

WEEK 8: What if I feel I cannot pray?



Every Christian experiences a time—or, often, many times—at some point in our Christian journey when we struggle to pray.

It's a topic we seldom discuss, even though it is arguably so common as to be universal. It is far from unknown for church members to have lost all connection to God through prayer—yet left feeling unable to raise the topic even amongst their church friends.

So, this week, we broach the thorny question of those times when we cannot or don't feel we have the words or motivation to pray anymore.



This week's bible reading is Romans 8.22-28

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope, we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for God's people by God's will.

We know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose.

Other readings for the theme are Mark 11.15-19 (Jesus disrupts the status quo of prayer and worship in the Temple) or Psalm 42:5-8 (Coming back to the source when it seems like we have no way to turn)



Key Themes and Lessons

This topic is rarely addressed directly in Scripture. Most of the Bible simply assumes that the people of God will respond to the Divine with prayer—and, as a result, it rarely addresses the reality that ALL Christians have times when prayer doesn't come easily.

I found this quote from a leading evangelical Christian website when I began researching this question.

The Bible says to “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), so anything other than a continual attitude of prayer and communion with God is sin.

That doesn't help the faithful folks in our church who might be experiencing a season of prayerless drought in their spiritual journey.

This week's main reading, Romans 8, is the most extensive passage I found. It recognises that even the most devoted believers sometimes experience spiritual struggle.

Let's unpack it in more detail by taking each verse in turn:

The Groaning of Creation (verse 22): The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. This verse suggests that all creation suffers and longs for redemption, not just humanity. This groaning is physical suffering and a longing for future redemption. God's not finished yet—he is still at work in creation, drawing it towards future redemption.

First fruits of the Spirit (verse 23): Not only creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we eagerly await our adoption to sonship. This verse suggests that despite having the Holy Spirit, believers also experience suffering. We are part of the incomplete state of redemption at the present time.

Hope and Salvation (verse 24): In this hope, we were saved. This verse proclaims the hope of future glory and redemption, which are the basis of our salvation.

The Spirit intercedes (verses 26-27): The Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes with sounds too deep for words. This highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in helping believers with their weaknesses and praying on our behalf.

All Things Work Together for Good (verse 28): This verse reassures us that God works for the good of both people and the wider creation. It promises God's providential care for those called according to His purpose.

Now, let's delve deeper into each point:

Groaning of Creation: The groaning of creation is a metaphor for the suffering and decay we see in the world around us. This includes natural disasters, disease, and death. These are all consequences of sin and are part of the “bondage to decay” mentioned in Romans 8:21-22.

First fruits of the Spirit: The term “first fruits” refers to the Holy Spirit as a foretaste or pledge of the future blessings that God has promised. Despite the present suffering, believers have the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of their future glory.

Hope and Salvation: The hope mentioned in Romans 8:24 is not wishful thinking but a confident expectation of future glory. This hope is based on God’s promises and is a source of comfort and encouragement during times of suffering.

Intercession of the Spirit: The Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in the life of believers. When we are weak and don’t know what to pray for, the Spirit intercedes for us according to God’s will. This is a great comfort because it assures us that our prayers are heard and answered according to God’s perfect plan.

All Things Work Together for Good: This is one of the most comforting promises in the Bible. It assures us that God is sovereign and works all things together for our good and His glory. This doesn’t mean that all things are good, but God can use even the bad things in our lives for our ultimate good.

Practical Application

Romans 8:22-28 offers several practical applications for Christians, particularly those who might be struggling with prayer:

- *Understanding Suffering: Recognising that suffering is a part of life and not necessarily a sign of God’s disfavour can be comforting. The “groaning” of creation and believers in Romans 8:22-23 reminds us that suffering is a shared experience, not something we face alone.*
- *Hope while Suffering: The hope mentioned in Romans 8:24 is not wishful thinking but a confident expectation of future glory. This hope is based on God’s promises and is a source of comfort and encouragement during times of suffering. This can inspire Christians to remain hopeful and patient, even in difficult times.*
- *Relying on the Holy Spirit in Prayer: Romans 8:26-27 reassures believers that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness, especially when we struggle to pray. Knowing that the Spirit intercedes for us can encourage us to confidently approach prayer, even when we don’t know what to pray for.*
- *Trust in God’s Sovereignty: Romans 8:28 assures us that God works all things together for our good. This can encourage Christians to trust God’s sovereignty and goodness, even when circumstances seem challenging or confusing.*
- *Practical Prayer Tips: For those struggling to pray, this passage offers reassurance that the Spirit intercedes on our behalf. Therefore, Christians can approach prayer honestly, bringing doubts, fears, and struggles before God, trusting that the Spirit will intercede for them. They can also find comfort in knowing that their prayers are always heard and that God is working for their good—even when it doesn’t feel like it.*

Remember, these applications are offered to provide practical guidance and encouragement based on Romans 8:22-28. They are not exhaustive, and the richness of this passage allows for many more insights and applications.



Some Christians think every other Christian prays more than they do and feel guilty for not praying more.

In fact, research shows that a surprising number of Christians don't pray as much as you might think. A "Pew Research" Organization survey found that as many as a third of Christians only pray weekly or less often.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/christians/christian/frequency-of-prayer/>

That's perhaps not the most encouraging news, but knowing that we are far from alone in our prayer struggles can be helpful.

Another survey of over 7500 Christians showed that most people who said they prayed prayed for less than one minute per day.

<https://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/christnewstoday/2024/01/we-asked-7454-christians-how-often-they-prayand-the-results-were-surprising.html>

From this site

This is one area where the differences between ages are much less pronounced, and most Christians pray for only a short time. Imagine trying to maintain a relationship with the most important person in your life by having a 30-second conversation with them...once a month. For a large portion of the Christians we surveyed, that's exactly what they're doing.

The main reason cited for the lack of prayer was people saying they were "too busy"; the second reason was that people didn't know how.

Beyond encouraging people to be better at managing time, there isn't much we can do about the first reason. However, as church leaders, we have to take some responsibility for the second reason. We can teach our congregations how to pray!

Online resources

How to pray when you can't pray

<https://www.intouchuk.org/read/articles/how-to-pray-when-you-cant-pray>

Seven ways to pray when you can't pray

<https://guideposts.org/prayer/how-to-pray/7-ways-to-pray-when-you-cant-pray/>

Seven things to do when you cannot pray

<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/07/7-things-to-do-when-you-cant-pray/>

When is it OK not to pray?

<https://jasonalowe.com/2020/09/21/when-is-it-ok-not-to-pray/>



"When prayer is a struggle, do not worry about the prayers you cannot. You are a prayer to God at that moment. All within you cries out to Him, and He hears all the pleas that your suffering soul and body are making to Him with groanings which cannot be uttered." (*Ole Hallesby*)

"Oddly enough, many people struggle to pray because they focus on praying, not on God." (*Paul Miller*)

"Pray as you can, not as you can't." (*Dom Chapman*)

"If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is 'thank you', that would suffice." (*Meister Eckhart*)

"And so I urge you: carry on an ongoing conversation with God about the daily stuff of life, a little like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. For now, do not worry about 'proper' praying; just talk to God." (*Richard J. Foster in "Celebration of Discipline"*)

"The wish to pray is a prayer in itself." (*Georges Bernanos*)

"No one can pray and worry at the same time. When we worry, we aren't praying. When we pray, we aren't worrying." (*Max Lucado*)

In prayer, it is better to have a heart without words than words without a heart. (*John Bunyan*)

"I talk to God, but the sky is empty." (*Sylvia Plath*)



If you have been working with earlier sessions in this series, you will know my repeated mantra: these sermon outlines are a resource rather than a prescription. You are free to work up a sermon yourself without ANY reference to this outline. It is provided as a starting point for those who value a little inspiration.

So, in that spirit, here's a sermon outline for "What to do when you can't pray" based on Romans 8:26-27:

Introduction

Start by acknowledging the common struggle of prayer. At some point, everyone has felt the weight of words unsaid, the struggle to articulate thoughts or the feeling of distance from God. This is a shared experience, and it's okay to admit it. The Bible itself addresses this issue in Romans 8:26-27.

1. The Reality of Our Weakness (Romans 8:26a)

Discuss the first part of Romans 8:26, *"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness."* Highlight the reality of our human weakness, including our inability at times to know what or how to pray. This is a common struggle and nothing to be ashamed of.

2. The Role of the Spirit in Our Prayers (Romans 8:26b)

Move on to the second part of Romans 8:26, *"We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans."* Emphasise the role of the Holy Spirit in our prayers, especially when we don't know what to pray for. The Spirit understands our hearts and our needs and intercedes on our behalf.

3. The Assurance of God's Will (Romans 8:27)

Finally, discuss Romans 8:27: *"And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God."* Reassure the congregation that God knows our hearts and hears our prayers, even when we can't find words. The Spirit intercedes according to God's will, ensuring our prayers are always heard.

Conclude by challenging the congregation to lean into these truths in the coming week.

Encourage them to approach prayer with honesty and vulnerability, trusting that the Spirit will intercede. Remind them that God knows their hearts and hears their prayers, even when they can't find the words to say.

Encourage them to find comfort in the promise of Romans 8:26-27 and to share this comfort with others who may also be struggling with prayer.

This sermon outline provides a roadmap for exploring the topic of prayer struggles and offers practical and biblical insights for overcoming these struggles. It's designed to be adaptable, so feel free to modify it as needed to fit your congregation's needs and context. Remember, the goal is to provide comfort and encouragement, reminding everyone that they are not alone in their struggles with prayer. God is with us, and His Spirit helps us in our weakness.



Suggested Hymns and Songs

STF H&P

| | | |
|-----|-----|---|
| 634 | 710 | Fight the Good Fight |
| | 668 | Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine |
| 636 | 685 | O love that wilt not let me go |
| 489 | | All I once held dear |
| 736 | 678 | In heavenly love abiding |
| 519 | | Father I place into your hands |
| 628 | | Faithful one, so unchanging |
| 638 | 73 | Through all the changing scenes of life |
| | 687 | When we walk with the Lord (Trust and obey) |

Call To Worship

Welcome, dear friends, to this sacred gathering,
Where hearts are open, and souls are seeking.
In the stillness of this moment, let us turn our eyes
To the One who lights our path, Jesus Christ

In the depths of our being, we yearn to find the presence of the Divine.
Let us draw near, casting away fear.

Come, let us seek the Lord.
For in His presence, all is made bright.
Let us worship together, seeking God today
And find in Him the abundance of grace and love.

Prayers of Approach and Penitence

Heavenly Father, we come before You today, acknowledging our human frailty and the many times we struggle to express our hearts in prayer. We thank You for the gift of Your Holy Spirit, who intercedes for us in our weakness. As we gather in Your presence, we ask for a fresh outpouring of Your Spirit to guide, comfort, and help us in our prayers. Open our hearts to Your Word and Your will, and help us to trust in Your unfailing love.

Amen.

Merciful God, we confess that there are times when we feel distant from You, when words fail us, and we don't know how to pray. We admit our weaknesses, our doubts, and our fears. We repent of our lack of faith and our failure to trust in Your providence. We ask for Your forgiveness and Your grace. Thank You for Your promise that Your Spirit intercedes for us in our weakness. Help us to rely on Your Spirit in our prayer life and to trust that You are working all things together for our good. In Jesus' name, we pray.

Amen.

Leader: For the times when we have struggled to find the words to express our hearts to You.

Lord, have mercy

People: **Lord, have mercy.**

Leader: For the moments when our doubts and fears have silenced our prayers,

Lord, have mercy

People: **Lord, have mercy.**

Leader: For the occasions when we have neglected to seek Your guidance in our lives,

Lord, have mercy

People: **Lord, have mercy.**

Collect

Gracious God,

In our moments of silence and struggle, when words fail us and prayers seem distant, remind us of Your constant presence.

Grant us the faith to trust in Your providence, knowing that in all things, You work for the good of those who love You.

Strengthen our faith, encourage us in our hope, and deepen our love for You and one another.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord,

Amen.

Intercessions

Gracious God,

In our moments of silence and struggle, when words fail us and prayers seem distant, remind us of Your constant presence. Thank You for Your Holy Spirit, who intercedes for us in our weakness with groans too deep for words. Grant us the faith to trust in Your providence, knowing that in all things, You work for the good of those who love You. Strengthen our faith, embolden us in our hope, and deepen our love for You and one another.

In faith and love, let us pray to the Lord,

Hear us, O Lord.

Lord God, we lift our world to You. We pray for peace in places of conflict, healing in places of hurt, and justice in places of inequality. We ask that Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Guide our leaders to make wise decisions that reflect Your love and justice. Help us be good stewards of the earth you entrusted to us. In Jesus' name, we pray. May we seek to love our neighbours as ourselves and serve those in need. We pray for unity in diversity, understanding in disagreement, and compassion in adversity. May Your will be done in our community as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name, we pray.

In faith and love, let us pray to the Lord,

Hear us, O Lord.

Compassionate God, we bring those who need Your healing touch before You. For those suffering from physical pain and illness, we ask for Your healing power to restore their bodies. For those grappling with emotional turmoil, we pray for Your peace to calm their minds. For those enduring the heartache of loss, we seek Your comfort to soothe their grieving hearts. May they find strength in Your love, hope in Your promises, and healing in Your grace. May they experience Your strength in their weakness and their struggles, and may they encounter Your faithfulness.

In faith and love, let us pray to the Lord,
Hear us, O Lord.

Loving God, we long for Your presence in our lives. Help us to seek You in all we do, listen for Your voice in the stillness, and rest in Your presence. We pray that we might grow in our relationship with You and experience Your peace that surpasses all understanding. We ask for wisdom to make decisions that honour You, strength to face the challenges we encounter, and grace to extend love and forgiveness to others. Help us to discern Your will in our lives and to follow Your path with faith and courage.

In faith and love, let us pray to the Lord,
Hear us, O Lord.

Sending Prayers (Benediction)

God of all comfort and peace,
As we close this time of worship,
we thank You for Your presence and Your faithfulness.
We thank You for the Holy Spirit
who intercedes for us in our weakness
and helps us when we don't know how to pray.

**As we go out into the world, may we carry this truth in our hearts,
finding comfort and strength in Your promise.
In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.**

or

Blessed Lord,
As we leave this place, may we carry with us
the assurance of Your love and the comfort of Your Spirit.

When words fail us,
remind us that Your Spirit intercedes for us.

When doubts cloud our minds,
remind us of Your faithfulness.

When struggles weigh us down,
**remind us of Your promise that in all things,
You work for the good of those who love You.**

May we live out these truths in our daily lives,
and may our lives be a testament to Your grace and love.
In Jesus' name, we pray.
Amen.



Prayer Activity: Colouring

This week, we will try some meditative colouring, focusing our mind and spirit on our prayers while adding colour to intricate designs.

There are many free-to-download colouring sheets of various styles available from online sources. Here are a few of the many sites:

<https://thecreatorsclassroom.com/free-coloring-pages-for-adults-to-bring-joy-to-your-life/>

<https://joditt.com/free-christian-coloring-pages-adults/>

<https://www.susanldavis.com/free-printable-bible-verse-coloring-pages/>

Download something suitable to distribute around the congregation—preferably a few different ones.

- Choose a colouring book or print out colouring pages with intricate designs.
- Find a quiet and comfortable space to sit with your colouring supplies.
- Take a few deep breaths to centre yourself and clear your mind.
- Select colours that resonate with your emotions or intentions for prayer.
- As you colour, focus on your prayers or intentions, allowing the repetitive motion to deepen your connection with God.

Prayer Activity: Using Liturgy

When we feel in a prayer slump and have no words to pray with, there is no shame in using other people's words. In this prayer activity, we will use liturgy.

Liturgy is a set form of public worship that includes structured prayers, readings, and rituals. It provides a time-tested, structured way to approach God in prayer, which can be helpful when spontaneous prayer feels difficult.

The first task is to find a suitable liturgy resource. Fortunately, there are now many online resources (some even have Apps for phones or tablets). Here are some, and a quick Google search will find many more.

The Methodist Daily Prayer Book can be downloaded from:
<https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/resources/leading-worship/methodist-liturgies/daily-prayer/>

Northumbria Community Daily Prayer
<https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/offices/morning-prayer/>

Church of England Daily Prayer
<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

Book of Common Prayer
<https://www.bookofcommonprayer.net/#>

Create a Sacred Space: Use candles, a cross, or sacred images to set a conducive atmosphere.

Time of Day: Choose a regular time (morning, midday, or evening) that you can commit to for prayer.

Minimise Distractions: Silence your phone, inform others in your household, and find a space to be alone.

Daily Practice: Aim to follow the liturgy daily or several times a week to build a habit.

Top Tips for Using Liturgy to Enhance Prayer

- **Start Small:** Begin with shorter liturgies or focus on one part (like morning or evening prayer) to avoid feeling overwhelmed.
- **Be Flexible:** Feel free to adapt or modify the liturgy to fit your current needs and time constraints better.
- **Embrace Repetition:** Allow the repetition of prayers to deepen your understanding and internalise their truths.
- **Use Liturgy for Tough Days:** On particularly challenging days, let the liturgy carry you when personal prayer feels impossible.
- **Explore Different Traditions:** Experiment with liturgies from various Christian traditions to find new expressions and insights.
- **Engage Physically:** Utilise gestures like kneeling, standing, or crossing yourself to involve your body in prayer.

Ice Breaker Questions

If you could ask one biblical figure for advice on prayer, who would it be and why?

Music often speaks when words can't. What's a song or piece of music that helps you feel closer to God when you're struggling to pray?

Describe a time when you felt like you couldn't pray. What helped you get through that season?

Discussion Questions

1. When you're at a loss for words in prayer, how do you sense God is still present with you?
2. Considering Romans 8:22, which talks about the whole creation groaning, how does this perspective shape your understanding of personal struggles in prayer?
3. Reflecting on Romans 8:26, how does it make you feel to know that the Spirit intercedes for you with groans too deep for words?
4. Think about a time when you were too overwhelmed to pray. What brought you comfort or clarity at that moment?
5. Romans 8:28 speaks of God working all things for good. How does this promise affect your approach to prayer during difficult times?
6. When you feel disconnected from prayer, what non-traditional ways have you found to engage with God? What scriptures or spiritual practices have you found particularly grounding or helpful?
7. What role does your church community play for you when you find it hard to pray alone? Does it help to share your struggles honestly with other people?
8. What does it mean to you to pray without words? How do you experience God in those silent or wordless moments?

Multiple Choice Bible Study

On the next page is a multiple-choice bible study as commonly found in the Serendipity Bible (and Serendipity resources from the 1980s and 1990s).

They open up conversation by offering people a series of multiple-choice answers to questions around our theme. Some of the answers make sense, but others are a bit off-beam. There will always be more than one "correct" answer. That's deliberate—so we avoid the rush to seek "the right answer."

Print copies for everyone in your group or meeting. Give out the copies and a pen. Ask everyone to fill in their answers quickly! These studies work best if people don't overthink!

Then, you can use the responses as the basis for discussion in one large group or divide people into pairs or groups of three.

1. What might you do when you can't find the words to pray?

- Start humming a familiar hymn or worship song.
- Write a letter to God expressing your innermost thoughts and feelings.
- Drink a glass of wine and hope for inspiration.
- Pretend to be super-spiritual and "fake it until you make it."
- Use the Lord's Prayer or another structured prayer as a guide.

2. How can the promise of Romans 8:28 encourage you to pray in tough times?

- Trust that God works for good, even if you can't see it now.
- Understand that your prayers will immediately change your circumstances.
- Believe that groaning and struggling are normal parts of creation.
- Assume that you are doing something wrong if life is hard.
- Recognise that the Holy Spirit is interceding for you in your weakness.

3. Which of the following is a beneficial way to pray when you feel disconnected from God?

- Yell at the sky in frustration.
- Read and meditate on Scripture to find comfort and guidance.
- Give up and look for another religion to follow.
- Assume you are being punished for something.
- Light a candle and sit quietly, focusing on God's presence.

4. How might meditating on Romans 8:26 help you understand your struggles in prayer?

- Realise that the Holy Spirit helps and prays for us in our weakness.
- Think that your prayers don't matter because the Spirit is already interceding.
- Understand that it's okay to come before God without having perfect words.
- Feel like giving up on prayer altogether since it's too hard.
- Assume you need to pray exactly right for God to listen.

5. What could be a meaningful alternative if you cannot pray?

- Engage in a prayer walk, using nature to focus your thoughts on God.
- Go and watch a box set of Love Island to take your mind off everything.
- Use a liturgical prayer or prayer book to guide your time with God.
- Count backwards from 100 while you try to think of something to pray for.
- Share your struggles with a trusted friend and ask for their support.

6. What might help you connect with God in the future when personal prayer feels too difficult?

- Believe that you need to wait until you feel like praying again.
- Join a prayer group or community where you find strength with others.
- Find a fresh and creative way to approach prayer.
- Spend time in silence, listening for God's voice.
- Try to pray with 16th Century "thee's and thou's" to sound more "spiritual."