

What if I told you that you do not know how to pray?

Not that you should pray more, but that, on your own, you cannot pray.

Romans 8 has been teaching us this all along, that the Christian life is lived by the power of the Holy Spirit, not our own effort. Verse 26 begins with "likewise," tying everything we've seen together. And nowhere is our dependence on the Spirit clearer than in the area of prayer.

Two Intercessors

In verse 15 we read that we've "...received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" We come to the Father by the Spirit, through the finished work of the Son. John Murray puts it well: "*believers have two divine intercessors — Christ pleads for us in the courts of heaven, while the Spirit intercedes in the theatre of our own hearts.*"

Verse 26 says the Spirit "*intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words,*" better translated *wordless longings*. This connects back to verses 22–23, where creation groans and believers groan, desperate for Jesus to return.

John Stott asks why we don't know what to pray for. Maybe because we're never quite sure whether to ask for deliverance from suffering or strength to endure it. Even Jesus groaned at the suffering sin caused in this world (see Mark 7:34), his was not a sigh of weariness, but a deep groan of pain. Today the Spirit groans with us. He feels our weakness. And he does more than groan, he intercedes, so that we're led into the will of God even when we don't know how to pray. He shares the burden.

A Promise, Not a Band-Aid

Then we come to verse 28 — one of the best-known verses in the Bible, and one of the most taken out of its context: "*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*"

How many times have you heard this verse quoted to someone in the middle of tragedy, an accident, an illness, or financial ruin? Never pat someone on the back mid-crisis and quote this verse to them. It will hurt and not heal.

This verse isn't a band-aid to make us feel better in the moment. It's a promise to hold onto in the darkest night. Paul begins with "we know" — not that we always understand what God is doing, and not that we welcome it when it's painful. Cancer isn't good, loss isn't good, but God, in His sovereignty, takes the calamities of life and works them together for our good and His glory.

And what is our ultimate good? Our eternal salvation. As Paul already told us in verse 18, "*the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be*

revealed to us." The very things that made Jesus groan, and that make us groan, refine us, and drive us deeper into dependence on the Spirit.

Five Affirmations

Verses 29–30 trace God's purpose through five steps: those He *foreknew*, He *predestined*; those predestined, He *called*; those called, He *justified*; those justified, He *glorified*. These are big words, and they've caused a lot of division in the Body of Christ. "Foreknowledge" doesn't just mean God knowing facts about you ahead of time. It is the same language used of God choosing Israel before He created them. If you follow Jesus, God has loved you from before time began.

Predestination is where the followers of Calvinism and Arminianism disagree, two labels that have been at war for 500 years, going back to two men who barely overlapped in life. Here's my frustration with all of it: the Gospel is 2,000 years old, and it's the message of salvation. These doctrines are 500 years old, and they've never saved anyone. Let's not let a secondary doctrine; one that has split churches and done real damage, define our faith.

Scripture is clear that believers are chosen in love (see Ephesians 1:4). Does that mean some are predestined for hell? No. Predestination applies only to the elect. No one is condemned because God predestined it; people are condemned because they reject Christ (see John 3:18). Peter calls his readers "elect exiles" in 1 Peter 1:1, not because they earned it, but because God chose them.

God is sovereign. He didn't ask our permission to create this world, and He has every right to plan its future. Knowing man would choose sin, He planned a path to salvation through faith in Christ. I refuse to wear a doctrinal label that divides the body of Christ. Scripture also promises that God will save all who come to Him (see John 6:37). One day in heaven, I believe we'll find we were all partly right, and none of us had the whole picture.

As Dr. J. Vernon McGee wrote, "*All of these great concepts are on God's side of the fence, and none of us can come up with a final explanation.*" This doctrine should produce humility in us, not arrogance.

Justified, Not Yet Glorified

The chain ends with the best news of all: those called, He justified. That is to be made right with God, not by our effort, but by the blood of Jesus. And those He justified, He will glorify.

Right now, we live in the in-between; justified, but not yet glorified. Theologians call this sanctification. And in this season, we cannot produce anything of eternal value apart from the Spirit's power.

Do You Have the Spirit?

That's not actually the question. Romans 8:9 already answers it: if you belong to Christ, the Spirit dwells in you. The real question is how much of yourself is submitted to his authority.

Some churches over-emphasize outward displays of the Spirit until people start faking it just to belong. Others react and go the opposite way, never speaking of the Spirit at all, which leads to a dead religion with no power. Neither is the answer.

When you submit to the Spirit's leadership, serving the Lord gives you life, because he's the one empowering the work. You'll still get tired, Jesus did, but you'll have joy and zeal doing what He calls you to do.

So: how much are you trying to do in your own strength? Teaching, praying, sharing the Gospel, serving on a team, leading as a deacon or elder; without submission to the Spirit's inner work, it will be eternally ineffective, and it may even damage the Body of Christ.

Lay aside the idea that you have some special gift that Jesus desperately needs. He made you. He'll use you. But only as you submit to the Spirit.