

## Prayer

Lord God and Father of all, You perceive the truth behind everything we think, everything we say, and everything we do. Hold us back from judging the thoughts, words and deeds of others, knowing that we must answer for ourselves before Your throne of grace. By the power of Your Spirit, may we keep so close to You that we come to know ourselves more deeply, speak more wisely and live more judiciously, at work, at church, and at home. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*What is most deeply on your heart today? Make sure that you tell the Lord all your feelings about this*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who suffer disasters.** Pray for those who live with the uncertainty being in an earthquake zone
- Pray that the World Cup will be celebrated peacefully in South Africa, by all countries involved
- Give thanks for food and drink

## Meditation

Wherever you are going, go in safety, go in peace,  
For the Lord your God goes with you,  
He knows the path you travel and He knows your destiny.

Whatever you are doing, do it well and with integrity;  
For the Lord your God empowers you,  
He knows your weaknesses and He knows your strength.

Whenever you work, show your faith in all you do,  
For the Lord your God inspires you  
He triggers the inner desire to do what is right and good.

However you live, give yourself to others, not yourself;  
For the Lord your God will keep you,  
He knows your heart and soul, and will never let you down.

Whichever things come to pass, you will be blessed,  
For the Lord your God has chosen you  
He has promised good for you, and His pledge remains secure.

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## Bible passage - Romans 8:26-30

<sup>26</sup> In the same way, the Spirit comes to help us in our weakness; for we do not know what we should pray about, but the Spirit Himself intercedes with groans that cannot be put into words.

<sup>27</sup> And He who searches hearts knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit pleads for the saints as God requires.

<sup>28</sup> For we know that for those who love God, the Spirit works through all things to bring about good for those who are called according to His purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those He already knew He set apart in the beginning to be likened to the image of his Son, so that He might be the firstborn of a large family; <sup>30</sup> moreover, those He chose beforehand He also called; and those He called, He also made righteous; and those whom He made righteous, He also glorified.

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# Bible Study

## Review

Within Paul's letters there is hardly a better place to go than Romans chapter 8 to find words of great encouragement. So far we have read these two wonderful promises:

- *'There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'* (8:1)
- *'The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children'* (8:16)

And today, we have read more,

- *'The Spirit helps us in our weakness ...'* (8:26),
- *'the Spirit works through all things to bring about good for those who are called according to His purpose.'* (8:28)

Our passage begins with a short paragraph about the help of the Holy Spirit in prayer, especially for God's own people (8:26,27), and this is followed by another, which goes on to explain how God works through history to bring about His will and the blessing of His people (8:28-30). This second paragraph is difficult for us to understand because it says that God 'predestines' some for glory (8:29,30), so we will need to look at it carefully.

The first paragraph describes the mysterious way in which the Holy Spirit works to help God's children in their prayers. Paul has already spoken a great deal about human weakness and sin, even sin that continues to distress the believer (7:14-25), so it is not surprising that Paul should speak about how the *'Spirit comes to help us in our weakness'* (8:26). He explains that the Spirit prays for us in ways we cannot fully understand, *'with groans that cannot be put into words'* (8:26). This phrase may refer to a sound like speaking in tongues, but it is best to imagine the Holy Spirit speaking to God in a spiritual way that God alone understands. As Paul says in verse 29, the only thing we really need to know is that through the Spirit, God understand the needs of the 'saints', meaning all His people.

The next paragraph (8:28-30) is not easy to interpret. Now, historically, some Christians believe that certain people are 'predestined' by God to have faith. Others believe that although God does indeed chose people for special tasks, all have free will concerning whether they respond to God or not. This passage seems to support the idea of predestination, and is often quoted by those who believe in predestination (often called 'Calvinists'). Those who say that God's love is for all people, not just the chosen few (often called 'Armenianists') need then to explain what this passage means, because it appears to support the alternative Calvinist view.

Now, I explain all this because it is important for us to understand it and deal with the issues raised, which are about God's purposes for His people and the world, and whether people have free choice to believe. In this study, I will explain that it is not necessary to divide up Christianity between these two views, because when we study the passage carefully, we will find that it is really about something else.

In verse 28, Paul speaks about God's intention to bring good out of evil, and to do this in the lives of His people. Moreover, we all benefit from this promise. However, what he says next about people who have been chosen beforehand to be 'like' His Son, is written in the past tense. This means that Paul is writing about great Old Testament characters, such as Abraham, Isaac and Moses, who were specially chosen and used by God to do His will. Certainly, Christians of the early church regarded these great characters as showing something of 'likeness' of Jesus before He came (such as David, and the prophets).

Paul talks about this in order to help his readers have confidence that God is still in control, just as He was in Old Testament times. This, I believe, is Paul's point here, and he would be concerned to know that his words have created confusion amongst Christians through the centuries! Certainly, predestination and what we mean both by God's choice and our choice is something important, but it can only be decided with reference to other Scriptures. Here, we must be content to accept what this passage really says, and it is all about encouraging us in our faith!

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The work of the Spirit through prayer
- The work of the Spirit in bringing about good
- The sure and certain purposes of God

## Going Deeper

As we continue to study this text, I will explain the important details of the translation of verse 28 and the difficulties around the issue of 'predestination'. Together with the subject of prayer, these issues give us a structure for our study of the text, which continues to bring us a positive and at times thrilling message about the special love of God for those who accept Him by faith.

### ***The work of the Spirit through prayer***

Our passage begins with the words '*In the same way ...*', which means that this passage about the work of the Spirit in our weakness follows on from the previous text about the hope of the glory of God (8:18-25). For Paul, one hope follows the other, and the same Spirit lies behind them both.

In talking about the help of the Spirit '*in our weakness*', the first subject Paul addresses is prayer. It is very helpful to read what Paul writes here in verse 26, for it goes to the heart of what many people experience in their prayer life. Prayer comes easy to some, but many find it very hard and only feel able to join in silently, or only say something that is written down. This is sad, but it is not what Paul is concerned about when he says '*for we do not know what we should pray about ...*'. He assumes that a Christian does pray, for to pray is to talk to the God with whom we have a relationship, and it is hard to see what anyone might mean by a relationship in which there is no communication! Verse 26 is not about people who have lost their way with faith and their relationship with God, it is about the real difficulty that prayerful people have concerning the priorities they give to the many issues that face them.

This is a real difficulty for those who are deeply conscious of the duties and privileges of faith. Because we live in a world of trouble and strife, we could spend all of our time praying about the church, our neighbours, our families, items in the news, and a hundred other things. All are important and all deserve our prayerful attention, so how do we decide what to pray about, by means of habit or routine? This may be a useful starting point, but our text today tells us that the motivator for our prayers should be the Spirit. If you read this text in some Bible translations, this issue is a little blurred, but I have attempted to bring it out by writing '*the Spirit comes to help us ... for we do not know what we should pray about ...*' (8:26). The Spirit will only come to help us if we will allow Him; and if we do, our priorities will be radically changed. Yes, there are people and situations which clearly require our priority in prayer, such as family and loved ones, but it is only the Spirit who can lead us to go beyond our routines and give priority to issues, things or people needing our prayers at some special moment perhaps known only to the Spirit; as Paul says, '*the Spirit ... pleads for the saints as He requires.*' (8:27).

There is much debate about the meaning of this phrase; '*groans that cannot be put into words*' (8:26). Some believe that Paul really means 'speaking in tongues', but he was perfectly capable of saying this if he wanted. The best way I can describe this is from personal experience. There are times when I have felt overcome by some matter for prayer to which the Spirit has guided me, the pain of someone's grief, or the staggering nature of the evils of the world. Sometimes these things are beyond words, and irrespective of the issue of 'speaking in tongues', the heart becomes caught up in the sorrow or grief of the prayer. No words have been said, yet the Spirit has been powerfully at work. Personally, I feel the inadequacy of my prayers, but spiritually, I know I have done what has been required of me. It is difficult to describe such occasions, but Paul's words about 'groans' which cannot be put into words, seem very apt.

### ***The work of the Spirit in bringing about good.***

The very earliest copies we have of Paul's letter to the Romans, going back to the second century AD, are unclear about what Paul actually wrote and meant in verse 28. We simply do not know for sure about the construction of the sentence normally translated '*all things work together for good*' (8:28). It is just possible that the subject of the sentence could be God, which gives the alternative reading '*God works in all things for good*'. This reads better, because it makes it clear that God is the one who does this great work and not some mysterious co-incident or chance which we think may be blessed by God. However, the word for 'God' is not present in the best ancient texts, and it remains uncertain whether the Greek for 'all things' is the grammatical 'subject' of the sentence or the 'object'. To resolve this, I have followed a practice of Greek translation that is used elsewhere in the New Testament, in which the subject of one sentence is carried over to the next (from which it is missing); and in this verse, the subject is the Spirit! Hence my translation '*the Spirit works through all things to bring about good ...*'

The end result of all this is not far short of what we might have concluded even if I had left the word 'Spirit' out of the translation, but I believe it is both helpful and correct. The whole passage is about the way that the Spirit does God's work in the everyday life of a Christian; and if we are talking of how 'all things', even the most terrible, can be moulded and transformed by God so that a greater good is achieved, then this is indeed the work of the Holy Spirit. Many can testify to the power of the Spirit in doing just this. Moreover, if any of us face something that seems so awful that we can find no good within it; then we know that the Spirit gives

us the hope of God's final Glory (8:21,25), when all things will be re-created and we will see everything in the new light of God's perfect Kingdom. Although there is no doubt that we all face seemingly impossible and difficult things in this life, our ultimate hope is sure, and Romans 8:28 shows the way!

### ***The sure and certain purposes of God***

For the last five hundred years of the life of God's church, there has been a deep split between the traditional evangelical 'wings' of the church. On the one hand stand the 'Calvinists' who believe in predestination, following the substantial and impressive teaching of Calvin. By this, we mean that Romans 8:29 and 30 are interpreted as saying that we are Christians because God has 'decided beforehand' that we will follow the path of faith. The main difficulty that Calvinists have is explaining how it is that most of the rest of the New Testament including the writings of Paul, talk of faith as essentially a matter of 'free choice'. On the other hand, 'Armenianists' insist that the Calvinist doctrine must be wrong because it means that God has already decided who will be Christians (and therefore saved). They would say that this cannot possibly be so because the death of Christ on the Cross was for all people, and not just for those already chosen by God. This was the message at the heart of the preaching of John Wesley, who was responsible for a great revival in England and America, around 250 years ago. Armenianists have the problem, however, of explaining what Paul says here, and what is meant in general in the few places in the Bible where it speaks of God's choice of His own, or 'election' (mostly in the Old Testament and Romans 8:29 and 30)!

The arguments about this fly back and forth to this day. However, I am content to say that although I come from traditional 'Armenianist' stock, I believe that the two apparently divided doctrines of evangelicalism can be held together if we accept that this passage of Romans is not intended by Paul as a definition of who is a Christian and why. This passage is, as I have already explained, a word of reassurance to those who are already Christians that God is at work in their lives despite all the troubles of the world.

Personally, I believe that whilst we all exercise free will, from God's perspective, He does place His hand on people for specific tasks. In addition, I do not feel able to make black and white statements about how each individual finds Christ, because these things are surely found only in the heart of the Creator. There is of course, much more for us to consider when attempting to tie down exactly how and why people are 'saved', but if we allow our study of this passage to be dominated by this, then we miss out the important features of the text, and all that Paul seeks to bring to our attention here.

Paul tells us that if our present life is hard pressed because of our continued weakness (8:26), then we have not one but two causes for keeping faith and standing strong. Firstly, as in yesterday's reading (following through into today's), we have the sure hope of the Glory of God for our future. But, in addition, we have the assurance from our past that God has 'chosen us beforehand'. The Greek word used here links with the Hebrew word for 'elect', which the Old Testament uses frequently to describe God's choice of Abraham and the people of Israel! Our passage seems to me to be clear enough in what it says by way of encouragement of the Christians through the work of the Spirit, and we should accept this gift of God in Scripture without allowing relatively recent doctrinal disputes of the church to muddy the water of a relatively simple truth.

## Application

This passage is written to describe the work of the Spirit of God. More than that, it clearly offers us guidance about how we may expect the Spirit to be at work in our own lives. The Holy Spirit is our assistant and guide in prayer. The Holy Spirit helps us make sense of the sometimes bewildering circumstances of our lives, and place this within God's eternal perspective. The Holy Spirit also assures our own spirits that we are God's elect, His own chosen people, and His hand is upon the whole of our lives. I strongly believe that this threefold message lies at the heart of this text, and it should be preached! Many people need to know this and have confidence in their Saviour, and some languish for want of having it explained. It is there within this text, but it is not often expounded because people are too concerned about Calvinism and Armenianism.

These promises of God have always been important for God's people, for their reassurance and for their confidence. If we read on in Romans, we will find that Paul is deeply conscious of the need to reassure people of faith that God's love is for all people and He is not in the business of turning people away. Too many feel that they are at arm's length to the deeper things of faith, but God does not work on a graded scale of faith, rewarding some who have deeper spiritual experiences, and giving trials to those who have problems with sin. Unfortunately, the faith of many boils down to little more than this, and it is a tragedy; this is not the life of Christ, and the devil works to make hay pout of any text that can be 'side-tracked' away from its purpose. We have a duty to read this passage therefore for what it says.

We all need to read the assurances of Scripture and take them to ourselves. Perhaps the most important thing we can do after reading a passage such as this is to check out whether we accept the assurances given by God. Ultimately, we cannot live the life of faith unless we accept God's Word.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Discuss your experience of prayer, and how the Holy Spirit helps you in your prayers.
2. How do you answer those who say that Romans 8:28 is simply not true, and things do not always turn out for the best?
3. Do you believe that God chose you? When did He do this; before or after Creation, just before you were born? In what sense do you feel yourself to be 'chosen beforehand'.

### **Personal comments by author**

*As I read this passage, I am immensely encouraged, because I have known myself that life can seem very unrewarding, and there are times when it seems that everything in life is very 'unresolved'. If I take my eyes of the theological conundrums placed by this text and look at the way it seems to use the Old Testament as an example, then I am forced to see what is happening to me in a far wider context. God worked in OT times to do His will over centuries. He is perhaps doing the same now, and my own life requires me to be obedient now, and for reasons I cannot fully see now. This may be a message for you.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Try taking each one of the promises of God (see application) and dwelling on it over a few days at a time. Ask the Lord in prayer to make this real to you and wait on Him for His assurance and His Word.*
- *Pray for Christians divided by the Calvinist and Armenianist debate. Pray that God will work to bring His people together and assure them of His grace and favour.*

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## Final Prayer

We praise You Lord God, great Creator and Redeemer; for You have made us for a purpose. May we be content to seek that purpose and to fulfil it, in the knowledge that in so doing we will find our greatest joy and satisfaction; both now and in eternity. AMEN

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