

Routines to live by: Prayer  
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The routine we are examining today is prayer. Developing a routine of prayer has always been my hardest routine to establish and maintain. I'm a proud man; proud people don't pray. They don't think they need to pray or they are too proud to ask for help. I get easily distracted when I pray; that's another challenge. I start praying for my wife and kids and somehow wander into wondering who's going to win MasterChef. Honestly, I feel selfish when I pray at times. My prayers can be a laundry list of wishes for creature comforts instead of blood-earnest prayers to see the kingdom of God established in my life. I don't always believe my prayers will be answered. There are all kinds of reasons why developing a routine of prayer is a challenge for me.

The church fathers always viewed prayer as the pinnacle of faith. The true goal of faith is union with God and that's what prayer is a practice of. When we pray we experience this act of communion and connection with God that our hearts long for. Yet, it's a challenge. So, we need help and, thankfully, God gives that to us. Today's passage encourages me in my struggles to pray. It reminds me of God's great love for me and motivates me to take up a routine of prayer; I hope it does the same for you.

Romans 8 is our passage. Get really familiar with Romans 8. It's such a beautiful passage full of encouragement. If you're struggling with discouragement; hoping to find strength to overcome your sin; purpose in suffering; wondering if God's love is truly strong enough for you, read Romans 8. It's such a wonderful chapter. Paul writes a fair amount about how the Spirit fits into God's work for creation and for his people. Let's read vs.. 26-27 together (READ).

After mentioning how the Holy Spirit works for our adoption as sons and daughters into the family of God through the work of Jesus Christ, Paul says, "Likewise," meaning, "In a similar way, the Holy Spirit helps us even more." How else does the Spirit help us? Vs. 26 says, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness." Well, that's good news. As glorious as it is for the Spirit to bring about our initial conversion and transformation when we believe in the gospel, the Spirit also helps us in our walk with Jesus. And one thing we learn when we walk with Jesus is that we are weak. Jesus is strong, Jesus is powerful, he is able, but we are not. We are weak, friends. I hope you've figured that out by now.

We are weak in many ways, but what weakness does Paul have in mind right now in this passage? The answer is in the next phrase. "For we do not know what to pray for as we ought." That's our weakness. It's important to see: Paul doesn't say we have weaknesses that we don't know how to pray for - though that's true. He's saying, "Not knowing what we ought to pray for is our weakness." Do you see that? The Spirit helps us in our weakness (what weakness?); we don't know what to pray for as we ought.

I find it very interesting and helpful that Paul is showing us that not knowing what to pray for as we ought is a weakness that we have. And, praise God, the Spirit helps us with that weakness (we'll talk about that in one minute). I recognize this weakness in me. I don't always know what I ought to pray for. I'm surprised, honestly, how many times I go to prayer and I sit there somewhat speechless; I don't know what to say. I don't know what to ask for. My mind is confused and distracted by all that's going on and how to make sense of it all. I struggle discerning the difference between my godly and ungodly desires. I'm left doubting if I'm praying for the right things.

If you're a dad or a mom and you've tried to help anxious children at bedtime, you've probably have said something like, "Let's pray about that. Let's ask God for help." But it doesn't take our children too long to wonder (as I've been asked before), "Daddy, how come God doesn't answer my prayers?" How do you explain that to a 6 or a 7 year old at 10 o'clock at nite when you're trying to get them to bed? But we struggle with such thoughts all our lives. How should I pray for my prodigal child? Should I pray that life gets tougher in hopes that they hit rock bottom or that life will get easier? Should I pray for more money to get out of debt or for more wisdom to stay out of debt? Do I pray for my broken, failed marriage to be resurrected from the dead or do I pray for a new spouse to love and share life with? Do Paul's words hit home for you? For we do not know what to pray for as we ought.

As I get honest about this weakness in me, I'm comforted that God knows this about me and has a plan to help me. I know this isn't desirable, but nothing takes God by surprise and every single weakness I have, including even praying to him, he has help for me. Look at vs. 26, "For we do not know what to pray for as we ought." We ought to. We ought to pray and we ought to know what we should pray for. But we don't. And we don't because we're weak. But God doesn't leave us alone in our weakness. God has help for us; he has a solution for our weakness. So, I want you to hear me right now, especially if your struggle in prayer has been a source of discouragement in your life and faith: the Lord helps you.

We learn the kind of help the Lord offers us in our weakness at the end of vs. 26, "the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." When you look at this verse, one of the intriguing questions that pops into our mind is, "what are these groaning by the Spirit that are too deep for words?" And there are all kinds of suggestions and speculations as to what that means (most of the answers, I find, miss it). But what these groanings are actually is not the point. Paul's point is that the Spirit helps us in our weakness. And what's the help? The Spirit's intercession on our behalf. When we don't know what we should pray; when we are lost in our confusion, when we are crushed by the weight of our circumstances and too weak to even know what to pray for, the Spirit steps in on our behalf and prays to God for us. What an amazing thought, am I right? The Holy Spirit himself (do you see that word... himself... the Spirit *himself*) is going to the Father and is lifting you up to God in prayer as you in your weakness are unable to even formulate the kind of prayer that you ought to pray. God loves you, FBC! Look how he is serving you! He is not letting a single moment of your life go on without his personal care for you, your life, and your faith.

Do you think the Spirit will offer a good prayer for you? Do you think the Spirit knows what he ought to pray for? You better believe it. That's the point of the next verse, vs. 27, "And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." So, this is what Paul is telling us. The one who searches hearts and knows the mind of the Spirit is God the Father. He's the one we offer our prayers; he's the one who supplies to us all that we need through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, we're told, prays for all the saints. And how does the Spirit pray? He prays according to the will of God. So, look what Paul is saying trying to encourage you that the Spirit's prayers for you are powerful and effective. God the Father knows the thoughts and heart of the Spirit (why wouldn't he, right?) while the Spirit prays for you according to the will of God. Friends, our great, loving, merciful God has everything work for your good. The Spirit is praying for you. He's doing so according to God's will for you (and, clearly, God's will for you is good). And while the Spirit is praying, the Father searches and knows the Spirit's heart and mind. You can have great confidence that the Spirit's ministry of prayer for you is making a significant difference in your life.

Part of me is wondering if you're thinking, "Well, I guess I don't need a prayer routine! The Spirit's praying for me and he's better at praying for me than me!" While that is true, that's the wrong conclusion to make. Remember what vs. 26 says? "For we do not know what to pray for as we ought." We *ought* to pray; we *ought* to know what to pray for. While the Spirit has a routine of prayer for us, we need a routine of prayer, too. Do you know why? Because prayer will regularly realign our hearts to the will of God. There's a difference between someone praying for us according to the will of God and we praying for ourselves to be aligned to the will of God. When we can pray as we ought we are actively taking the steps of faith that serve our souls and honor God.

Our prayers work, too. So, of course we should pray. And I say so by faith; do you know what I mean when I say that? I don't say "prayers work" by my own authority or even by my own experience (because based off of my own experience it seems like prayer doesn't work). I say prayer works by faith, meaning, God says prayer works and if God says it then it's true. Where does God say it? Well, one of my favorites is James 5:16-18 (READ).

Do you see what James is saying? Elijah was a dude just like you and me; he put his pants on one leg at a time. He got tired, he got hungry. He was prone to discouragement. And he prayed and God moved. So, pray, FBC. That's the conclusion you should make. God answered his prayer and he will answer mine. And the best reward of my prayers is God taking my guilty, wounded, confused heart and mind and realigning it according to his ways, words, and kingdom. The greatest change made through my prayers is the change made in me towards God.

In an effort to better develop and maintain your prayer routine, I want to strongly encourage you to prepare and plan. I'm pretty off the cuff when I pray. I haven't been very good

at preparing my prayer times; I haven't always had a plan. But I think that contributes to my challenges. It's why I get distracted; it's why I lack knowing what to pray for. When I'm thoughtless when I come to prayer I will struggle with it. I may have this initial, immediate sense of need that motivates me to pray, but it doesn't take long for me to struggle staying engaged in my communion with God. So, when you come to God in prayer, be ready. Make a list not just of your requests, but also of your praises.

I know it's odd for our tradition, but I want to commend to you organized, even prepared, prayers. Our tradition of praying off the cuff, extemporaneously, is actually the oddity in historical Christianity. We view it as more spiritual or genuine; Christians throughout the ages don't share that view. Books like *The Book of Common Prayer* or even the Book of Psalms in our Bibles are prayer books... books of prayers for people to read and pray through. When you don't know what to pray for, why not pick up the prayers of the saints that have endured for centuries and use them? The Book of Psalms is actually scripture, which would mean they are an expression of God's will for us; when you pray through a psalm you are praying for God's will in your life. Now you *do* know what to pray for?

So, let's do that now; let me give you an example of how you pray through a psalm. Turn with me to Psalm 32 and let's read the first 4 verses (READ). Thinking big picture, when I pray through a psalm or another's prayer I'm seeking to join my heart to the words and the expressions of the author. Remember, I'm lost for words! I don't know what to pray! I'm finding help with the words from this guide (which should tell you how important it is to get a reliable guide). So, how might I use this psalm? The first thing I might do is simply read the psalm with an ear and heart open to instruction and encouragement. After I read it through, I start working it line by line.

- So, when I read, "Blessed is the one whose transgressions is forgiven," I might pray, "Thank you, God, for forgiving my sins! Thank you for Jesus who washed my sins away. You've covered my shortcomings and guilty conscience with your grace."
- When I read in vs. 3 I might pray, "Lord, I'm hurting, too, right now. I feel like my bones are wasting away; I'm struggling day by day." You can tell in Psalm 32 that the author is struggling even though he begins with an expression of hope in the forgiveness of sins.
- In vs. 4 the Psalmist rightly recognizes how God has permitted the trial he's enduring. He says, "For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of the summer." So, I might offer my complaint to the Lord, too, by saying, "God, I feel your heavy hand upon me, too. How come I'm still depressed? When will you heal my sickness?" This psalm is teaching me to be honest with my sufferings to God and I can include that in my prayers. Also, I'm going to be honest about my weakness. "Lord, my strength is gone, too."

I'm hoping you are seeing how these prayers are instructed by the psalm. Since I don't know what to pray for like I ought, I'm going to use the words of the psalmist.

Another tool I've used lately is the combination of a prayer rope and the Jesus prayer. Here's my prayer rope; it's simply a little bracelet with 33 knots. And at every knot I pray the Jesus prayer; the Jesus prayer is, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Now, I don't simply chant this over and over again. I use this simple prayer that's over 1600 years old (it was first mentioned by St. John Chrysostom in 407 AD), as a guide, as a structure for my time in prayer. I'll start by simply praying

- Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to me, a sinner.
- I recite the prayer pausing at different words, like, "**Lord** Jesus Christ... you are my Lord; you are my master. Lord Jesus **Christ**... you are the Christ, the Holy One, God's chosen One. There is no one like you." And "be **merciful**... God, I need your mercy more than anything. I don't need health or wealth or people liking me; I need your mercy."
- I'll use the Jesus prayer for my family. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to my wife, Korby, a sinner. God, my wife needs you today; she has a big day. Show her mercy. Give her patience..."

I find help in both the structure and the words of the Jesus prayer. The structure is simple and keeps me focused. The words emphasize the things that matter and I apply what matters most to the areas of need in my life.

Can I ask you in closing, "Do you think your walk with Christ will be helped by these three routines of worship, scripture, and prayer?" Or maybe I should ask, "Do you think you will endure without them?" I'm strongly persuaded that our life is made of the routines we have, so, my good friends, seek God's help to establish these routines for your life with God.

Key vs. Romans 8:26

#### Questions for the week

- Do you feel weak in prayer? If so, what did you hear today that was helpful?
- What would you like to change about your time in prayer? How will you go about that?
- What other routines might you think are important for your walk with Christ?