When You Run Out of Words, the Holy Spirit Hasn’t

The Spirit of Christ

Imagine you’re facing a situation with a lot of moving parts. Several people are involved. Decisions depend on other decisions. And there’s a lot you simply can’t know.

So you try to pray. And you realize you don’t know what to ask for. If you ask for this, it might cost that. If you ask for that, it might not be what’s best for someone else. You’re not sure what’s coming, you’re not sure what’s best, and you’re not even sure what you want. You open your mouth, and nothing comes out that feels like enough.

If you’ve ever been there, you’ve stood exactly where Paul is pointing. It isn’t a place of failure. It’s a place of weakness. And Paul says that is precisely where the Spirit meets you.

Romans chapter 8, verses 26 and 27.

> “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. 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.”
>
> ROMANS 8:26-27

Look closely at what Paul says and what he doesn't. He doesn't say we don't know how to pray. Paul assumes you know how to pray. He says we do not know what to pray for. That's a different problem. It isn't a problem of technique, or discipline, or a thin prayer life. It's the problem of living in the middle of a story whose ending you can't see.

And Paul has been building toward this. A few lines earlier, in Romans chapter 8, verse 23, he writes,

> "And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."
>
> ROMANS 8:23

We have the Spirit as the first taste of what's coming. But we're still waiting. We live in bodies that get sick, in a world that aches, in situations that don't resolve on our schedule. In that gap between what has begun and what hasn't yet arrived, there will be many moments where we simply do not know what to pray.

So what does Paul say the Spirit does? He helps us. The word he uses means to take hold of the other end of a load, alongside you. You are not carrying this by yourself. And then he says the Spirit intercedes. He appeals to God for us. Notice what that means. The Spirit isn't coaching you on what to say. He isn't waiting for you to get the wording right first. He is praying. When you've run out of words, he hasn't.

Now, Paul says he does this "with groanings too deep for words." And believers have understood that phrase in different ways for a very long time. Some hear it as prayer so deep that no words could carry it. Others hear it as the kind of praying in the Spirit that Paul describes elsewhere, including praying in tongues. The word Paul uses can mean unspoken, and it can mean without

recognizable words, and thoughtful people have landed in different places. You don't have to settle that to stand on what Paul is clearly saying. Paul expects us to pray in the Spirit as an ordinary part of life. In Ephesians chapter 6, verse 18, he writes,

> "praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication."
>
> EPHESIANS 6:18

However you understand the groanings, the center of the passage is the same. The Spirit himself is praying, and he is praying in you.

Then Paul gives us the reason we can trust it. "He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit." Think about what that sentence says. The Spirit has a mind. And the Father knows it completely. This is not an influence or a feeling or a force. It's a Person speaking to a Person, and the Father understands every word, even the ones you can't. When your own praying runs out, the Father is not straining to catch what you meant. He knows exactly what the Spirit means.

And look at the last phrase. The Spirit intercedes "according to the will of God." That's what you need most when you're in the dark. Our own praying comes tangled up with our fears and our preferences. We pray for what we want, or what we're afraid of losing. The Spirit's appeal is never tangled that way. It is always in keeping with God. Not one of his prayers lands in the wrong place.

This is where the Kingdom comes into it. Jesus is King, and he reigns now. He hasn't yet brought the Kingdom in its fullness, but he has already sent his Spirit to apply his rule in the lives of his people. That includes the places where you can't see what the King is doing. When you don't know the King's will in a situation, the Spirit does. He prays Kingdom-shaped prayer in you, ahead of the day when everything is made right.

And you are never praying into the dark alone. Romans chapter 8, verse 34.

> "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us."
>
> ROMANS 8:34

The King is at the Father's right hand, praying for you. The Spirit is within you, praying through you. And Ephesians chapter 2, verse 18 says,

> "For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father."
>
> EPHESIANS 2:18

Through the Son, in the Spirit, to the Father. Your praying is never a solo flight. It's a conversation that's already going on, and you've been brought into it.

So here is the challenge. Not an idea to agree with. A prayer to pray.

Think of one situation in your life right now where you truly don't know what to pray. Not a general sense of struggle. A specific one. A diagnosis. A decision with no clear right answer. A relationship that has gone quiet. Name it. Say it out loud, in plain words, to the Father. Tell him you don't know what to ask for. Then pray whatever comes, even if it's two halting sentences. And if nothing comes, stay there anyway. Let the silence be part of the prayer. You are not performing. You're giving the Spirit room to pray what you can't.

Back in that situation, you still don't know how it's going to turn out. That hasn't changed. But you're no longer carrying the praying yourself. Someone is praying in you, the Son is praying for

you, and the Father knows exactly what is being said. You can come as you are, with whatever words you have left, and trust that none of it is wasted.

Group Discussion Questions

1. Paul says “we do not know what to pray for as we ought.” When have you been in a situation where you truly did not know what to ask God for, and what did you do?

2. Why do you think so many believers assume that running out of words in prayer means they are doing something wrong? How does Romans 8:26-27 change that?

3. Romans 8:34 and Ephesians 2:18 describe Jesus praying for us and the Spirit praying in us as we come to the Father. How does it change the way you pray to know you are stepping into a conversation already underway?

Self-Reflection Questions

1. What is one situation in my life right now where I do not know what to pray, and have I actually brought it to the Father in plain words?

2. When my words run out, do I tend to stop praying or stay in his presence? What would it look like to stay?

3. Where have I been praying only for what I want or what I fear losing, and what would it mean to leave room for the Spirit to pray according to God’s will?

REFERENCES

Fee, G. D. (1994). *God's empowering presence: The Holy Spirit in the letters of Paul.* Hendrickson.