

# The Gospel: Indwelt by the Spirit's Enabling Presence

## Romans 8:1-39

*Pastor Russ Kennedy*

From Romans 1 through Romans 7, the Holy Spirit is mentioned only twice. Here in Romans 8, He is referred to twenty two times! While we have a decisive deliverance from sin's power through the cross of Christ in Romans 6 and a frustrating futility from sin working in us in Romans 7, we have a freeing liberation through the work of the Spirit as we walk in the Spirit in Romans 8.

"There is no reason why those who are in Christ Jesus should go on doing penal servitude as though they had never been pardoned and liberated from the prison house of sin." (F.F. Bruce) Romans 8 shows us how we live in the freedom and power of God's Spirit while yet groaning and suffering. While we walk in the Spirit, we do so in the world until the Lord comes.

### **The Ministry of God's Spirit**

**(v.1-17)**

We now have a present indwelling that enables godly living. "The fundamental contrast in the whole passage is between the inability and weakness on the one hand of the law to renew and reorder life so long as sin is in control, and the effectual life-giving power of God's own presence in the Spirit on the other. The outcome is to open the way for the fulfillment of God's holy and just commandment."<sup>2</sup>

Godly living begins with the truth that there is no condemnation for us (v.1) and ends with our personal testimony that there is no one to condemn us (v.34).

### **To Change us by God's Righteousness**

**(v.1-8)**

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. <sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. <sup>5</sup> For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. <sup>8</sup> Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

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<sup>2</sup>James Luther Mays, *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1996, c1988).

### **God's Spirit changes us because of *Spiritual Realities* (v.1-4).**

We who are in Christ are not condemned. Why? The law of the Spirit of life set us free from the law of sin and death. What does he mean by this? He explains it in the next verse.

**The law of sin and death is this:** weakened by the flesh, the Law could not bring nor produce righteousness with the consequence that we are controlled by sin and condemned to death.

**The law of the Spirit of life is this:** God sent Jesus in a human body into the realm of the flesh to condemn sin and complete the Law for us.

“As believers ‘in Christ’, we are free from condemnation because Jesus Christ has completely fulfilled the law on our behalf. He became what we are – weak, human and subject to sin’s power – that we might become what he is – righteous and holy.” (D.A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary*).

### **God's Spirit changes us through *Spiritual Practice* (v.5-8).**

What God has done in Christ He makes true in us. Those who have been set free from sin’s domination to the Spirit’s control are those who do walk according to the spirit. They are characterized by how they live. They live the way they do because of their mindset.

Through these contrasts Paul explains why it is that the Spirit, and not the flesh, brings life. People ‘in the flesh’ – that is, those who live in the ‘old regime’ where sin and death reign – have mind-sets dominated by ungodly impulses (v.5); they cannot *submit to God's law* (v.7) or *please God* (v.8) but are under sentence of death (v.6). On the other hand, Christians, ‘in the Spirit’, who have been transferred into the new regime where grace and righteousness reign and who have therefore been given a new mind-set focused on the Spirit, enjoy *life and peace* (v.6).” (Carson, *NBC*).

Here is the primary function of the Spirit in practical terms of changing us: He gives us a new mindset that transforms us. Notice, those who mind the flesh, are live according to the flesh, are hostile to God, do not and cannot submit to God’s law, do not please God and all this is death, God’s judgment.

### **To Indwell us as God's Life**

**(v.9-13)**

<sup>9</sup>You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. <sup>10</sup>But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup>If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

<sup>12</sup>So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. <sup>13</sup>For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

If the Spirit is in us, then we are in the Spirit and not in the flesh. We will be characterized by life, the life of Christ. The indwelling of the Spirit imparts the character of Christ so that

we will live the righteousness of Christ. Further, this life is God's gift by the Spirit as opposed to sin's wages of death and judgment.

In these verses, the words life and death are meant to convey blessing and judgment. The body is dead, not in that it is inanimate, but that it is corrupted and condemned; it is mortal. But we have God's approval and right standing before Him characterized by the word, *life*. So, the present possession of spiritual life in dying and mortal bodies anticipates the possession of spiritual life in a living and glorified body at the resurrection.

Notice that Christ is in us *by the Spirit*. The second person of the Godhead sits on the right hand of God in heaven. The Spirit indwells us in such a way that it is Christ in us. While maintaining the uniqueness of each person, Paul underscores the unity of the Godhead. The Father sent the Son to do what those who were in the Spirit needed (v.3-4). And now, the Spirit is in us as an extension of the Son (v.9-12).

Here we are called by faithfulness to the Scriptures to hold in tension two clear truths: that the indwelling of the Spirit infallibly secures eternal life, and that a lifestyle empowered by and patterned after God's Spirit is necessary to inherit eternal life. The Spirit is given to empower our activity in righteousness. (Carson, *NBC*).

So we do not owe the flesh anything. Sin has its wages, its cost. Sin tries to enslave us as a means of debt. But it is operating in the sphere of death. We are now in life with life in us. Sin no longer owns us. Sin no longer contractually holds us. So we put to death what has already died and live in the life we already have. This is how the New Testament talks about the Christian life.

### **To Assure us as God's Sons**

**(v.14-17)**

Since this is so, we have a new obligation and a new identification.

<sup>14</sup>For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. <sup>15</sup>For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" <sup>16</sup>The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup>and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

We are obligated in how we live. We are not to live according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. Why? Because a ministry of the Spirit is to assure us that we are God's sons. The *being led by the Spirit* is not in terms of making personal decisions, but rather of being under the Spirit's control. Those whom the Spirit controls, He helps to recognize their sonship, and bears witness in them that they are God's sons. He therefore functions as the Spirit who makes our sonship real to us. Adoption here is not the idea of being brought into the family, but that of being recognized as sons. So Jesus is publicly acknowledged as God's true Son and He responds with these words of intimacy, *Abba Father*. *And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."* (Mk. 14:36, ESV). This term also points to God's people who are His sons and daughters, graciously chosen by Him according to His good purposes. (See Rom. 8:23; 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5).<sup>1</sup>

Our adoption into God's family, however amazing and comforting, is not the end of the story. For to be children is also to be *heirs*: to be still waiting for the full bestowment of all the rights and privileges conferred on us as God's children (v.17). As *the* Son of God had to

suffer before entering into his glory (1 Pet. 1:11), so we sons of God by adoption must also suffer 'with him' before sharing in his glory. Because we are joined to Christ, the servant of the Lord 'despised and rejected by men' (Is. 53:3), we can expect the path to our glorious inheritance to be strewn with difficulties and dangers. (Carson, *NBC*)

So, verse 17 is a transition from 1-16 to 18-30. We have this amazing privilege and glorious reality of being God's sons, and thus His heirs. Yet, we must suffer now. If we suffer now, we will be glorified later.

## The Difficulty of God's Children

(v.18-30)

We are now experiencing present suffering while longing for a future glory. What we have here is groaning and glory. There is groaning and glory for creation, in the Christian, by the Spirit for our good and God's glory.

<sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

You must never minimize the fact or the severity of suffering for the Christian in this age. The key words here for you are *wait eagerly* (v.19, 23, 25) and *hope* (v.20, 24-25). Your evaluation of the present sufferings in the light of the future glory is shaped by:

### Its Example in the Creation

(v.18-22)

<sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

The creation is now subject to the curse because of the fallenness of man. Deliverance from the curse awaits the time when the children of God will receive their glorified bodies. So, creation groans, while standing on tiptoe anxiously anticipating the day of glory for God's people. The world we live in now is subjected by God to the futility of fallenness. And it is awaiting the day when it will enter into the glory of radical transformation of the material universe when all will be made new.

### Its Experience in Ourselves

(v.23-25)

We share in creation's groaning and hope.

<sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

We are groaning now. We have the *first fruits* of the Spirit – an assurance of our adoption – but we are awaiting the fulfillment of the Spirit – our eventual adoption as sons. The fulfillment of being placed as God's sons is in the reception of a glorified body. But we don't have that yet. Here it is: we groan waiting for glory. We are assured and adopted, but not yet.

Most errors concerning the victorious or the victimized Christian life flow from not understanding verses 23-25. You are delivered, but not yet. You are adopted, but not yet. You have the Spirit, but not fully. You groan now in suffering and struggling because there is a splendor of glory to come.

### **Its Expression by the Spirit**

**(v.26-27)**

How do we have hope then in the midst of this present groaning? Through the intercessory work of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. The weakness here is that we are living in the midst of fallenness and sinfulness. Often we are just struggling. We don't even know what to pray. But the Spirit Himself, who knows the mind of God, the will of God and the purposes of God, prays in us and for us. Like creation like us, the Spirit is groaning a too deep for words intercession. He is not here alluding to some inarticulate or ecstatic speech that the Spirit produces in us. Rather, the Spirit groans deeply because of our own sufferings and sins as well. So the Spirit's work in us to align our own hearts with the trajectory of God's will.

What strikes me here is how Paul is framing a theology of prayer here for us: Briefly, here are its key points.

Prayer is always in the context of fallenness and futility. It is shaped by our needs, our own groaning as sons and heirs.

Our own weakness and ignorance is assumed. We do not know what to pray for. This stands in stark contrast to our self-confident and long narrated requests for prayer.

The Spirit prays for us according to God's will. His praying is always aligned with God's purposes in Romans 8:28-30.

### **Its Expectation due to God**

**(v.28-30)**

Here is one of the most precious and hope giving texts in the New Testament.

<sup>28</sup> And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

In the midst of groaning, in the midst of struggling with sin while walking in the Spirit, we know that God is at work in all our situations to transform and conform us into likeness with Christ. When we say that God is at work for our good and His glory, we had better understand this in terms of God being at work to change us. It is not merely *for our good*, but that we might be different. When someone says, "I cannot see the good in this," that is a misunderstanding of this text. The good that God is always working toward is your be-

coming like Christ. So to not see the good in it is to not see how God is at work to change you.

Why is this so? On what is this grounded? It is grounded in the personal and providential sovereignty of God. Those whom God loved and chose (foreknew) He has determined beforehand that they will be like Christ. Then He moves in time and in those people's lives to make it so: He calls them, He justifies them and He glorifies them. These are not potential outcomes, but assured future realities. So we lean towards the glory to come in the present experience of groaning now because God is at work to mold us to be like Christ.

What are we to learn from this? How does this fuel hope and shape affections? God has a glorious purpose for His people and creation at large. But that purpose unfolds through the struggle with fallenness. But God is at work to for our good to display His glory. So, we are free from the power of sin, but not completely until that day. So, there is groaning now until the glory later.

### **The Surety of God's Love**

**(v.31-39)**

We are now inseparable from God's love while experiencing no condemnation and becoming more than conquerors. This is how we respond to all these truths in Romans 5-8.

#### **In our Answers**

**(v.31-36)**

We are gloriously sure of God's love because there is no condemnation.

<sup>31</sup> What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? <sup>33</sup> Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

SINCE GOD is for us, who can be against us? God's enemies, the fallen world, our sins, Satan – yes. But because God is for us, none of these is against *successfully*.

SINCE GOD graciously gave us His Son, will He not give us all things? Absolutely. The gift of God's Son not only obtained all God intends for us, but it also makes it sure. As Stott puts it, "The cross is the guarantee of continuing, unfailing generosity of God." (Stott, p. 255)

SINCE GOD has justified us, who can charge us? No one. Our right standing before God means there is no lesser court to charge us.

SINCE CHRIST has died and risen and intercedes, who can condemn us? No one. Jesus stands to answer any and all accusations with His perfect and completed sacrificial work.

SINCE ALL THIS IS SO, what persons or circumstances can separate us from God's love? None. Yet the brutal reality is that like Christ, our sacrificial lamb, we are set for suffering as well.

I can only conclude that we will have an ever greater experience of the surety and reality of God's love *in the midst of all the groaning circumstances outlined here.*

### **In our Affirmations**

**(v.37-39)**

We are gloriously sure of God's love because we more than conquer.

<sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In all these adversities (cf. "all things" in Rom. 8:28 and "all things" in v. 32 with *all these things* in v. 37), rather than being separated from Christ's love, believers are more than conquerors (pres. Tense), "keep on being conquerors to a greater degree" or "keep on winning a glorious victory") through Him who loved us. Jesus Christ and His love for believers enable them to triumph. Consider 2 Corinthians 2:14; *But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.*

Here is our conviction and our confidence. As Walvord points out: (*here to end of paragraph*) Paul's list of 10 items begins with death, where the list of 7 items in verse 35 ended. These elements in God's universe include the extremes of existence: (1) **death** and (2) **life** (in either death or life, believers are in God's presence); the extremes of created spiritual armies: (3) **angels** and (4) **demons** (angels would not and demons could not undo God's relationship with His redeemed ones); the extremes in time: (5) **the present** and (6) **the future** (nothing known now, e.g., the hardships listed in Rom. 8:35, or in the unknown time to come); spiritual enemies: (7) **powers** (perhaps Satan and his demons; or possibly human governments); the extremes in space: (8) **height** and (9) **depth** (nothing overhead or underneath can suddenly come swooping down or up to sever believers from God's love); and (10) everything in the entire created realm. Absolutely nothing in His **Creation** can thwart His purpose for believers **in Christ**. What a climactic way to affirm the certainty of believers' salvation!<sup>3</sup>

So, we are more than conquerors – over sin, law and self. We have an abiding confidence in God's love for us. Stott wrote, "We need these assurances today...when insecurity is written across all human experience. Christian people are not guaranteed immunity to temptation, tribulation or tragedy, but we are promised victory over them. God's pledge is not that suffering will never afflict us, but that it will never sever us from His love." (Stott, p. 259).

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<sup>3</sup>John F. Walvoord, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985).

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## Reflect and Respond

More than conquerors:

- In the midst of groaning...
- Headed for glory...
- Inseparable from God's great love for us.

Let me no more my comfort draw  
From my frail hold of thee;  
In this alone rejoice with awe –  
Thy mighty grasp of me.

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<sup>1</sup> One other note, in contrast to Lloyd-Jones, this work of the Spirit to highlight our being placed as sons and witnessing in us our sonship so that we have an assurance of our sonship *is the universal experience of all true sons*. Yes, there may be a time of special awareness and assurance, but this text is pointing us to a ministry of the Spirit to all those who are God's children.