts Us to Comfort Others,” Paramount, California, *Preaching Today*, posted December 10, 2007.