

Life in the Spirit

Romans 8:5-27

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Last week we saw how God in grace delivers us from sin. God does what the law could not do. God sends his Son to set us free. God gives us his Holy Spirit to make real in our lives the work that Jesus did for us. The Holy Spirit sets us free in Christ. And the Holy Spirit makes real in our lives what Jesus did on the cross—condemning sin and removing our condemnation. God gives us new life. We can describe this new life as “life in the Spirit.”

In Romans 8:5-27, we see that the Holy Spirit *overcomes our flesh* (vv. 5-13), *witnesses to our adoption as God’s children* (vv. 14-17), *guarantees our inheritance* (vv. 18-25) and *helps us in our weakness* (vv. 26-27) (John Stott, *Men Made New* 84). Let’s spend some time exploring each of these activities of God’s Spirit.

But first, maybe a reminder of who the Holy Spirit is would be helpful. The Holy Spirit is not just some higher level of human consciousness. The Holy Spirit is not some impersonal energy force. The Holy Spirit is the very Spirit of God who was present at the beginning of creation, who gives life and breath to all that live, who anointed and empowered leaders of God’s people, who spoke through the prophets, who created the miracle of Jesus’ conception in the Virgin Mary. The Holy Spirit anointed Jesus in his ministry. The Holy Spirit came upon and filled the followers of Jesus at Pentecost, creating the Church. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the risen Lord living in each of Jesus’ followers and in the Body of Christ, the Church. This is the Spirit Paul writes about in whom we have life, through whom we walk in Christ.

We see first that in our life in Christ, ***the Holy Spirit overcomes the flesh***. Remember that Paul normally uses “flesh” to speak of our whole human nature as it has been invaded, weakened, and corrupted by sin. It’s a reminder of how humans give in to sin. To live according to the flesh is to be self-centered instead of God-centered. Paul is not talking about a conflict of two natures within us. Instead, “flesh” and “Spirit” are two realms

or spheres of power in which we can live. And we have to choose one or the other.

Paul is not saying that our physical nature is evil. God created our bodies and the world we live in. God created us to be whole and united in spirit, mind, and body. However, sin fragments and divides us from ourselves as well as from God and each other. "The flesh" as Paul speaks of it, is a power, an influence that controls the entire person who yields to it.

But the Holy Spirit is also One who controls the entire person who yields to God. The flesh and the Holy Spirit resist each other and seek to overcome each other. We choose which to cooperate with, so our decision is very important.

Maybe a better way of explaining all this is in Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*:

Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust God's action in them find that God's Spirit is in them—living and breathing God! Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. ...So don't you see that we don't owe this old do-it-yourself life one red cent? ...The best thing to do is give it a decent burial and get on with your new life. God's Spirit beckons. There are things to do and places to go!

As we live according to the Spirit, we also find that ***the Holy Spirit witnesses to our adoption as God's children***. "All who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God." When God led his children, Israel, in the wilderness, God led them forward, not back to slavery. We have received the Spirit of God who makes us children of God. Receiving the Holy Spirit does not lead us back to slavery and fear, but on to liberty and life.

We are God's children through faith in Jesus Christ. God has adopted us, chosen us, and made us his own. Our relationship with God is like Jesus' relationship with God. Jesus seems to have been the first to address God simply, directly, and intimately as "Father." And Jesus apparently used the

word "Abba" in all his prayers. "Abba" means "Papa" or "Daddy." Jesus invites his followers to share in this kind of intimacy with God. The Holy Spirit within us enables us to call God "Abba." Do you know God that well? Are you able to speak to God with that kind of closeness?

The Holy Spirit lets us know that we are God's children through our being able to call God "Abba/Father" in prayer. The Spirit also touches us in a direct way, letting us know that we are God's children. What an amazing thing! What does it mean to you to know that you are a child of the Lord of the Universe?

Max Lucado writes, "Being a parent is better than a theology course." He relates some experiences with his children. His five year old was teased on the bus and he wanted to go after the fathers of the bullies. Later, she scraped her knee and he comforted her. His three-year-old woke up one night and all the lights were out because of a power failure. She cried out for her parents, who of course went to her and assured her.

Moments of comfort from a parent. As a father, I can tell you they are the sweetest moments in my day. They come naturally. They come willingly. They come joyfully.

If all that is true, if I know that one of the privileges of fatherhood is to comfort a child, then why am I so reluctant to let my heavenly Father comfort me?

Why do I think he wouldn't want to hear about my problems?

Why do I think he is too busy for me?

Why do I think he's tired of hearing the same old stuff?

Why do I think he groans when he sees me coming?

Why do I think he consults his list when I ask for forgiveness and asks, "Don't you think you're going to the well a few too many times on this one?"

Why do I think I have to speak a holy language around him that I don't speak with anyone else?

Why do I think he won't do in a heartbeat to the Father of Lies what I thought about doing to the fathers of those bullies on the bus?

Do I think he was just being poetic when he asked me if the birds of the air and the grass of the field have a worry? And if they don't, why do I think I will?

Why do I not take him seriously when he questions, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

Why don't I let my Father do for me what I am more than willing to do for my own children?

... Being a father is teaching me that when I am criticized, injured, or afraid, there is a Father who is ready to comfort me. There is a Father who will hold me until I'm better, help me until I can live with the hurt, and who won't go to sleep when I'm afraid of waking up and seeing the dark. (*The Applause of Heaven* 62-64)

Paul says if we are God's children, we are also God's heirs. We are co-heirs with Christ. We share in Jesus' inheritance. What is that inheritance? Glory, the glory of God, the glory God intended for humans when we were first created. "If indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

Even when we suffer—and we do suffer, Paul doesn't deny that. Even though all creation groans as it waits to see God's children come into their own (Phillips) and so creation will be delivered from its bondage. Even though there's a big gap between where we are and where we want to be, we have hope. The glory to be revealed in us is so much greater than our present sufferings, Paul says they're not even worth comparing. Our present sufferings, the natural world's sufferings, are like labor pains. They signal the birth of new life and they'll be forgotten in the joy of that glory.

But Christian hope is not just, "Hang on until we get to heaven." We begin to experience something of God's glory now. ***The Holy Spirit guarantees our inheritance.*** We have "the firstfruits of the Spirit." In the Old Testament, the firstfruits was the first part of the harvest that was given to God. The first part was a sign of the complete harvest yet to come. The Holy Spirit is the first part of God's glory. Our present experience of the

Spirit is the guarantee of more to come. The very best we experience of God here is just a foretaste of what God has in store for us. Our present experience of God's Spirit guarantees our future resurrection in Christ and the future renewal of all creation.

God's Spirit infiltrates our present experience in this fallen world. *The Spirit creates hope between suffering and glory*. This is not a hope based on earthly resources and circumstances. This hope of the Spirit is a gift of God (James Edwards, *Romans* New International Biblical Commentary).

Max Lucado again describes beautifully what we look forward to. He tells about coming home on an airplane after being away for a week. He eagerly anticipates getting off the plane, heading up the ramp and hearing two little girls shriek, "Daddy!" He then sees them jumping up and down and even applauding him. He sees his wife holding their sleepy baby. Faces of home.

You'll be home soon, too. You may not have noticed it, but you are closer to home than ever before. Each moment is a step taken. Each breath is a page turned. Each day is a mile marked, a mountain climbed. You are closer to home than you've ever been.

Before you know it, your arrival time will come; you'll ascend the ramp and enter the City. You'll see faces that are waiting for you. You'll hear your name spoken by those who love you. And, maybe, just maybe—in the back, behind the crowds—the One who would rather die than live without you will remove his pierced hands from his heavenly robe and ... applaud. (189-90)

Until that time, the Holy Spirit shares with us something of the life to come. ***The Spirit helps us in our weakness***. When we don't know how to pray or what we ought to pray for according to God's will, the Holy Spirit personally makes appeal for us. The Spirit translates our feeble cries and groans into genuine prayer.

"The Holy Spirit of God, the third member of the Trinity, himself accompanies us in our prayers. ...we do not have to have everything perfect when we pray. The Spirit reshapes, refines and reinterprets our feeble, ego-

driven prayers. We can rest in this work of the Spirit on our behalf" (Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* 98-99).

The Spirit gets with us and assists us in our weakness. Our weaknesses, our needs, are God's opportunities. God loves to display his power in human weakness.

And we have weaknesses, don't we? In this present age, we are frail, we make mistakes, we may use poor judgment, we may struggle with any number of emotional or relational issues. How does weakness show up in your life? Maybe if we could admit our own weakness, we could learn to be more patient with the weakness of others.

Some of us talk before we think. What if the Holy Spirit gave us patience and taught us to think before we speak? Some of us overthink and never say what needs to be said. What if the Holy Spirit gave us boldness and taught us how to speak the right word at the right time? Some of us have short tempers. What if the Holy Spirit gave us the gift of a long temper? Maybe we just don't know what to do or which way to go. Can we trust the Holy Spirit to lead the children of God, to go before us like the pillar of cloud and fire that led Israel in the wilderness? Even better, the Holy Spirit is not an external guide, but dwells within us, guiding and motivating and empowering us from within.

In all our struggles, in all our suffering, in all that we endure as we live in the Spirit while still in this world, God is there—with us, in us, giving us life and peace and strength through the Holy Spirit.

There's a scene in *Pilgrim's Progress* where Pilgrim sees a fire (the love and power of God in the soul). The devil is trying to put out the fire. But it keeps burning. On the other side of the wall, Pilgrim sees Christ continually feeding the flame with oil, the anointing Holy Spirit (*The Christian Classics*, 700 Club Edition 24-25).

Where do you need the Holy Spirit's help today? Ask for that help. In one of Frederick Buechner's novels, he has a character pray, "Help me whatever way thou canst, dear Christ and Lord" (*Listening to Your Life* 64). I like that. We ask God, "Help us however you can. In whatever way you can." And God can help in ways we can't imagine. Let's be open to all the ways God's Spirit is at work.