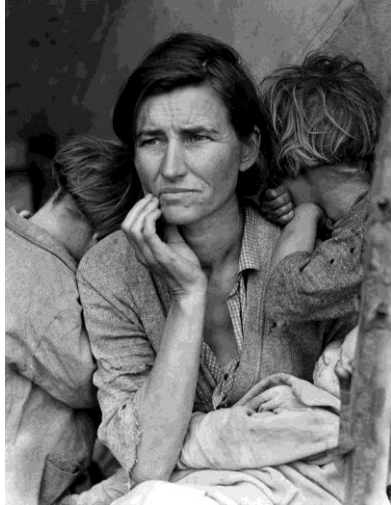




I am a preacher but I never considered myself to be a prophet--that is, until two weeks ago. I made an accidental prophecy when I said "Many of you have spent time in the hospital this year, and if you haven't, you will. Many of you caught that and were probably sitting there thinking, "Did he just say what I think he said?" Ryan told me that he and Ethan caught it and then heard a few people chuckle afterward, like I was making some kind of twisted joke, My family especially got a big laugh out of that faux faux and we had fun putting together this [short sound bite](#) for dramatic effect.

Of course I did not mean to predict that each and every one of you will end up in the hospital some time in 2014. That would be a horrible tragedy if it happened. If you recall, the message was about groaning, specifically, resurrection groans. The context had to do with suffering and the groanings of life in general. My train of thought was along that line, so what I meant is that if you haven't suffered some significant groanings in your life lately, you will soon enough. Now that much is true, is it not? That is not an accidental prophecy from a bumbling pastor. Jesus himself said that in this life you will have tribulation. Paul said that everyone who wants to live a Godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

He also said this in Romans eight. *For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 23 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.* Creation groans. We groan. Our bodies and our spirits groan and whether we are fully aware of it or not, what we are actually groaning for is our resurrection bodies. We wait eagerly for the redemption of our bodies. As believers, we know there is something better coming. We know that Wisconsin winters do not last forever and we also know that groanings are meant to have a good result. Just as the groanings of childbirth result in new and precious life of a newborn child, so our present groanings will result in new life--the new life of resurrected bodies in the actual, physical presence of Jesus Christ.



We know that is coming in the future, down the road, but what about the here and now? Are we left to wallow in our groanings? Are all good things merely future oriented? Our lives are not continually filled with groans but we certainly have enough of them. Life can often feel like this iconic photo from 1936 depression era. This woman's name was Florence Owens Thompson and she was only 32 years old when the photo was taken, even though she looks much older than that. What was she thinking? What emotions were weighing on her at that moment? Despair? Hopelessness? We

may not be poverty stricken as she was, but I think we can all identify with the pain written all over her face.



Interestingly, the second half of Florence's life was fairly prosperous and happy. She lived to be 80 years old and is pictured here with her three daughters in 1979. So how do we work our way through the daily groans while we wait for the redemption of our bodies? The next section of Romans eight teaches us how the Holy Spirit not only seals our future with a promise but also daily helps us in our weaknesses. And that help is available to more than blundering pastors who make false prophecies. ;-)

24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. 26 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. 27 And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

1. The comfort of a certain hope.

Obviously, verse 24 picks up in the middle of a thought. *For in this hope we were saved.* The natural question is, what hope? To what is Paul referring? He is referring back to verse 22 and 23. *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.* We hope for the redemption of our bodies. The word hope is misused about as much as the word love. We love our children and we love ice cream, but the two loves are not at all equivalent. We hope the Brewers or the red Sox will win and we hope to receive resurrected bodies one day, but those two hopes are not at all the same, are they?

When we hope for a baseball team to win, all we are doing is wishing something to happen. We want them to win and statistics and talent may be on our side to achieve a victory, but our hope is really nothing more than yearning, a hankering, a longing for some future event to take place. But it is not a certain hope.

But can hope be certain? We read here that hope *that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?* Paul is so right. I can't pull a dollar bill out of my pocket and say, "Boy, I hope I have a dollar in my pocket so I can buy one of those delicious rib sandwiches at Kwik Trip." (I really hope that is not your hope!) I can't drive home from Milwaukee after the Brewers beat the Cardinals and declare my hope that the Brewers will win today. That is not hope either. That is finished action. That's a done deal. Game over. Literally.

But hope is not seen. For who hopes for what he sees? Paul said something very similar in 2 Corinthians. *For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal* (17-18). Here's an important piece to the puzzle of hope. Hope is waiting for eternal things. Everything we can see and hold and taste and feel this day will be gone tomorrow. God has created everything in this life good and to be used for good but it was not meant to last.

But our resurrected bodies will be eternal. They will never wear out. They will never get cancer. They will never cause you to groan. It's hard to wrap our puny brains around something eternal, isn't it? You've heard the illustration about the eagle and the steel ball, right? I think I have used it before. Picture a ten foot steel ball hanging by a cable. Once every 1000 years an eagle flies past the enormous steel ball and brushes the very tip of her feathers along the edge of the steel. By the time that ten foot steel ball is worn down to the size of a bb, eternity will have just begun. I like that one, but it doesn't quite grab it for me. If you have a better analogy for eternity, please let me know after the service. But describing eternity is kind of like describing the Trinity. All analogies fall short of the real thing.

Then of course there is the classic text in Hebrews about faith and hope. *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not see* (Hebrews 11:1). Did you catch that? The assurance of things hoped for. There's the certainty of our hope. Hope is not seen but it is certain, and in that is tremendous comfort. But we still have to wait for it, as Paul said in verse 25. *But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

Patience. This is not a virtue that most of us possess in large amounts. But think about why we get impatient. We get impatient because we think what we are waiting for may or may not come to pass. Let's say you are unemployed and actively looking for a job. Some well meaning person will tell you to just be patient. Something will come along eventually. That may be true. You will find some kind of job eventually, but there really are no guarantees. If you are single and patiently waiting for a mate, there are no guarantees that you will get married some day. If you have a health problem and are patiently waiting for healing, there are no guarantees you will get better. I am not suggesting that we have a right to be impatient and grumble about these things but I am saying there is a difference between being patient for something that may not happen versus being patient for something that absolutely will happen. Do you see the difference?

Waiting patiently for something that WILL happen is so very different. This is why James instructs as the way he does.

As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful (James 5:10-11).

And the author of Hebrews.

11 And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. (Hebrews 6:11-12)

So we are commanded to be like the prophets who remained steadfast until the end. We are commanded to be like Abraham--that's the context of Hebrews 11--to be patient until you inherit the promises. So while we groan and await the redemption of our bodies, we are to have full assurance of hope until the end. Sounds easy to do, right? Just have hope. Do it. Go on, be patient. What are you waiting for?

The fact is, it's not easy to be patient while we groan. It's easy to be patient when life is cruising along because we don't feel like we are actually waiting for anything. We have what we need at the moment and life is good. But being patient while we groan--that's tough. Can I take it a step further and say it's impossible? So why would God ask us to do something that's impossible? Because we are not the ones who do the work.

Here's what we need for this to happen. First, we have to believe that we will receive the redemption of our bodies. We have to believe that at the second coming of Christ we will be resurrected into an immortal body and live with Christ for all eternity.

You have probably heard of the book, *Heaven is for Real*. It is the best selling Christian book in this decade selling 8 million copies. It is currently sitting in the number one position on the New York Times best seller list for non-fiction paperbacks. The movie has made 84 million dollars--so far. It describes what happened to Colton Burpo when he allegedly died when he was three years old. He describes things like Jesus riding on a rainbow colored horse. The back cover makes an audacious statement. "*Heaven Is for Real* will forever change the way you think of eternity, offering the chance to see, and believe, like a child."

Blogger and pastor Tim Challies concluded his review of the book this way. "So reject this book. Do not read it. Do not believe it. And do not feel guilty doing so."¹ I am not one to censor books. If I told you not to read this book, some of you would do so just to spite me. Here's a cold hard fact. Everything in the book is outside of the Bible. We can't know if one single thing that Colton describes is true. If this book changes the way you think of eternity, then we have a problem. If you are going to believe this book but not believe the Bible, then we have a huge problem.

Just believe what the Bible says. You and I are groaning until we receive the redemption of our bodies. It's hard to be patient. As I said before, it's impossible to do so, but this is why the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness.

2. The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness.

26 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. 27 And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

What exactly is happening with these Holy Spirit groans? Countless people claim that groanings too deep for words is what happens when we speak in tongues. Here's what one author wrote.

"If that phrase was to be understood in light of the experience of the Acts of the Apostles, it meant praying in tongues. Paul envisioned Christians participating with the Holy Spirit by praying the will of God with groanings too deep for regular words. The reality of the Holy Spirit interceding through the spirits of believers with prayers in tongues was in every way supernatural. This was the praying in tongues that Paul fully experienced in his own life and fully expected to constantly occur throughout the life of all the churches."²

I could take five minutes and show you why this is just plain non-sense but let me say this much. If you read the quote carefully you will see that nowhere does he prove his point that these groanings are speaking in tongues. He assumes this is true then makes statements based on the fact that it is true without ever giving one piece of Biblical evidence.

The word for groan is the exact same word for groan in the prior verses where the creation groans and believers groan. The creation groans and believers groan, but the groanings of the Holy Spirit while completely different, are most definitely related. We groan because we suffer while we wait. The Spirit is not suffering as we are, but in a sense, he is suffering on our behalf.

First, let's define our problem. We have a weakness and we are told exactly what that is. Verse 26 says that *we do not know what to pray for as we ought*. Verse 28 states that *the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God*. So here's the problem. We suffer and groan but in our suffering, we do not know how to pray as we ought. We do not know how to pray "according to the will of God."

Now in one sense, we do know how to pray according to the will of God for the Bible reveals his will to us in the Scriptures. We know that we are to pray for the gospel to spread to every tribe, nation, people and language. We are to pray that we come to an ever deeper knowledge of the love of Christ. We are to pray that we would win the daily battle against sin. There are all kinds of prayers that we know how to pray for. Usually, our problem is that we simply do not pray at all.

So we do know how to pray according to the will of God, but not always. In the midst of our groanings, there are things that we do not know. For example, when someone has cancer, do we pray for them to be healed or do we simply pray, "Lord, your will be done"? Yes. We should pray for both. All of our prayers should be submitted to the will of God. We should pray for healing. That is not a selfish prayer. James says that we "have not because we ask not," so ask. Ask boldly and confidently for such things.

So we pray and ask but there is something supernatural and beautiful happening as we pray--and sometimes when we don't pray. Have you ever been so exhausted that you don't know what to pray for? Have you ever been so discouraged that you feel like you can't even utter a prayer at all? Here is where the Holy Spirit does his work for us and in us.

The chief thing that happens here is that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. We need to understand what this word means. Intercessions means that someone has to go to bat for you because you can't accomplish what you need on your own. If a man is on death row and slated to be executed tomorrow, only the governor of that state can intercede on behalf of the convicted criminal and stay the execution. You can't save the man. The courts can't save the man. Your senator cannot save the man. Only the governor can save him.

This is intercession. Intercession is doing something for someone that they cannot do for themselves. If you could do the things that the Holy Spirit does for you in his intercessory work, then there would be no need for the Holy Spirit to do any of this for us. He does what we cannot do for ourselves.

He does this--we are told here--by searching our hearts. The Holy Spirit is called "he who searches our hearts." Do you know your own heart? We do to some extent, but you should know that we are all deceived at some times and at some level. Does your spouse know your heart? Even if your husband or wife truly is your best friend in all the world, even they do not know your heart. If you can't know your own heart, how can another human being know your heart? But the Holy Spirit is not human. He is the third person in the triune, divine Godhead. He knows all things. All things. He searches our hearts and turns them into "groanings too deep for words." This phrase literally means inexpressible words. Words that cannot be expressed by us.

The Holy Spirit also searches our hearts because God's ways are unsearchable. *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!* (Romans 11:33) He searches our hearts and intercedes for us because his ways are unsearchable. Are you starting to see how this works? The Holy Spirit knows our hearts and he knows the mind of God perfectly--because he is God. So he is the ideal intercessor.

But he is not the only one interceding on our behalf. Jesus also prays for us. Later in this same chapter we read: *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). And this truth from Hebrews. *Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them* (Hebrews 7:25).

Here is how theologian Louis Berkhof described this wonderful truth.

It is a consoling thought that Christ is praying for us, even when we are negligent in our prayer life; that He is presenting to the Father those spiritual needs which were not present to our minds and which we often neglect to include in our prayers; and that He prays for our protection against the dangers of which we are not even conscious, and against the enemies which threaten us, though we do not notice it. He is praying that our faith may not cease, and that we may come out victoriously in the end.³

So this intercessory work is happening all of the time. We can't pray. We don't know what to pray. We don't have the strength to pray. The Holy Spirit and the Lord Jesus do for us what we could never do for ourselves. That's intercession.

Let me give you an illustration of his this works from the life of Brother Yun from his story in *The Heavenly Man*. This is one of my favorite books of all time. Certainly if you had to choose between reading *The Heavenly Man* or *Heaven is for Real*, there is no real choice between the two.

Brother Yun was in and out of Chinese prisons for much of his life. He endured the most awful bouts of torture and persecution imaginable. He became one of five primary leaders of the house church in China who collectively represented 50 million believers all throughout the nation. After about three decades of this kind of ministry in China, the Lord allowed him to escape China and move to Germany. However, when he tried to visit Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), he was arrested and thrown into one of their miserable prisons. Listen to a letter he wrote to his family while languishing in the Burmese prison. "Living conditions here are even worse than in Chinese prisons but I can sing and pray to my Lord freely every day."⁴

Just how bad were the living conditions? Yun writes, "I was also infected with the terrible disease at this time, and was unable to digest any solid food for a month. Along with the other prisoners, all I could do is lie down and scratch all day. Parasites were rampant in my body. Sometimes I would look down at my stomach and actually see a worm moving under the surface of my skin. Occasionally, its tiny tail could be seen sticking out through the pores of my skin."⁵

Without bringing any charges against him, one judge handed him a seven year prison sentence. No explanation. No formal charges, just a wave of the hand and seven years of hellish treatment. So what brother Yun needed was intercession. He had millions of believers from around the world praying for him--what we normally call intercession. Praying intercessory prayers for him. He had Christian friends in Myanmar who were interceding for him, not just through prayer, but through the courts as well. He also had the German government interceding for him. He had been granted asylum in Germany so they were interceding on his behalf, trying to convince the government of Myanmar that he was an official German resident and should be released from prison.

So there was multiple levels of intercession and multiple types of intercession going on month after month. How do you pray for such a person? Well of course you pray for his release. That's what his wife and two children earnestly prayed for and what tens of millions of believers prayed for. You pray that brother Yun would be sustained and kept alive as he suffered. You prayed that his time in prison would bear spiritual fruit, that many would come to know Christ as Savior, as they always did when brother Yun was locked up.

But did any of these millions of believers know the will of God? Did they really know how to pray as they ought to pray? Were they praying according to the will of God. Were they able to search the heart of brother Yun? Did any of them know the mind of the Spirit? No. They were all interceding for him, as they should, but The Intercessor stitched it all together like an divine artist. he took the groanings of Yun and himself offered groanings too deep for words. Groanings

that no one on planet earth would ever fully understand. The Spirit took the cries of his son Isaac and his daughter Yilin, who both grew up without their father as he was always gone from them, either preaching the gospel or locked up in a Chinese prison. The Spirit took the cries of his children and turned them into groanings too deep for words. The Spirit interceded for all of them according to the perfect will of God.

Their faith grew weak. They did grow tired of praying. His wife said, "As the weeks wore on into months, with still no sign of my husband's release, my faith weakened and I grew more and more frustrated."⁶ Have you ever been there? Has your faith grown weak over your own suffering or the suffering of another? Have you become frustrated when the Lord did not seem to be answering your prayers? We need to understand that when these times happen--and hear me, this is no accidental prophecy--these times will happen. Maybe not this month or this year, but they will happen. When they do happen, God is at work all the time. He is not just listening to your prayers, he is actually praying for you. Your faith is weak. You don't know what to pray, how to pray, or hardly even why to pray anymore. The Holy Spirit is interceding for you. Christ Jesus is interceding for you. They are doing what you and I could never do.

Brother Yun did not spend seven years in that Burmese prison, but he did spend seven months and seven days. Listen to what he wrote about his experience. "When I look back, I clearly see that my time in prison in Myanmar really was a mission trip from the Lord. It was no accident that God had sent me into that dark place. There were so many desperate souls who needed to know Jesus."⁷

God knew. And God knows. He is searching your heart at this very moment. He knows your heart and he knows his will and he will bring these two together as he sees fit.

Rich Maurer
May 4, 2014

¹ <http://www.challies.com/book-reviews/heaven-is-for-real>

² Richard Hogue, *Tongues: A Theological History of Christian Glossolalia*, Tate Publishing, © 2010, pp. 100-101.

³ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* p. 403.

⁴ *The Heavenly Man*, Brother Yun and Paul Hattaway, Monarch Books: London, © 2003, p. 331.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 332.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 341.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 333.