

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

PNEUMATOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

UNIT 9: THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH

Lesson 27

The Spirit and Prayer

The Helper Who Intercedes When We Do Not Know How to Pray

Trinitarian Architecture, Enabling Power, and the Double Intercession of Son and Spirit

Key Texts: Romans 8:26–27; Ephesians 2:18; 6:18; Jude 20; Galatians 4:6

“The Spirit Himself Intercedes for Us with Groanings Too Deep for Words”

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Series Verse

*“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes,
He will guide you into all the truth;
for He will not speak on His own initiative,
but whatever He hears, He will speak;
and He will disclose to you what is to come.”*

John 16:13, NASB 1995

Introduction

Lesson 26 established the Spirit's double ministry of the Word: inspiration (the completed, God-breathed production of the Scripture) and illumination (the ongoing opening of the believer's mind to receive and apply what has been inspired). Lesson 27 now turns to the dimension of the Christian life in which the Spirit's enabling work is perhaps most intimately personal and most practically immediate: prayer. Every genuine act of Christian prayer is a pneumatological event, an act enabled, empowered, and interceded for by the Third Person of the Trinity, who is simultaneously the Spirit of the Son who cries "Abba, Father" (Galatians 4:6) within the believer's heart and the One who carries the believer's inadequate, halting, inadequately formed prayers before the Father with groanings too deep for words (Romans 8:26).

The doctrine of the Spirit and prayer is both the most immediately practical doctrine in the Pneumatology series and the one with the most profound theological depth. It is immediately practical because every believer prays, and every believer knows the experience of not knowing how to pray, the moments when the circumstance is too heavy, the grief too deep, the confusion too thick, or the spiritual dryness too pervasive for the usual words to come. These are precisely the moments that Romans 8:26 addresses with the most specific and most comforting pneumatological promise in the entire New Testament: "the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." The Spirit is already praying when the believer cannot; the Spirit articulates what the believer cannot form into words; the Spirit carries the believer's need before the Father with a precision and an alignment with the Father's will that no human prayer can achieve.

The theological depth of this doctrine is its Trinitarian architecture: genuine Christian prayer is not the religious practice of approaching a distant divine power with requests; it is the Spirit-enabled, Son-mediated, Father-addressed participation of the believer in the eternal life of the Triune God. The Spirit who prays within the believer is the same Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son; the Son through whom the believer has access is the same Son who intercedes at the Father's right hand (Romans 8:34); and the Father to whom the prayer ascends is the Father whose infinite knowledge searches the hearts and receives the Spirit's intercession with perfect comprehension and perfect responsiveness. Prayer is not the believer's religious effort to reach God; it is God's Trinitarian provision for the believer's access to the divine life from which all grace flows.

This lesson will examine the Trinitarian structure of prayer from Ephesians 2:18; the Spirit as the enabler even of the believer's most basic confession from 1 Corinthians 12:3; the meaning of praying in the Spirit from Ephesians 6:18 and Jude 20, with particular attention to what it does not mean (praying in tongues) and what it does mean (Word-aligned, Spirit-empowered, purpose-directed prayer); the Spirit's intercession within the believer from Romans 8:26–27; the double intercession of Spirit and Son; and the pastoral encouragement that no prayer of a genuine believer is ever unaided, however wordless, however faltering, however buried beneath the weight of a suffering or confusion that the believer cannot articulate.

I. The Trinitarian Architecture of Prayer

Access to the Father, Through the Son, by One Spirit

The most theologically precise single statement about the structure of Christian prayer in the entire New Testament is Ephesians 2:18: “for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father” (NASB 1995). The verse is remarkable for the density with which it packs the full Trinitarian structure of prayer into a single clause. Through Him (the Son, Christ is the subject throughout Ephesians 2:11–22), in one Spirit (the Holy Spirit as the enabling medium of the access), to the Father (the Trinitarian destination of the prayer), three Persons, one access, the complete Trinitarian architecture of genuine Christian prayer in eleven Greek words.

The word “access” (*prosagōgē*) carries the nuance of being brought before a king, of formal introduction to a royal presence, the term used in the Greek world for the introduction of a dignitary or ambassador to a ruler who would not be approached informally. The believer’s access to the Father is not casual, self-generated, or presumptuous; it is the formal, Son-mediated, Spirit-enabled introduction of the redeemed sinner into the presence of the holy God who has made this access possible through the Son’s atoning work and the Spirit’s enabling presence. The access is extraordinary and gracious: the God who is infinitely holy has opened His presence to sinners through the specific redemptive-historical work of His own Son and by the specific enabling work of His own Spirit.

The Trinitarian pattern of Ephesians 2:18 is not an isolated theological observation; it is the structural reality that underlies every genuine Christian prayer. When the believer prays “Dear Father”, she is addressing the First Person of the Trinity to whom the prayer is directed. The words “through Jesus Christ our Lord” that close many liturgical prayers acknowledge the Second Person’s mediatorial role as the access-giving Savior whose atonement opened the way into the Father’s presence. And the Spirit’s enabling work, the Spirit who moves the believer to pray, who supplies the words when words fail, who aligns the prayer with the Father’s will, is the Third Person’s contribution to the Trinitarian event that every genuine prayer represents. The prayer that is not Trinitarian in its structure, that does not reach the Father through the Son in the Spirit, may be sincere religious practice, but it is not the specific, privileged, redemptively-grounded access to the divine presence that Ephesians 2:18 describes.

The immediate context of Ephesians 2:18 is the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers in the one body of Christ: “for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.” The “both” is Jew and Gentile, the “one Spirit” is the Spirit who has baptized both into the one body (1 Corinthians 12:13, Lesson 17), and the corporate character of the access is the pneumatological ground of the community’s unity: all who pray in one Spirit to the Father through the Son are approaching the same Father in the same Spirit through the same Son, and this shared Trinitarian approach is the deepest possible ground for the community’s unity. The prayer of the gathered community is, in this Trinitarian frame, the most profound expression of the unity that the Spirit has created.

II. The Spirit as the Enabler of Prayer

Even the Most Basic Confession Is Spirit-Enabled

The most searching statement about the Spirit's enabling role in the believer's prayer and confession is 1 Corinthians 12:3: "therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus is accursed'; and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (NASB 1995). Paul is addressing the Corinthian community's confusion about the evaluation of spiritual claims, how to distinguish genuine Spirit-empowered confession from its counterfeit. But the positive statement, "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit", has pneumatological significance that extends far beyond the immediate diagnostic context.

The statement establishes that even the most basic Christian confession, the three-word declaration that Paul elsewhere identifies as the essential content of saving faith (Romans 10:9: "if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved"), is Spirit-enabled. Not merely the spectacular gifts, not only the prophetic utterances, not just the miraculous healing: the foundational, saving, gospel-core confession "Jesus is Lord" is possible only by the Holy Spirit. If the most basic confession is Spirit-enabled, then every genuine act of Christian prayer, which is an extended form of the same Spirit-enabled approach to God that the confession initiates, is from beginning to end a work of the Spirit in and through the praying believer.

Galatians 4:6 adds the intimate, filial dimension of the Spirit's enabling of prayer: "Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (NASB 1995). The Spirit of the Son cries "Abba!", the Aramaic term of intimate address to a father that Jesus used in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36) and that Paul here applies to the Spirit's own cry within the believer's heart. The Spirit of the Son reproduces the Son's own intimate relationship with the Father within the heart of the adopted child. When the believer prays "Dear Father," the Spirit of the Son is crying "Abba!" within him, the Spirit's own intimate approach to the Father through the believer who is the Spirit's own temple and the Father's own adopted child. This is the most intimate possible pneumatological description of Christian prayer: the Spirit of the eternal Son crying the eternal Son's own prayer of filial intimacy in the heart of the adopted child.

"Through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father" | "No one can say, Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit" | "God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, Abba! Father!"

Ephesians 2:18; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Galatians 4:6, NASB 1995

III. Praying in the Spirit

Ephesians 6:18 and Jude 20, What It Means and What It Does Not Mean

A. What Praying in the Spirit Does Not Mean

Two New Testament texts call believers to “pray in the Spirit”: Ephesians 6:18 (“with all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints”) and Jude 20 (“But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit”). In Charismatic interpretation, “praying in the Spirit” is regularly understood as a reference to praying in tongues, the ecstatic, unlearned-language prayer that is understood as the Spirit’s direct, unmediated expression through the believer’s vocal apparatus, bypassing the cognitive and linguistic processes of the ordinary mind.

The cessationist exegetical case against this identification is both grammatical and contextual. Grammatically, neither Ephesians 6:18 nor Jude 20 uses the word “tongues” or any language that specifically identifies the prayer with the tongues gift. The phrase “in the Spirit” (*en pneumati*) is a common New Testament expression for activity that is conducted in the sphere, power, or alignment of the Holy Spirit, a meaning that does not require the specific gift of tongues for its realization. Contextually, Ephesians 6:18 is part of Paul’s armor-of-God passage, where every element of the armor is drawn from the already-given Word of God (“the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God”, v. 17) and the prayer “in the Spirit” is the Spirit’s own empowerment of the armor-wearing warfare that the passage describes, Word-aligned, purpose-directed, persevering prayer. The tongues interpretation imports into this context a specific spiritual gift that the passage does not mention or require.

Jude 20’s context is equally decisive: praying in the Holy Spirit is listed alongside building up on the most holy faith and keeping oneself in the love of God (v. 21) as one of three disciplines that guard the community against the false teachers that Jude’s letter addresses. The three disciplines together describe the Spirit-dependent, Word-grounded, love-maintained perseverance of the community under doctrinal threat. Praying in the Spirit in this context is the Spirit-empowered, truth-aligned, faith-sustaining prayer of the community that is holding firm against spiritual attack, not the private, ecstatic, uninterpreted utterance that the tongues interpretation would supply.

B. What Praying in the Spirit Does Mean

If praying in the Spirit is not a reference to the tongues gift, what is it? The most exegetically satisfying definition is this: prayer that is prompted, guided, empowered, and aligned by the Holy Spirit, offered through the truth of the Word, and directed toward the Father’s purposes rather than exclusively toward the believer’s own perceived needs. Praying in the Spirit is the mode of prayer in which the Spirit’s own presence and agenda shape the content, the direction, and the energy of the prayer, where the believer is not merely bringing his own wish-list to God but is being carried along by the Spirit’s own interceding purpose (Romans 8:27) toward the prayer that the Father desires to receive.

Three specific dimensions of praying in the Spirit deserve attention. First, the Spirit’s prompting: the Spirit moves the believer to pray when the believer might not otherwise choose to pray, bringing to mind specific people, specific needs, specific circumstances that the Spirit is directing the prayer toward. The person who sits down to pray and finds specific names, specific situations, or specific scriptures repeatedly arising in the mind is experiencing the

Spirit's prompting toward specific prayer. Second, the Spirit's alignment: the Spirit's presence in the prayer orients it toward the Father's will rather than exclusively toward the believer's own preferences. The Gethsemane prayer ("Not as I will, but as You will", Matthew 26:39) is the supreme model of Spirit-aligned prayer: the prayer that submits the believer's desires to the Father's will rather than demanding the Father's compliance with the believer's agenda. Third, the Spirit's empowerment: the Spirit supplies the persistence, the earnestness, and the faith that genuine prayer requires but that the believer's own spiritual strength and emotional reserve cannot sustain. Ephesians 6:18's "all perseverance" is Spirit-produced perseverance, the Spirit's own enduring interceding energy sustaining the prayer through the discouragement and the apparent non-response that persevering prayer inevitably encounters.

IV. The Intercession of the Spirit

Romans 8:26–27 and the Helper in Our Weakness

A. The Problem: We Do Not Know How to Pray

Romans 8:26–27 is the pneumatological summit of the entire prayer doctrine, and it begins with a candid acknowledgment of the believer's most fundamental prayer-problem: "In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should" (v. 26a, NASB 1995). The word translated "helps" (*sunantilambanomai*) is a compound word that literally means to take hold of something together with another person, to bear the weight of it alongside them, the image of someone coming alongside a person who is struggling under a burden too heavy to carry alone and lifting from the other side. The Spirit comes alongside the praying believer and takes hold of the burden of prayer from the other side.

The reason the Spirit's helping is needed is stated with disarming honesty: "we do not know how to pray as we should." Not merely some believers, not merely the spiritually immature, not merely the occasionally confused: we, all believers, in Paul's inclusive first-person plural, do not know how to pray as we should. The ignorance is not a deficiency to be overcome by sufficient spiritual maturity, sufficient biblical knowledge, or sufficient prayer experience. It is the permanent, constitutive human limitation of finite, fallen creatures who cannot see their own circumstances from God's perspective, cannot know the Father's will comprehensively, and cannot always identify which of their apparent needs are the things that would actually serve their genuine good and God's glory if granted. The Spirit's helping is not remedial assistance for prayer beginners; it is the permanent, essential provision for all believers throughout their entire praying lives.

B. The Solution: Groanings Too Deep for Words

The Spirit's response to the believer's prayer-weakness is described in verse 26b with language that is both pneumatologically precise and pastorally tender: "but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." The intercession is the Spirit's own (Himself, *autos*, emphatic, the Spirit in particular, not some spiritual gift or human capacity); it is for us (on behalf of the believers in their weakness); and it is with groanings too deep for words

(stenagmois alalhfois, unspoken groanings, wordless utterances that cannot be reduced to articulate speech).

The groanings too deep for words are not the tongues gift. This is a crucial exegetical point: the Charismatic interpretation that identifies the Spirit's groanings with the believer's praying in tongues misreads the grammar in a decisive way. Romans 8:26 says the Spirit Himself intercedes with groanings too deep for words, the Spirit's activity, not the believer's. The tongues interpretation turns the Spirit's own intercession into a spiritual gift that the believer exercises; the text describes the Spirit's own direct action within the believer. The groanings are alalhfois, unspoken, inexpressible, incapable of verbal articulation, which is the precise opposite of the tongues gift, whose characteristic is audible speech. The Spirit's groanings are what the Spirit does within the believer at the level where no human speech, articulate or glossolalic, reaches.

The pastoral significance of the Spirit's wordless intercession is immense. Every believer knows the experience of circumstances in which prayer cannot find words: the grief that is too deep for sentences, the fear that is too overwhelming for composure, the confusion that is too total for the precise articulation of a petition, the spiritual dryness that reduces the desire to pray to a wordless ache. Romans 8:26 addresses precisely these experiences with the most specific and the most comforting pneumatological assurance in the New Testament: at the very moment when the believer's prayer is most inarticulate, most faltering, most reduced to a mere groan of need directed at a God who feels impossibly distant, the Spirit Himself is taking up that wordless need and interceding for the believer before the Father with a precision, an accuracy, and an alignment with the Father's will that no articulate human prayer has ever achieved.

C. Romans 8:27, The Spirit's Perfectly Effective Intercession

Verse 27 provides the pneumatological ground for the assurance that the Spirit's intercession is effective: "The One who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (NASB 1995). The argument is from the Father's omniscience and the Spirit's perfect alignment with the Father's will. The Father who searches the hearts (an Old Testament title, cf. Jeremiah 17:10, indicating the Father's perfect, penetrating knowledge of every dimension of the believer's inner life) knows the mind of the Spirit, knows, that is, what the Spirit is interceding for in the wordless groanings of verse 26. And the reason the Father knows and receives the Spirit's intercession is that it is according to the will of God: the Spirit's prayers are perfectly aligned with the Father's own purposes.

This alignment is the source of the Spirit's intercession's perfect effectiveness. Human prayer, however sincere and however earnest, is limited by the human pray-er's incomplete knowledge of the Father's will: we ask for things that seem good to us from our limited perspective, not always knowing whether what we ask for aligns with what the Father has purposed in His comprehensive wisdom. The Spirit's intercession has no such limitation. The Spirit who proceeds from the Father knows the Father's will comprehensively; His intercessions are not petitions that may or may not align with the Father's purposes but the perfect expression of the Father's purposes back to the Father through the Spirit's interceding presence within the believer. The Spirit's prayers on the believer's behalf are always received, always answered,

always effective, because they are always, precisely, what the Father purposes for the believer's good.

V. The Double Intercession

The Spirit Within and the Son at the Right Hand

Romans 8:26–27's account of the Spirit's intercession within the believer is paired, just eight verses later in Romans 8:34, with Paul's account of the Son's intercession at the Father's right hand: "who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us" (NASB 1995). Together, verses 26–27 and verse 34 constitute the New Testament's most comprehensive statement of the double intercession that surrounds every believer's praying life.

The two intercessions are complementary and distinct. The Spirit's intercession is within the believer, the Spirit groaning in the depths of the believer's inner life with the wordless precision of one who knows both the believer's need and the Father's will. The Son's intercession is before the Father, at the right hand of God, the exalted, glorified, seated Christ interceding for His own people with the specific, ongoing, eternally effective advocacy of the one who has borne their sins and whose merit is the permanent ground of their standing before the Father. The believer who prays is the believer who is simultaneously interceded for from within (by the Spirit) and interceded for from above (by the Son), the double advocacy of the two divine Persons ensuring that no prayer of a genuine believer is ever alone, ever unaided, or ever brought before the Father without the Spirit's and the Son's interceding presence.

The pastoral consequence of the double intercession for the believer's prayer life is the most practically liberating truth in this entire lesson: the effectiveness of the believer's prayer does not depend on the eloquence of the prayer, the theological precision of its content, the emotional intensity of its offering, or the spiritual maturity of the one who prays. It depends on the Spirit who intercedes within and the Son who intercedes above, both of whose intercedings are perfectly effective because both are perfectly aligned with the Father's will. The believer who prays with halting words, inadequate understanding, and incomplete faith is the believer for whom the Spirit and the Son are simultaneously interceding; and the Father who receives the prayer receives it from the hands of both advocates before He receives it from the trembling lips of the one who prays.

Hebrews 7:25 provides the most explicit statement of the Son's ongoing, effective intercession: "therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them." The Son's intercession is permanent (He always lives), comprehensive (able to save forever), and directed toward those who draw near through Him (those who are praying in the Spirit). The two intercessions, the Spirit's groaning within and the Son's living advocacy above, together constitute the most complete possible Trinitarian provision for the believer's access to the Father through prayer.

VI. The Breadth of Spirit-Enabled Prayer

Corporate, Persevering, and Warfare Prayer

The Spirit's enabling of prayer extends beyond the individual believer's private prayer life to the corporate, persevering, and warfare dimensions of prayer that the New Testament consistently commends. Ephesians 6:18 provides the most comprehensive statement of Spirit-enabled prayer's breadth: "with all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints." The fourfold "all" of this verse, all prayer and petition, at all times, with all perseverance, for all the saints, describes the comprehensiveness of the Spirit's prayer-enabling ministry: He enables every form of prayer (all prayer and petition), in every season (at all times), sustained through the difficulty of unanswered prayer and spiritual dryness (with all perseverance), and directed toward the needs of the entire community (for all the saints).

The corporate dimension of Spirit-enabled prayer is the specific expression that Ephesians 6:18 most directly addresses: praying for all the saints is praying in the Spirit for the community's needs as a whole, not merely for the individual believer's personal concerns. The Spirit who intercedes for the individual believer (Romans 8:26–27) is the same Spirit who moves the praying community to intercede for one another, directing the community's prayer toward the specific needs of specific members, the community's mission, the leaders' faithfulness, and the advance of the gospel. James 5:16's assurance ("the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much") applies both to the individual and to the praying community: the community's corporate intercession, empowered by the Spirit who enables all prayer, is among the most powerful forces available to the church for the accomplishment of the Spirit's own purposes.

The warfare dimension of Spirit-enabled prayer is established by the context of Ephesians 6:18 within the armor-of-God passage: prayer in the Spirit is the final component of the spiritual armor that equips the believer for the spiritual warfare described in verses 10–17. The warfare is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, powers, and spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (v. 12); and the ultimate weapon in this warfare, deployed after the armor has been put on, is prayer in the Spirit: the Spirit-empowered, purpose-aligned, persevering intercession that assaults the spiritual forces of darkness on behalf of the gospel's advance and the saints' protection. The believer who prays in the Spirit is the believer who is engaging in the warfare for which the armor has been provided; the prayer is both the weapon and the declaration of dependence on the One who wins the war.

The perseverance dimension, "with all perseverance", addresses the most practically common failure in the prayer life of believers and communities: the failure to continue in prayer when the answer is delayed, when the circumstances appear unchanged, when the spiritual energy for sustained intercession has been depleted. The Spirit's enabling of persevering prayer is the provision for this specific failure: the Spirit who intercedes for the believer within (Romans 8:26) also sustains the believer's own praying through the long seasons of apparent divine silence, the unanswered petitions that test the faith of the most mature pray-er, and the spiritual dryness that strips the prayer of emotional warmth while leaving the will to pray intact. Praying in the Spirit through such seasons is the perseverance that Jesus commended in the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8) and that Paul commanded in Colossians 4:2 ("Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving").

VII. The Pastoral Encouragement: No Prayer Is Ever Unaided

The Spirit Is Already Praying in You

The lesson closes where the Spirit's prayer doctrine is most immediately and most personally needed: at the point of the believer's most profound experience of prayer's inadequacy. Every genuine believer knows this experience, the experience that is too deep for words, too confusing for coherent petitions, too spiritually dry for the usual approach to God, too grief-laden for anything except silence before God or at most a wordless cry directed at the heaven that feels momentarily closed. The pastoral encouragement that the Spirit's prayer doctrine provides for exactly this experience is the most specific and the most personally addressed comfort in the entire New Testament's pneumatological teaching.

The encouragement is this: the Spirit is already praying. Not "the Spirit will pray for you if you first achieve a sufficient quality of prayer yourself." Not "the Spirit will supplement your prayer if it reaches a sufficient level of spiritual earnestness." Not "the Spirit will intercede for you after you have done what you can." The Spirit is already praying, the present tense of Romans 8:26 (*hyperentunchanei*, is interceding) describes an ongoing, continuous, already-in-progress intercession that does not wait for the believer's prayer to begin before the Spirit's intercession commences. The Spirit's groaning for the believer is already happening in the moments before the believer manages to form the first word of a prayer.

The corollary is equally pastoral: no prayer of a genuine believer, however halting, however wordless, however thin with spiritual fatigue, however inadequate in its theological precision, is ever unheard by the Father. Because the Spirit is already interceding within the believer with the perfect alignment with the Father's will that the Spirit's divine nature guarantees, and because the Son is simultaneously interceding before the Father with the perfect merit that the Son's atoning work provides, every prayer that the believer manages to utter, however inadequate it is as prayer by any human standard, arrives before the Father from the hands of the best possible advocates. The most fumbling, most inarticulate, most theologically inadequate prayer of the most spiritually exhausted believer arrives before the Father with both the Spirit's and the Son's interceding presence surrounding it. This is the double advocacy of the double intercession, and it is the most pastorally liberating truth that the doctrine of the Spirit and prayer yields.

The Spirit who cries "Abba!" within the believer's heart (Galatians 4:6) is the Spirit who knows the Father's face, who has no barrier of sin between Himself and the Father's presence, who prays within the believer with the confidence of the eternal Son's own filial relationship to the Father. When the believer's prayer is reduced to a single word, "Abba", the Spirit of the Son is praying everything that "Abba" means in the mouth of the eternal Son: the perfect confidence of the one who has never been separated from the Father's love; the perfect trust of the one who has never doubted the Father's good purposes; the perfect intimacy of the one who has always known the Father's heart. The believer who prays "Abba" in the Spirit is praying with the

Spirit's own access to the Father, which means no prayer of a genuine believer is ever inadequate to reach the Father's ear and heart.

*"In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we should,
but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us
with groanings too deep for words;"*

Romans 8:26, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Prosagōgē	Greek: access, introduction (from <i>pross</i> , toward, + <i>agō</i> , to lead). Used in Ephesians 2:18 for the believer's access to the Father: "through Him we both have our access (<i>prosagōgē</i>) in one Spirit to the Father." The word carries the nuance of formal introduction to a royal presence, the term used in the Greek world for the presentation of a dignitary before a ruler. The believer's access to the Father is Son-mediated (through Him), Spirit-enabled (in one Spirit), and corporately shared (we both, Jew and Gentile together). Used also in Ephesians 3:12 ("in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him") and Romans 5:2 ("through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand").
Abba	Aramaic: Father (intimate, familial address). Used by Jesus in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36: "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me") as the characteristic expression of His own intimate filial relationship with the Father. Applied to the Spirit's prayer within the believer in Galatians 4:6 ("God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, Abba! Father!") and Romans 8:15 ("you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, Abba! Father!"). The Spirit's crying "Abba!" within the believer is the Spirit of the Son reproducing the Son's own intimate approach to the Father in the heart of the adopted child.
Praying in the Spirit	The mode of prayer described in Ephesians 6:18 ("with all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit") and Jude 20 ("praying in the Holy Spirit"). The cessationist interpretation: prayer that is prompted, guided, empowered, and aligned by the Holy Spirit, offered through the truth of the Word, and directed toward the Father's purposes. Not equivalent to praying in tongues (contra the Charismatic interpretation), since neither passage mentions tongues, the phrase <i>en pneumati</i> is used broadly for Spirit-sphere activity throughout the New Testament, and the Ephesians 6 and Jude 20 contexts describe Word-aligned, purpose-directed, community-serving prayer rather than private ecstatic utterance.
Sunantilambanomai	Greek: to take hold of together with, to help by bearing the weight alongside. The word translated "helps" in Romans 8:26: "the Spirit also helps our weakness." A compound verb (<i>sun</i> , together with + <i>anti</i> , opposite + <i>lambanomai</i> , to take hold of) describing the image of the Spirit coming alongside the believer who is struggling under the burden of inadequate prayer and bearing the weight from the other side. Not a spectator-assistance but a co-bearing: the Spirit takes hold of the prayer alongside the believer, carrying what the believer cannot carry and articulating what the believer cannot articulate.

Term	Definition
Groanings Too Deep for Words	The description in Romans 8:26 (stenagmois alalhtois, wordless, inexpressible groanings) of the Spirit's intercession within the believer: "the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." The groanings are the Spirit's own activity, not the believer's spiritual gift; they are alalhtois (inexpressible, incapable of verbal articulation), which is the precise opposite of the tongues gift's characteristic audible speech. The Spirit's groaning intercession operates at the level where no human speech, articulate or glossolalic, can reach, bringing before the Father the believer's deepest needs with the precision and alignment with the Father's will that only the Spirit's divine knowledge can achieve.
According to the Will of God	Romans 8:27's description of the principle that governs the Spirit's intercession: "He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." The perfect alignment of the Spirit's intercession with the Father's will is both the ground of the Spirit's intercession's effectiveness and the explanation for why the Father who searches the hearts always receives and responds to the Spirit's intercession. Human prayer is limited by incomplete knowledge of the Father's will; the Spirit's intercession is not so limited. The Spirit who proceeds from the Father knows the Father's will comprehensively and intercedes accordingly, ensuring that every intercession He offers on the believer's behalf is the perfect expression of what the Father purposes for that believer's good.
Double Intercession	The Trinitarian provision of prayer described by the pairing of Romans 8:26–27 (the Spirit's intercession within the believer) with Romans 8:34 (the Son's intercession at the Father's right hand). The Spirit intercedes within the believer with wordless groanings aligned with the Father's will; the Son intercedes before the Father from the position of completed atonement and exalted glory. Together, the two intercessions constitute the complete Trinitarian advocacy that surrounds every genuine believer's prayer: the Spirit bears the prayer from within, the Son presents it from above, and the Father receives it from the hands of both advocates. No prayer of a genuine believer is ever alone, unaided, or unheard.
Son's Intercession	The exalted Son's ongoing, continuous intercession at the Father's right hand described in Romans 8:34 ("He is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us") and Hebrews 7:25 ("He always lives to make intercession for them"). The Son's intercession is permanent (He always lives), comprehensive (able to save forever), and directed toward those who draw near to God through Him. Grounded in the Son's completed atoning work: the merit that makes the intercession effective is the same merit that paid for the believer's sin; the advocate is the One whose blood was the sacrifice, now presented before the Father as the permanent ground of the believer's acceptance.
Huperentunchanei	Greek: is interceding (present tense, active, indicative). The verb used in Romans 8:26 for the Spirit's intercession: "the Spirit Himself intercedes

Term	Definition
	(huperentunchanei) for us.” The present tense is pastorally significant: the Spirit’s intercession is ongoing, continuous, and already-in-progress, not a response to the believer’s prayer but a pre-existing, unceasing advocacy that precedes, accompanies, and continues after every prayer the believer manages to articulate. The prefix huper (on behalf of, over) intensifies the sense: the Spirit intercedes with the full weight of His divine advocacy on the believer’s behalf, taking the believer’s cause before the Father with the complete earnestness that the Spirit’s own nature supplies.
En Pneumati	Greek: in the Spirit, in spirit. The phrase used in Ephesians 6:18 (“pray at all times in the Spirit”), Jude 20 (“praying in the Holy Spirit”), Ephesians 2:18 (“access in one Spirit to the Father”), and elsewhere. In the New Testament, en pneumati characterizes activity conducted in the sphere, power, or alignment of the Holy Spirit, a meaning that encompasses but is not limited to any specific spiritual gift. For prayer, en pneumati describes the Spirit-enabled, Spirit-aligned, Spirit-empowered mode of prayer that the passages commend: prayer that is prompted and sustained by the Spirit, aligned with the Spirit’s purposes, and empowered by the Spirit’s own interceding energy within the believer.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: *What Must We Believe?*

We must believe the Trinitarian architecture of prayer with sufficient depth to allow it to transform both our understanding of prayer and our practice of it. Prayer is not a human religious activity performed in the direction of a divine power; it is the Spirit-enabled, Son-mediated, Father-addressed participation of the adopted child in the life of the Triune God. This means that the effectiveness of prayer is not primarily determined by the quality of the prayer, its eloquence, its theological precision, its emotional intensity, its length, or its spiritual depth, but by the Trinitarian advocacy that surrounds it: the Spirit interceding within, the Son interceding above, and the Father receiving from both advocates what the believer's own faltering words could not adequately present.

We must also believe Romans 8:26's statement of the believer's prayer-weakness with complete honesty: we do not know how to pray as we should. This is not an accusation; it is a liberation. The belief that my prayer is inadequate by its own standard is the belief that prepares me to receive the Spirit's helping intercession with gratitude rather than with self-reliance. The person who believes he knows how to pray as he should, who approaches prayer with the confidence of one whose spiritual formation has made him sufficient for the task, is the person who is least positioned to receive the Spirit's helping. The person who knows that every prayer he prays is carried to the Father by the Spirit's intercession and the Son's advocacy is the person who prays with the most genuine freedom and the most Spirit-dependent boldness.

B. For the Heart: *What Must We Feel and Desire?*

Let the pastoral encouragement of the double intercession be received as the specific gift to the weary, discouraged, spiritually dry pray-er that it is meant to be. The person who feels that her prayers are bouncing off the ceiling; the person whose grief has reduced prayer to silence; the person who has prayed for something for twenty years and has not seen the answer; the person who is too spiritually exhausted to do more than groan before God, Romans 8:26–27 speaks directly to each of these people. You do not know how to pray as you should; neither does anyone else. But the Spirit Himself, the Spirit who knows the depths of God, who is already praying when you cannot find the words, who carries your wordless need before the Father with groanings that are more precise and more perfectly aligned with the Father's will than any prayer you have ever articulated, the Spirit Himself intercedes for you. The Father who searches your heart hears the Spirit's intercession and knows your deepest need before you can name it.

Desire to be a person and a community of prayer whose expectation of prayer's effectiveness is grounded not in the quality of the praying but in the faithfulness of the double advocacy. This is the specific pneumatological boldness that Romans 8:26–27 is written to produce: the boldness of approaching the Father in prayer with the confidence of one who knows that the Spirit is

already interceding within, the Son is already interceding above, and the Father already knows and purposes the good of the one who prays. The boldness is not the boldness of presumption (I can ask for anything and demand that the Father comply) but the boldness of adoption (I am the adopted child of the Father, approached through the Son's mediation, in the Spirit's enabling, and the Father receives me from the hands of both advocates).

C. For the Hands: *What Must We Do?*

- Read Romans 8:14–27 in one sitting, attending to the full context of the Spirit's intercession: the Spirit of adoption (vv. 14–17), the eschatological groaning of creation, believers, and the Spirit (vv. 18–27). Note that all three, creation, believers, and the Spirit, are described as groaning: creation groans for the new creation (v. 22), believers groan for the redemption of the body (v. 23), and the Spirit groans in intercession for the believers (v. 26). What is the theological significance of the parallel structure? And what does the shared groaning of Spirit and believer suggest about the intimacy of the Spirit's engagement with the believer's experience?
- Practice the specific prayer discipline of Ephesians 6:18: praying at all times in the Spirit, with all perseverance, for all the saints. For one week, keep a prayer list of specific names and specific needs, not your own needs but the needs of others in your community. Pray through this list daily, with the specific expectation that the Spirit is prompting, guiding, and aligning your intercession for these specific people. At the end of the week, reflect: did specific names or needs arise in your mind that you had not consciously placed on the list? Did the Spirit's prompting direct your intercession toward people or situations you had not intentionally included? These are the evidences of the Spirit's directing work in Spirit-enabled intercession.
- Read Ephesians 6:10–18 as a unified passage and identify the relationship between the spiritual armor (vv. 14–17) and prayer in the Spirit (v. 18). How does prayer function as the final and comprehensive deployment of the armor? What specific spiritual warfare is the Spirit-enabled prayer of verse 18 engaging, and how does the fourfold "all" (all prayer and petition, at all times, with all perseverance, for all the saints) describe the comprehensive scope of warfare prayer? Then apply the passage to your congregation's specific spiritual warfare context: what is the most urgent front of the spiritual warfare that your community's Spirit-enabled prayer should be engaging?
- Memorize Romans 8:26–27 and carry it as the specific pastoral encouragement for the most difficult seasons of prayer. The next time you encounter a person who is discouraged with prayer, who feels that their prayers are ineffective, or who is too grief-stricken or spiritually exhausted to pray, speak the promise of Romans 8:26–27 to them directly: the Spirit is already interceding; the Father already knows; no prayer of a genuine believer is ever unaided. Prepare a brief, specific, pastoral statement of the double intercession's encouragement that you can offer to such a person, not the generic "God hears your prayers" but the pneumatologically specific assurance of the Spirit's own groaning intercession.
- Evaluate your congregation's corporate prayer life against the Acts 2:42 pattern (devotion to prayer as a foundational community mark) and the Ephesians 6:18

standard (praying at all times in the Spirit, with all perseverance, for all the saints). Is the corporate prayer of your community characterized by the earnestness, the specificity, the Spirit-dependence, and the other-directedness that these texts describe? What single structural change, in the gathering's schedule, the prayer meeting's format, the community's expectation of prayer's role, would most significantly move the community's corporate prayer toward the Spirit-enabled, persevering, community-wide intercession that Ephesians 6:18 calls for?

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. When has prayer been most difficult for you, most wordless, most reduced to silence or groaning, most uncertain about whether it was reaching the Father at all? Without sharing details that should remain private, describe the experience. And how does the doctrine of this lesson, the Spirit's groaning intercession within, the Son's advocacy above, the Father's searching of the heart, address the specific experience you are describing? Does the doctrine provide genuine pastoral comfort, or does it feel abstract in relation to the raw experience of prayer's apparent failure?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read Ephesians 2:14–18. The passage is about the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile in the one body of Christ, and verse 18 provides the Trinitarian ground of that reconciliation: “through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.” How does the Trinitarian structure of verse 18 both describe the mechanism of prayer (access to the Father through the Son in the Spirit) and provide the ground for the community's unity (both have access through the same Son in the same Spirit)? What does the connection between Trinitarian prayer-access and community unity suggest about the relationship between genuine corporate prayer and the community's relational health?
3. Read Romans 8:14–27 carefully. Paul describes three groanings in verses 22–26: creation groaning (v. 22), believers groaning (v. 23), and the Spirit groaning (v. 26). What does each groaning have in common, and how are they distinct in their objects? And note that the believer's groaning (v. 23) is a groaning “within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body,” while the Spirit's groaning (v. 26) is on behalf of the believers in their weakness. What is the theological relationship between the believer's own eschatological groaning and the Spirit's interceding groaning for the believer?
4. Read Galatians 4:1–7. The sending of the Spirit of the Son (v. 6) is grounded in the adoption language of verses 5–7: God sent His Son to redeem those under the law so that we might receive the adoption as sons, and then sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts to confirm the adopted status. What is the logical relationship between the adoption (received through the Son's redemption) and the Spirit's crying “Abba! Father!” within the believer? And how does the Spirit's “CAbba!” function as both the confirmation of the adoption and the means of the adopted child's access to the Father?
5. Read Jude 20–21. Note the three disciplines listed: (1) building yourselves up on your most holy faith, (2) praying in the Holy Spirit, and (3) keeping yourselves in the love of

God (v. 21). What is the function of each discipline in the context of Jude's exhortation to stand firm against false teachers? And how does praying in the Holy Spirit relate to the faith-building and the love-maintaining of the other two disciplines, are they separate disciplines or mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single Spirit-dependent posture?

6. Read Romans 8:31–39. The double intercession of Spirit (vv. 26–27) and Son (v. 34) is embedded within Paul's great doxological argument for the security of the believer's love-relationship with God. What role does the double intercession play in the overall argument of verses 31–39? And how does the Son's intercession in verse 34 ("who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us") relate to the rhetorical question of verse 35 ("Who will separate us from the love of Christ?")? Does the Son's intercession function as the answer to the separating-from-love question?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson argues that praying in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:18; Jude 20) is not a reference to praying in tongues but to prayer that is prompted, guided, and empowered by the Spirit. The Charismatic counter-argument is that the most natural reading of "praying in the Spirit" in the context of the Pauline gift discussions is a reference to the tongues gift, since Paul connects "praying in the Spirit" to tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:14–15. Is the Corinthians 14 passage a parallel to Ephesians 6:18 and Jude 20, and does it require the tongues interpretation for those passages? How does the cessationist distinguish between the different uses of the "in the Spirit" language in different contexts?
8. The Spirit's groanings in Romans 8:26 are described as *alalhtois* (inexpressible, too deep for words). Some interpreters have read this as describing an experience that the believer has, a level of prayer that transcends articulate speech and expresses itself in sighs, groanings, or other pre-linguistic expressions of the soul's need. The cessationist reading takes *alalhtois* as describing the Spirit's own intercession rather than the believer's experience. Which reading is grammatically and contextually more supported? And what are the pastoral implications of each reading for the person in prayer?
9. Romans 8:27 says the Spirit intercedes "according to the will of God." This perfect alignment with the Father's will guarantees the Spirit's intercession's effectiveness. But what does this imply for the effectiveness of the believer's own prayers, which are not always aligned with the Father's will? Is the Spirit's re-aligning of the believer's prayer part of the interceding work, does the Spirit take the believer's prayer as expressed and re-form it according to the Father's will? Or does the Spirit's intercession operate independently of what the believer prays, simply adding the Spirit's own perfect petition alongside the believer's imperfect one?
10. The double intercession (Spirit within, Son above) is among the most profound Trinitarian structures in the New Testament's pneumatology. But a possible question is whether this makes the believer's own prayer redundant: if the Spirit is already praying

within and the Son is already interceding above, why is the believer's prayer needed at all? How does the New Testament's consistent command to pray (Matthew 6:9; Ephesians 6:18; Philippians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:17) relate to the double intercession? Does the double intercession make the believer's prayer less necessary, or does it make it possible?

11. The lesson presents praying in the Spirit as encompassing corporate, persevering, and warfare dimensions in addition to the individual devotional dimension. In many contemporary evangelical churches, prayer is primarily understood as a private devotional practice rather than as corporate, persevering, community-wide warfare. What would the church's prayer culture look like if all three dimensions were given equal weight? And what specific practices or structures would need to change in most evangelical congregations to cultivate the Ephesians 6:18 model of all-prayer, at-all-times, with-all-perseverance, for-all-the-saints Spirit-enabled intercession?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. The lesson's most important pastoral application is for the person whose prayer life is most discouraged: the person for whom prayer feels ineffective, unanswered, or too painful to sustain. Using the specific theology of Romans 8:26–27, prepare the specific pastoral conversation you would have with such a person, not generic encouragement but the specific pneumatological assurance that the Spirit is already interceding, the Father already searches the heart, and no prayer of a genuine believer is ever alone or unaided. What specific questions would you ask to understand the person's specific experience? What specific truths from this lesson would you offer, and in what specific order?
13. The lesson proposes a one-week experiment of praying for specific others with the expectation that the Spirit is directing and prompting the intercession. Having completed (or begun) this experiment, reflect: what did you observe about the Spirit's prompting? Were there specific people or needs that arose in your mind that you had not consciously intended to pray for? What does the experience (or lack of it) reveal about your normal prayer orientation, is it primarily self-directed or Spirit-directed? And what specific change in your daily prayer practice would make the Spirit's prompting of intercession more central?
14. The Trinitarian architecture of prayer (through the Son, in the Spirit, to the Father) is the theological foundation of genuine Christian prayer. Evaluate your current prayer practice against this structure: is your prayer predominantly addressed to the Father through the Son? Is the Spirit's enabling presence acknowledged and expected in your prayer? Is the access you are exercising genuinely rooted in the Son's atoning mediation, or does your prayer more often reflect a general theistic assumption that God is accessible to any sincere religious petitioner? What specific change in how you begin your prayer would more explicitly acknowledge the Trinitarian structure?

15. The lesson closes with the pastoral encouragement that the Spirit is already praying, in the present tense, continuously, before the believer finds the words. Identify the specific believer or situation in your pastoral context that most needs this specific encouragement right now. How would you bring the doctrine of Romans 8:26–27 to bear on that specific person’s specific situation, not abstractly but in the specific, personally-addressed, pastorally warm language that makes doctrinal truth pastorally effective? Draft the three or four sentences you would say.

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson with the reading of Romans 8:26–27, slowly, perhaps twice, allowing the weight of each phrase to settle before moving to the next. “In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness...” Let “helps our weakness” land with its full honesty: the weakness is ours, and it is real, and the Spirit does not pretend otherwise. “for we do not know how to pray as we should...” Let this acknowledgment stand without defense or qualification: we do not. None of us. Not the most mature believer in the room, not the most experienced pray-er, not the one with the most rigorous daily prayer discipline. We do not know how to pray as we should. “but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words...” The “but” (alla, a strong adversative) is the pivot on which the whole encouragement turns: we do not know, but the Spirit does. He is interceding. Now. For us. With groanings that go where no human word can follow.

Begin the prayer by bringing before the gathered community’s God the specific, honest acknowledgment of the prayer-weakness that Romans 8:26 so candidly names. Not as a confession of failure but as the opening of the hand that releases self-sufficiency and receives the Spirit’s helping intercession. Pray together: we acknowledge that we do not know how to pray as we should, for our own lives, for the specific needs that are too heavy to articulate, for the people we love whose situations we cannot see clearly, for the community’s mission whose complexity exceeds our wisdom, for the world’s suffering that we cannot adequately hold in prayer. We acknowledge that we bring inadequate, partial, imperfectly-aligned prayers before the Father, and we trust that the Spirit Himself is interceding with the precision, the alignment with the Father’s will, and the perfect advocacy that our prayers cannot supply for themselves.

Pray then through the double intercession’s specific comfort for specific people in the gathered community who are most in need of it: those whose prayer has been most discouraged, most wordless, most reduced to silence or groaning. Without naming names unless permission has been given, pray for these specific people with the specific assurance that the Spirit is already interceding for them, that the Father who searches the hearts already knows their need before they can articulate it, that the Son at the Father’s right hand is already interceding with the merit of the cross on their behalf, and that no prayer of a genuine believer in Christ is ever alone. Pray the groaning prayer on their behalf: the prayer that simply lifts the person’s name before the Father and trusts the Spirit’s intercession to say what the interceding community cannot adequately say.

Close with the Trinitarian doxology that Ephesians 2:18 and 3:20–21 together create: the access to the Father through the Son in the Spirit is the access of the community that is being built as the Spirit’s dwelling (Lesson 25), illuminated in the Spirit’s Word (Lesson 26), and interceded for by the Spirit’s own groanings (Lesson 27). Read Ephesians 3:20–21 as the doxological conclusion to everything that Lessons 25–27 have established about the Spirit’s corporate ministry: “Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all

generations forever and ever. Amen.” The power that works within us is the Spirit’s interceding, illuminating, building, empowering presence. And to Him, through the Son, in the Spirit, to the Father, be the glory. Soli Deo Gloria.

*“Through Him we both have our access
in one Spirit to the Father.”*

Ephesians 2:18, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Romans 8:14–27, 34; Ephesians 2:14–18; 6:10–18; Galatians 4:1–7; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Jude 20–21; Hebrews 7:25; James 5:16; Luke 18:1–8; Colossians 4:2; Ephesians 3:20–21

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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