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"But the Spirit Himself Intercedes": An Exegetical on Romans 8:26-27

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“But the Spirit Himself Intercedes”
An Exegetical on Romans 8:26-27

By Carmen Scott

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I. Introduction

In two short verses, Paul communicates the deep dependency a believer must have on the Holy Spirit to be sustained through this age, specifically on the topic of prayer. The aim of this thesis is to give a fuller approach to the interpretation of Romans 8:26-27. Many sources have contributed to the interpretation of this passage and the purpose of this thesis is to bring together many of those contributions to shed light on the meaning of Paul's words and produce an insightful and cohesive reading of the passage. The thesis will explore an array of material, including an analysis of the Greek text of Romans 8:26-27 in order to interpret the passage in light of its original context.

II. Context

Historical Context

Romans was undisputedly written by Paul, who names himself in the very first verse of the letter. Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ who was of Jewish descent. He was very well educated in both the Hebrew Bible and the Greek culture. At the time of writing Romans, Paul had been on three missionary journeys in the east and was most likely spending time in Corinth before heading west to Jerusalem and Spain, visiting the Romans along the way, as he mentions is his next expected mission in Romans 15:19-32. Scholars have trouble dating Paul's missionary journeys with precision, but based on the information in the text it can be assumed that Romans was most likely written between A. D. 55 and 58.¹

The Roman audience Paul was writing to was unique. It is clearly not one of Paul's original church plants. Some believe it to have been founded by Peter, but because Paul makes it clear that he would not preach to another apostle's church plant in 15:20, it more likely had no original apostolic foundations. Instead, the Christian community in Rome was most likely founded upon the return of a group of Roman Jews who were converted at Pentecost in Acts 2:10.²

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 3.

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 4.

Although it had Jewish beginnings, the church in Rome changed drastically when the Jewish population in Rome was expelled from their homes by the government in A. D. 49.³ This left the Gentile Christian population time to grow and become more prominent in the church in Rome until the return of the Jewish population sometime later. Because the evangelism practices of the first Christian converts were mainly within the synagogue, the Gentiles would not have had a large opportunity to hear the gospel and join the house churches unless they also attended the synagogue.⁴ However, in Rome many Gentiles were attracted to Judaism and went to the synagogue and adhered to the Jewish faith to different extents.⁵ At the time the audience would be reading Romans, the Jewish community had already returned to Rome so there was a mix of Jews and Gentiles within the Christian community. Although still debated, the long absence of the Jewish population combined with the evidence in the book of Romans suggests that the audience reading the letter was comprised primarily of Gentile Christians.⁶

Paul never comes out and states clearly the purposes or circumstances which prompted the writing of his letter to the Romans. However, as one reads Romans, some clear purposes seem to string through the entire letter. Moo lists many potential purposes, but hones in on a few as the primary concerns of Paul: he wrote the letter to be an introductory letter in order to win the support and trust of the community in Rome on his way to Jerusalem and Spain; he wrote the letter to ease mounting tensions between Gentile and Jewish believers which were common in the universal body of Christ; and he wrote the letter in order to inform the believers of the core

³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), xlvi.

⁵ Ibid., xlviii.

⁶ Frank J. Matera, *Romans*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 7.

theology of the Christian faith.⁷ Paul does not directly address any problems specific to the churches in Romans, perhaps because doesn't know the happenings in the community personally.

Literary Context

Romans is a letter written to a community of believers for the building up of the body of Christ. However, a large portion of it takes the form of a “treatise,” an argument dealing very formally with much of Paul’s theology, although not comprehensively.⁸ Also, parts of the letter are in a style called “diatribe,” which works creatively to counter another argument.⁹ Rather than a letter for one church, it was formed in a way that it could be read and applied to the many house churches located in Rome.

Romans 8:26-27 is an irreplaceable part of Paul’s larger argument in vv.18-39. However, the reader can distinguish it as a stand-alone passage functioning as a sub-point to this larger argument and therefore a cohesive unit, despite its small size, based on key literary features. First, at the beginning of v. 26, Paul uses the Greek phrase “Ὡσαύτως δὲ,” a combination of an adverb and a marker of development which can be translated as “And likewise.”¹⁰ This combination closely correlates this passage with the one before while still making it a distinct passage.

⁷ Moo, 16-22.

⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰ Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2010), 28-36.

In vv. 26-27, Paul is discussing the Spirit's role in helping believers enduring the "present sufferings" of this age. Prior to vv. 26-27, Paul is explaining the eager awaiting and hoping of first the creation (vv. 19-22) and then the believers (vv. 23-25) in this age. Here, there is a direct shift in the subject matter, emphasizing the way the Spirit is to function during this age. This is made clear by the author's repetition of the word "πνεῦμα," (Spirit) which has only been used once outside of this passage in vv. 18-30.

The end of the passage is also made clear by a topic shift marked by the use of "δὲ," at the beginning of v. 28 and a shift in focus. After describing the role of the Spirit, Paul goes on to explain how God is at work in this present age. The Spirit is not directly mentioned again in the rest of the chapter.

With this passage, the readers gain a different perspective on a beautiful aspect of the intimate presence of God working on their behalf in their sufferings. It clearly communicates a conquering hope when faced with the mountain one's true level of weakness. This passage on the Spirit bridges the gap between where believers and creation are now, and where they will be when the Kingdom of God has completely dawned. It specifically explains one of the many ways God is working out his plan to glorify his people as he continues to sanctify them. Also, it adds a vivid picture of the intimate workings of God through the Spirit to help the believer in their weakness and incapacity. It explains in beautiful detail the relational presence of God actively at work in the believer's lives.

III. Holy Spirit in Romans 8

Romans 8 is sometimes referred to as “the Holy Spirit Chapter” of Romans. This is because Paul references the Spirit by name nineteen times in the first twenty seven verses, twenty one times in all.¹¹ This high frequency is not paralleled in any other chapter in the New Testament. One of the reasons Paul uses the term so frequently is because one of his purposes in chapter eight is to contrast life in the Spirit with the life under the law he outlined in chapter seven. Stott goes further by communicating that in chapter 8, “the essential contrast which Paul paints is between the weakness of the law and the power of the Spirit.”¹²

To achieve as clear a representation as possible of what Paul is communicating about the Spirit in vv. 26-27, it is important to make some brief observations about what he has already said about the Spirit in the prior verses of Romans 8. The Holy Spirit is the bridge between heaven and earth.¹³ This passage reveals one of the powerful ways the Spirit clearly goes between the believer and God the Father. Throughout the first half of Romans 8, vv.1-17, the Spirit is associated with everything good in God’s sight; things such as life, peace, law, righteousness, and even active attack on the “deeds of the flesh.” Believers are to be led by the Spirit, to live by the Spirit, to be adopted by means of the Spirit, and even to fight using the Spirit. Paul also explains that the Spirit lives inside of the believers. Relationship with and reliance on him is the only way the believer will experience any true life this side of their own bodily resurrection. Believers have life now because they have the Spirit. After learning these

¹¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 216.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *God’s Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 211.

things about the Spirit in the verses before, the readers will know very well how they can take action to be God's people by the power of the Spirit. But now, in vv.26-27, Paul explains that even when the believer doesn't have the strength to take another step or pray another prayer, the Spirit continues to intercede on their behalf. Here, the Spirit is active and powerful even when the believer cannot be.

IV. Holy Spirit in Romans 8:26-27

Translation

And likewise, the Spirit also helps our weakness. For we do not know what we ought to pray as is fitting, but the Spirit himself intercedes with wordless groanings and the one who examines hearts knows what the mindset of the Spirit is, that he is appealing according to God on behalf of the saints.

Syntactic Diagram

²⁶ δὲ
Ὡσαύτως καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα συναντιλαμβάνεται¹⁴
τῇ ἀσθενείᾳ¹⁵
ἡμῶν·
γὰρ
τὸ¹⁶ τί προσευξώμεθα καθὼ δεῖ οὐκ οἶδαμεν,
ἀλλ’
αὐτὸ¹⁷ τὸ πνεῦμα ὑπερεντυγχάνει¹⁸
στεναγμοῖς¹⁹ ἀλαλήτοις
²⁷ δὲ
ὁ ἐραυνῶν²⁰ τὰς καρδίας οἶδεν τί τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος²¹,
κατὰ²² θεὸν
ὅτι... ἐντυγχάνει²³
ὑπὲρ²⁴ ἁγίων.

¹⁴ “Bearing a burden along with”

¹⁵ Dative of sphere.

¹⁶ Sometimes neuter singular article is used before a statement, quotation or clause. This falls under the category of “substantivizer” article because it conceptualizes the statement that follows. This communicates that the phrase that follows the τὸ is the object of the verb οἶδαμεν.

¹⁷ Pronoun being used reflexively.

¹⁸ Iterative present.

¹⁹ Dative of manner.

²⁰ Substantive Participle.

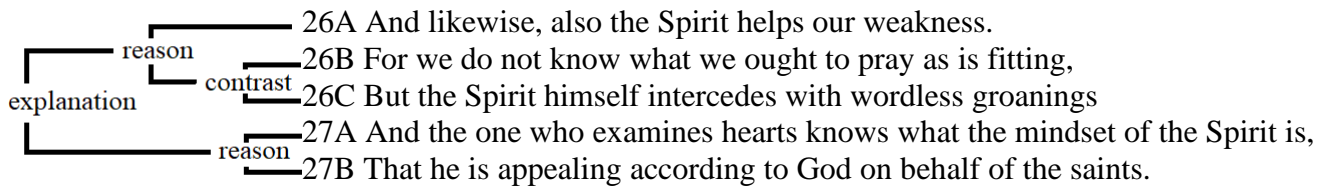
²¹ Genitive of possession.

²² Preposition indicates reference/ standard “corresponding to.”

²³ Iterative Present.

²⁴ ὑπὲρ is indicating representation.

Semantic Diagram



Explanation of Content

Verse 26

“And likewise, the Spirit also helps our weakness. For we do not know what we ought to pray as is fitting, but the Spirit himself intercedes with wordless groanings”

In Romans 8:18-30, Paul is drawing up a picture for his readers of what it looks like for creation, believers, and the Spirit to live in “the sufferings of this present time,” while they are looking forward to “the glory that is going to be revealed.” Creation, as explained in vv. 19-22, is “eagerly awaiting” for the revealing of “God’s children” with groaning because then it will be able to experience the “glorious freedom” from decay which the people of God will experience. The next set of verses, vv. 23-25, explains that believers also groan, longing to experience the rest of their redemption promised at the second coming of Jesus Christ. Their groaning takes place as hopeful patience and endurance. In v. 26, Paul explains the role of the Spirit in this present time. He uses the adverb *Ἠσαύτως* in order to relate the new topic to his two previous scenarios, carrying on the groaning motif.²⁵ First he explains the groaning of creation, then “not

²⁵ Dunn, 476.

only that” but also the believers’ groaning, and now “likewise” the Spirit’s groaning; each has distinct roles in the present.

Romans 8:26-27 has deep theological implications: the personality, strength, and power of the Holy Spirit as well as his love for the people of God is beautifully revealed in this passage. The audience is given a deeper understanding of what suffering in this lifetime should look like. Jesus promises sufferings in this lifetime, and now Paul explains to believers how to relate to the Spirit, and how the Spirit is fighting for them even through the turmoil that they experience.

Beginning here, Paul dives into what the role of the Spirit entails specifically. Verse 26 starts off with the phrase “*καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα συναντιλαμβάνεται τῇ ἀσθενείᾳ ἡμῶν*” (the Spirit also helps our weakness). In order to understand the text clearly, we must first address the *καὶ* (also). Not only is Paul using it to naturally continue the groaning motif that started with creation’s groaning in v. 22, but he is also using it in combination with “ὡσαύτως” (likewise) to connect the Spirit’s help with the revelation of the hope of our future adoption and redemption in the previous two verses (vv. 24-25). Although “groaning” is a strong motif throughout Romans 8, the connection made by the transitional particles must be primarily the help provided for the believers in this age because the thematic center of vv. 26-27 is the Spirit’s help.²⁶ Both the Spirit’s intercession and our hope in the future, mentioned in the previous verses (specifically vv. 24-25), allow us to wait in patience through the sufferings we experience now. Together, they provide sustenance for believers by allowing them to taste some of their coming “glorious freedom” even in this present age.²⁷

²⁶ Schreiner, 434.

²⁷ Stott, 244.

The first verb he uses to describe the role of the Spirit is “συναντιλαμβάνεται,” which means “he helps,” in the sense of coming to aid someone in need. Just like the believers and creation, the Holy Spirit experiences his own sense of suffering, which causes him to groan for the completion of the new creation. However, unlike creation and believers, the Holy Spirit’s groaning takes shape as a wonderful help to believers in a unique manner. Following the verb in this verse, Paul uses the phrase “τῆ ἀσθενείᾳ, ἡμῶν” (our weakness) to explain why the Spirit needs to help in the first place. The word “ἀσθενείᾳ,” though translated as “weakness,” seems to communicate the idea of the believer’s inability due to limitations or incapacity rather than any physical frailty. This meaning is reinforced in the next clause, where Paul defines further what form this “weakness” takes, revealing that it is a weakness regarding prayer.

Most modern Bible versions translate this phrase as “The Spirit also helps us in our weakness. However, this infers the first-person plural pronoun “us,” when it is not present in the Greek. It seems that it would be more precise to translate the phrase as “The Spirit helps our weakness” to provide a better image of what is reflected in the Greek. In the traditional translation, the reader is can mistakenly be given the idea of the Spirit helping us to help our own weakness. If the more literal translation is used by removing the first-person plural pronoun, no matter how small a change it might seem, it communicates more clearly the depth of dependence the believer has on the Spirit when it comes to the believer’s incapability to know what to pray in certain situations. Adding the first-person plural pronoun may lead to an ambiguity that is not present in the Greek about the action of the believer when they reach this point in their prayer life. Although this seems like a small detail, remaining true to the Greek as precisely as possible is of the highest priority. Schreiner adds that “συναντιλαμβάνεται” (he helps) is probably intensive because the preposition συν- often communicates this, which would support the view

that sees Paul's desire in this verse to communicate the deep need that the believer has for the help of the Spirit.²⁸

The help of the Holy Spirit is not a partial support that allows the believer to be able to complete the task on their own, but his "help" is completing a task that the believer is unable to complete. In order to be sustained through this time, the believer is desperate for something which they cannot now and could never attain within themselves, and the Holy Spirit is wholly able to provide this help. Translating the verse in a way that communicates this message is vital to properly construe the comfort and peace that comes from walking with and depending on the Spirit.

Next Paul writes the phrase "τὸ γὰρ τί προσευζώμεθα καθὸ δεῖ οὐκ οἶδαμεν" (for we do not know what we ought to pray as is fitting). The "γὰρ" (for) is a logical conjunction introducing the specific explanation of why the believers need help from the Spirit in their weakness. Paul utilizes a very interesting employment of the definite article in Greek with the "τὸ" at the beginning of the phrase. The article signifies that the rest phrase before the verb with its proceeding negation should be taken together as one concept. It is said to conceptualize what follows it which altogether becomes the object of the verb that follows. Therefore, "τί προσευζώμεθα καθὸ δεῖ" (what we ought to pray as is fitting) becomes a concept which is the object of the verb. As is the standard in the New Testament, the verb "προσεύχομαι" means simply "to pray" and in the subjunctive mood here construes a hypothetical "ought to pray." The whole concept is best translated "what we ought to pray as is fitting." This is what the believers "do not know," and why the Spirit must help them.

²⁸ Schreiner, 434.

Scholars have continually debated what Paul means specifically when he talks about our inability to pray correctly. Most interpreters end up in two camps; either that Paul is talking about the believer's inability specifically with the *manner* of prayer or the *content* of prayer. The former seems unlikely because of the interrogative pronoun τί which is best translated “what,” signifying Paul pinpoints the content of prayer as what needs help. Although “τί” can be translated “how” in certain contexts, if that is what Paul intended he could have just as easily used the word “πῶς”.²⁹ The case is made even stronger for content when we see the chiasm at play in v. 26:

A The Spirit helps
B our weakness
B' For we do not know what we ought to pray as is fitting
A' But the Spirit himself intercedes with wordless groanings³⁰

In the chiasm, A' and B' further define A and B by giving the content to each. The content of the help provided by the Spirit is intercession, and the content of the weakness endured by the believer is their ignorance in terms of what to pray.³¹ Neither is concerned with form, but instead with content. The disregard for form is further emphasized by the fact that even the Spirit's prayers are “wordless,” or formless.

When commenting on this debate, Schreiner supports the argument made for content by suggesting that “δεῖ” could be more clinically translated “as is fitting,” instead of “as is

²⁹ Schreiner, 435.

³⁰ Ibid., 434-435.

³¹ Stott, 244.

necessary.”³² Dunn agrees with the definition in BDAG³³ in saying that it is best translated, “as is proper,” and continues to qualify the definition by defining “proper” as proper in the sense of aligning with the will of God.³⁴ (As we continue to dive into this passage it becomes ever clearer that “fitting” or “proper,” which can be synonymous, are finer renderings of the word in context where Paul will describe the Spirit’s intercession on behalf of the believers as “according to God.”) Where the believers are weakened by their limited knowledge of the near future and the will of God within ambiguous situations, the Spirit bridges the gap by interceding with wordless prayers which perfectly align with the will of the Lord. The Spirit works miraculously through his intimate relationship to God the Father to empower the believers’ prayers when they are rendered powerless. Translating “δεῖ” as “fitting,” communicates more thoroughly the necessity for the Spirit’s intercession and the grace that it is than the traditional translation “as is necessary”.

Living in this time offers much suffering, as Paul mentions in v. 18. This suffering is caused by disorder, confusion, and delusion. Christ-followers do not suddenly have all the answers the moment they accept Jesus as their savior and are indwelt with the Holy Spirit. Many times, life just gets continually more confusing, especially when there is suffering involved. A believer must discern true wisdom from false wisdom, which can look deceptively similar. This is the weakness that the Spirit helps the believers with. Since human beings have limited knowledge even with the Spirit, there are many times the right thing to pray for is

³² Schreiner, 435.

³³ Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 214.

³⁴ Dunn, 477.

unclear. Do they pray for a way out of the situation they are in or a way to be sustained within the situation? Is the “no” of a friend when confronted with the gospel a sign to stop or is the Spirit going to work supernaturally if they continue to share the Gospel? Does God want them to extend grace or pursue justice within a certain situation?

There are many situations that the believer may be faced with in which they have no idea where to start praying according to the will of God, as wisdom eludes them. Thankfully, this is where the power of the Spirit comes into play. The Spirit’s intimate intertwining with the other two persons of the trinity allows him to go where the believer cannot and communicate in a way that is impossible for the believer. He is able to intercede without a spoken word, in a manner only heard and understood by the Father. Paul’s words are a deep encouragement for the believers who have come to the end of themselves in some difficult situation and are crying out for mercy; for he is communicating that even as they are crying out, God has provided mercy through the faultless intercession of the Spirit. As Dunn puts it, “prayer characteristically denotes the dependence of the creature on the creator for all good.”³⁵

Moving into the last part of v. 26, Paul’s use of “ἀλλ” (but) at the beginning of the last phrase creates an emphasis how opposed the believers’ inability is to the Spirit’s capability. The stark contrast continues to build the message of deep dependency on the Spirit that Paul is conveying in these two verses. Following the conjunction, the author explains the Spirit’s response to the believer’s weakness by defining the way he helps. Paul’s use of a reflexive pronoun here is emphatic, putting a strong emphasis on the fact that the Spirit is the one interceding when the believer does not know what to pray. The verb which is used to describe

³⁵ Dunn, 477.

what the Spirit is doing, “ὑπερεντυγχάνει,” (he intercedes) only occurs once in this form in the entire New Testament. However, a verb with the same root (in v. 27, ἐντυγχάνει) occurs in the latter half of the next verse and is common in literature at the time the letter was written.³⁶ The dual use of the verb reveals the centrality of the Spirit’s intercession to the message Paul is relaying. In both verses, Paul is explaining that the Spirit prays on behalf of the believers what they cannot pray because of their limited knowledge. The believers live with an aperture in their prayer lives between their knowledge now and the wisdom of the age to come, and the Spirit fills this gap with his precious intercession. It is a beautiful example of how the Spirit practically helps with the sanctification of the believer. “Thus ‘the children of God have two divine intercessors’, writes John Murray. ‘Christ is their intercessor in the court of heaven...’, while ‘the Holy Spirit is their intercessor in the theatre of their own hearts.’”³⁷

Following the verb, the Spirit’s intercession is characterized with “wordless groanings,” by the dative of manner, “στεναγμοῖς ἀλαλήτοις.” The root of the word translated “groanings” is used three times in vv.18-27, once each for creation and believer, and here for the Spirit. The only other occurrence in the New Testament is in Acts 7, in a quote from Exodus, when God hears his people’s groanings in Egypt and has decided to perform the exodus. Paul uses the verb form in 2 Corinthians when talking about the believer’s discomfort in the body they have now, longing to be in perfected, resurrected bodies in heaven. Altogether, the word seems to be an expression of care or concern, laced with desire and longing. In each verse, it is coupled with the suffering that is a product of living before the final redemption has come. As the believers feel

³⁶ Dunn, 478.

³⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1968), 311.

unable to push forward in prayer because of their lack of discernment, the Holy Spirit intercedes for them, producing wordless noises to be interpreted by the Father, as seen in v. 27.

Some scholars push back on this interpretation of the word “στεναγμοῖς” (groanings). Although it is plausible for both creation and the church to groan because of their present state of imperfection, it seems very strange that the Holy Spirit, a perfect being and member of the most powerful person in the universe, would groan.³⁸ The Holy Spirit is described as suffering in other places within the New Testament. For example, Paul commands the believers not to grieve the Spirit in Ephesians 4:30 and reveals that the Spirit can be grieved by human beings. Also, 1 Thessalonians 5:19 communicates that believers have the ability to quench the Spirit by acting in a way that despises his gifts and fruit. When viewed simultaneously—that the Spirit can groan, be grieved, and be quenched—it becomes clear that the Spirit is deeply affected by the state of the world, which is under the curses of Genesis 3:14-19. However, the Spirit’s ability to experience suffering does not mean that he not sovereign; he has all authority and could easily remove himself from these sufferings. Instead, they should be understood as revealing the extent of his sovereignty and glory more fully. God’s desire for relationality reaches even to the extent that he would subject himself to pain on behalf of the believer.

We can compare his ability to empathize with our sufferings to Christ, who willingly went to the cross, shared in our sufferings and is glorified. The Holy Spirit shares the attitude of Christ in John 10:17-18, when he says, “This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again. I have received this command

³⁸ Stott, 245.

from my Father.” The Holy Spirit willingly subjects himself to the pain we experience in this life and the pain of sharing in relationship with a broken humanity and this further exalts him.

Therefore, in this passage Paul is creating such a notable dissonance in order to catch the readers’ attention. The Holy Spirit groaning seems paradoxical but Paul communicates it in this verse as very practical. It is a wonderful miracle that we have a God that can not only sympathize but also empathize with our sufferings solely because he has chosen to do so.

Some scholars have believed this “wordless groaning” of the Spirit to represent the gift of tongues. This is highly unlikely. The adjective “ἀλαλήτοις” (wordless) is more likely relaying that the groanings of the Spirit are without vocalization and make no noise rather than making noises that could be linked to the gift of tongues. Also, the “στεναγμοῖς” (groanings) of the Spirit is most likely metaphorical, similar to the groaning of creation in v. 22, representing that the Spirit shares in longing for creation being made new with the rest of the world.³⁹ Stott also adds that when Paul speaks of the gift of tongues elsewhere in the New Testament, it is expressed in languages where there is understanding of the words being said.⁴⁰ If what the Spirit is doing here is “wordless,” then there is no way this is referring to the gift of tongues some believers experience.

³⁹ Schreiner, 437.

⁴⁰ Stott, 245.

Verse 27

“and the one who examines hearts knows what the mindset of the Spirit is, that he is appealing according to God on behalf of the saints.”

Stepping into v. 27, the author now explains in detail how the intercession of the Spirit is effective. First, Paul introduces a new character to the illustration, “ὁ ἐραυνῶν τὰς καρδίας” (the one who examines hearts). The one who examines hearts is a reference to God the Father, the title being used referring to God many times in the Old Testament. Paul’s use of this name for God instead of “θεός” (God) retains the emphasis on the Spirit, who is mentioned by name three times within the two verses.

By introducing God in this role, Paul wants to emphasize his omniscience. This reminds the readers that he knows exactly what the intentions and desires of a person are without any form of communication from them. Believers can trust fully in the reception of the Spirit’s intercession because God is the “examiner of hearts” when the Spirit’s prayers are without an utterance. Reminding the believers of his omniscience is also a gentle reminder that God, perfect in every way, chooses to invite us into his plan. Schreiner points out that is clear support of the belief that the Spirit indwells the believer upon their salvation.⁴¹ Here, as God examines the inner parts of a believer, he finds the Spirit there interceding on behalf of the believer. He examines a believer’s heart and finds the mindset of the Spirit being presented to him as well. When coupled with v. 9, there is a coherent picture of how the Spirit dwells within the believer.

⁴¹ Schreiner, 438.

When Paul explains that God, “the examiner of hearts,” hears the intercession of the Spirit who “knows what the mindset of the Spirit is,” the use of both mind and heart stresses the complete knowledge that God has of both the Spirit and the believer. He understands with clarity that which seems unable to be communicated but is present within the mind of the Spirit and the heart of the believer. The word translated “hearts” in English does not represent the same part of human cognition as it does in Greek. The ancient Greek usage of this word did not refer to merely human emotion and feeling as does the English, but to the place where one exercises volition and ambition; decision making happens on the seat of one’s heart.⁴² The Greek word “φρόνημα” (usually translated “mindset”) is also hard to capture in one English word. Instead of just referring to the established set of thoughts one has, “φρόνημα” also holds a strong intentionality or focus. The word can even mean “to strive” for something in certain contexts.⁴³ So the “mindset of the Spirit” is that which the Spirit is set on.

The phrase “φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος” (the mindset of the Spirit) draws the reader back to Romans 8:5-8, where Paul uses the same phrase while talking about the contrast between the mindset of the flesh and the mindset of the Spirit. In that passage, Paul explains that the mindset of the flesh is death because it is hostile to God, cannot submit to God and therefore cannot please God. Concerning the mindset of the Spirit, in 8:5-8 Paul mentions that the Spirit is “life and peace.” Now it seems that through this illustration Paul is defining more concretely how the mindset of the Spirit *is* life and peace. The mindset of the Spirit is life and peace through his intercession on behalf of the believers; they are one in the same.⁴⁴

⁴² Dunn, 479.

⁴³ Arndt, 1066.

⁴⁴ Schreiner, 438.

Some commentators argue that “πνεύματος” (spirit) here refers to the human spirit rather than the Holy Spirit. However, this is improbable because it would break the flow of the scene being built. The same word has referred to the Holy Spirit in every single other passage in Romans 8, and to say that this one usage is different would not make much sense.⁴⁵ The case is strengthened by the fact that the word is articular as well.

The fact that the Spirit is interceding according to God shows that where the flesh cannot submit to God, the Spirit is completely in submission to God. Although Paul is no longer directly highlighting the contrast between the flesh and the Spirit now, he is still subtly adding that the believer, who has chosen the Spirit, receives the good portion of life and peace just as promised. Where the flesh is hostile towards God, the Spirit works together with God, producing peace in the life of the believer. From the beginning, we see the Holy Spirit working to bring chaos into order—in Genesis 1:2 he is already hovering, ready to get to work! In the chaos of the believer’s clouded prayer life, the Holy Spirit brings order.

The final clause of the passage modifies what the mindset of the Spirit entails. The “ὅτι” (that) that begins this phrase could be either causal or explicative. However, deciding between the two is unnecessary because either renders a very similar understanding of the verse.⁴⁶ Either way, what is communicated is that the Spirit’s intercession is appealing on behalf of the believers. The mindset of the Spirit here is on appealing on behalf of the believers before God according to his will.

⁴⁵ Dunn, 480.

⁴⁶ Schreiner, 438.

In this last phrase, Paul repeats that the Spirit is interceding for the believers. This repetition emphasizes the Spirit and the action he is taking in order to help believers. The believers are introduced here as “*ἁγίων*,” which is translated into English as “saints.” This one word translation might not capture the full expression of what is expressed by the Greek word. Since languages is so fluid and never stops changing, the meaning of the word “saint” in the present day has lost its impact. In modern English, a saint usually refers to someone who is morally upstanding and does something of worth with their life in their religious circle. We celebrate Saint Patrick’s Day and Saint Valentine’s Day as secular holidays. When we examine the meaning of the Greek word, the title carries grandeur and honor. To be a saint is to be set apart for the purpose of God, to be consecrated, to possess a quality that allows one to approach God, and to be dedicated to the service of God. By using this word, Paul laces this passage with encouragement by reminding the believers of their position before God.⁴⁷

This is only the second time the word has been used of believers thus far in Romans, which must mark this verse with some sort of importance.⁴⁸ The passage reminds believers of one of the privileges of being set apart for the Lord. Jesus promised that when he departed from the world, the Holy Spirit would be sent and that it would be for our benefit. In John 16, he calls the Spirit our counselor. This is one of the unique ways that Christians get to experience the grace of God. Not only do they have Christ’s blood covering them so they may approach God, but they even have God within them interceding on their behalf to God so that their life may go according to the will of God. It is a marvelous glimpse of how the trinity works to strengthen the believers. What a comfort that God brings himself glory by working for our good.

⁴⁷ BDAG, 10.

⁴⁸ Dunn, 480.

We also read here that the Spirit is interceding “κατὰ θεὸν,” or “according to God.” Many translations rightly infer that the Spirit is interceding according to “the will of God.” The thought here is that the Spirit is praying in line with what the Father desires, which ends in the flourishing of the believer. As Schreiner puts it, “he [the Spirit] articulates the will of God in his intercession.”⁴⁹ On behalf of the believer who cannot see the will of God for a particular situation, the Spirit prays the will of God. The believer, when they come to the end of their ability, is carried along by the Spirit through his intercession to God. This is why we can trust the following verses, that God works all things for the good of his people.

The Spirit is always granted that which he prayed for because he is praying in alignment with the will of God. As Thomas Schreiner beautifully puts it, “God’s will is not frustrated because of the weakness of believers. It is fulfilled because the Spirit intercedes for us and invariably receives affirmative answers to his pleas.”⁵⁰ This is the Spirit’s role in this present time of trials and sufferings of believers.

The message of hope in vv. 26-27 leads wonderfully into the last section of Romans, where Paul teaches the believers the ramifications of the power of the Spirit within our lives. If the Spirit of God is praying on our behalf according to the will of God, so that all which God—who is perfect and loves us endlessly—desires may be accomplished in our lives, we can trust that all things will work together for the good of those who love God (vv. 28-30). Not only that, but we can believe in the power of God, nothing can be against us for he will grant us everything through Christ, as he has already granted the awesome gift of the Spirit (vv. 31-36). Finally, with

⁴⁹ Schreiner, 436.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 439.

all of the power granted to us through the Holy Spirit, we are more than conquerors when it comes to the highest highs and the lowest lows during our time in between the two ages, awaiting the coming Kingdom of God (vv.37-39).

V. Conclusion

Romans 8:26-27 renders many timeless truths. There is not a wide river to cross in order for modern day believers to hear this message in a similar way to the Roman Christians. First, this passage teaches that human fragility provides an opportunity for God to meet believers in their need. Second, it teaches that when a believer comes to the end of their own ability, God has provided many avenues in which his strength will continue to carry them forward. Lastly, this passage teaches the specific role of the Spirit in prayer. He is actively aligning the prayers of the people of God with the intentions of God through his groaning intercessions.

Although Romans was not written to address a specific problem to the people in the Christian community there, Paul addresses many of the problems that would universally apply to the people of God within his letter. Romans 8:26-27 is part of a larger section which address the problem of how the Christians were to find their place within the sufferings that they were promised. Although the Gospel promises redemption and reconciliation to God, it does not promise safety or security. These verses specifically were very practical in giving hope to a Roman Christian who is struggling with discernment, as the Spirit who lives inside of them will guide their every prayer, even if they go to pray and cannot seem to break the silence.

It is a mysterious marvel that the weakness of the believer creates an opportunity for the glory of God to be increased. The inability of the believer provides an opportunity for the Spirit to fulfill a role made uniquely for him, allowing him to pursue deeper relationship with the believer and God the Father. Romans 8:26-27 outlines the interworking of our weakness becoming strength through the prayer of the Holy Spirit.

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