

“ENTER: THE SPIRIT”

Studies in Romans – 11

Romans 8:1-17 (p. 1096)

We ended our study last time with this question: Given the fact that being a Christian is evidently a lifelong battle; and that, even if I wanted to, I couldn't escape that battle and still remain a Christian; how, then, do I stay in the fight until it's won? Where does the staying power come from? That's the question. The marvelous answer begins to unfold now in chapter 8 as Paul lays out his doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

The great affirmation of Easter is that, in Jesus Christ, God has not only conquered sin and death. He has made that same power over sin and death available to us through his indwelling Spirit. Paul puts the matter this way in verse 2: *“Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.”* What Paul calls the “law of the Spirit” isn't a set of rules. It's not like the “Law of God” (the Ten Commandments). The law of the Spirit is an operating principle – like the law of gravity. And Paul tells us here that this operating principle of the Spirit can overpower the operating principle of sin in our lives.

The Commandments couldn't do that. All they could do is tell us what we should and shouldn't do. They might appeal to our sense of right and wrong; they might even make us want to be good. But the weakness of the Commandments is that, while they may give us the desire to be good, they can't give us the power to be good.

But God loves us too much to leave us powerless. And so, it was when we were powerless to save ourselves that God acted on our behalf in Jesus Christ. That's what Paul says in verse 3. *“For what the Law was powerless to do... God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man... in order that the righteous requirements of the Law might be fully met in us...”* In case you didn't catch it, the key words there are the words *“in us.”* Evidently God has decided that the perfect goodness described by the Commandments is to be “fleshed out” not only in the perfect life of Jesus, but *in us* as well. The staggering fact is that God intends to make us perfect like Jesus.

Now, that idea may be a bit confusing to those who assume that Jesus has already done for us everything that has to be done, so that all we have to do is accept the gift. Evidently what Paul is saying here is that when God raised Jesus from the dead to give us life, and we said to God, *“Thank you!”* God in effect replied, *“You're welcome; but I'm not finished. In fact, I'm just getting started; and you're next on my list!”*

But how does God propose to do that? How does God intend to make us like Jesus? Or as Paul put it in his letter to the Ephesians, to help us “attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” That, says Paul, is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. And in our lesson today, he lays out three ways in which the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of Christians. First, the Holy Spirit subdues our fallen nature. Second, he secures our family ties. Third, he seals our future glory. Now let’s look at each one.

1. First, *the Holy Spirit subdues our fallen nature*. But in order to do that, He will require our assistance. In verse 4 Paul talks of how the righteous requirements of the law are to be fully met in us “*who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.*” Now what exactly does that mean – for us to live “according to the Spirit?”

At first Paul talks in general terms about the difference between living according to the sinful nature and living according to the Spirit. But then at verse 9 he writes: “*You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.*”

In other words, if you’re a Christian, the Holy Spirit lives in you. That’s just the way it is. If you’re a Christian you have the Holy Spirit, whether you recognize it or not. However, it doesn’t necessarily follow that because you have the Spirit you will therefore automatically live “according to the Spirit.” You might even be “controlled by the Spirit,” as Paul says in verse 9. But that does not of necessity mean that you will invariably subject yourself to that control. It’s still your choice. Living according to the Spirit isn’t something that simply “happens” to you. It requires your cooperation.

Understand, you can be a Christian and have the Holy Spirit inside and still live like a heathen. Now, it will be obvious to others how your hypocrisy makes a mockery of the faith you say you embrace. But the subtle and more serious effect is that, if you’re a Christian and choose not to act like one, you gradually destroy your identity as a child of God. When our son was young he had a poster on his bedroom wall that was as theologically profound as it was grammatically atrocious. It read: “*Be what you is; because if you be what you ain’t, then you ain’t what you is.*” If you’re a Christian, you have God’s Spirit. What you do about it, however, is up to you. You need to “be what you is.”

That’s why Paul goes on to say in verse 12, “*Therefore we have an obligation...*” Actually our obligation is twofold. On the one hand, Paul says in verse 13 that we are obliged to “*put to death the misdeeds of the body.*” His language may seem brutal, but he knows what he’s talking about. The fact is that, if we don’t ruthlessly and regularly reject those habits and thoughts and practices that we know are wrong, they will take control. The second part of our obligation,

as Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, is to replace those “misdeeds of the body” by giving ourselves wholeheartedly to “*whatever is true and noble and right and pure and lovely and admirable and praiseworthy...*”

The problem we face in fulfilling that dual obligation, however, is that none of us, on his own, is able to do that with any consistency. We all need help. And that is one of the reasons why God has given us his indwelling Spirit: to offer us the power to subdue the sinful nature and to focus our minds on those things that make life permanently good.

2. The second thing that the Holy Spirit does for us is to ***secure our family ties***. In verse 15 Paul adds one more name for the Holy Spirit. He writes, “*For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’*”

Paul says that it is the Holy Spirit in us who gives us the security to call God by one of the most intimate of family names. “Abba” is the Aramaic form of the word, “Daddy.” And it is the Spirit living in us who prompts us who have been adopted by God to see Him in that way.

I want to be clear on this point. The reason we’re free to call God “Abba” – “Daddy” is because He adopted us. Now, there are those who will argue that everyone is a child of God, since God created everyone. And that seems like a plausible argument. But that’s not what the Bible says. In the opening lines of his Gospel, John tells us that Christ came into his own creation, but his own people rejected him. Then John says: “*Yet to all who received him... he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent... but born of God.*”

We know the difference between a child who is simply produced and one who is born of love. There’s a huge difference between the man who simply produces an offspring (a so-called “biological father”) and a “Daddy.” Paul says that the Holy Spirit is that corroborating witness living in our hearts – the one who, to use Paul’s words, “*testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.*” I wonder if you realize what an incredible gift that is! You and I can know that we’re not just God’s creatures. We are God’s dearly loved, adopted children. And it’s the Holy Spirit inside who confirms that to us.

3. As we allow the Holy Spirit room to work in our lives, he subdues our fallen nature and secures our family ties. The third work of the Holy Spirit is that he ***seals our future glory***. In verse 17 Paul writes, “*Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*” You’ll notice that there is a condition attached to our glory. Paul says that we will share in Christ’s glory if we share in his suffering. That’s one of those lessons I have to learn over and over again. You don’t get the glory without sharing the pain.

How do you handle suffering? How do you handle the pain and trials that we all have to face from time to time? Some folks can't take the pressure; and so they buckle – they collapse. Others become mean and sour. They look for all the world like someone who's been baptized in lemon juice. Other people deal with suffering and pain by barricading themselves behind a wall of insensitivity. They won't allow themselves to feel any pain – or anything else for that matter.

But, thank God, there are those who have discovered that it is often through pain and suffering that we become more than we ever could have been otherwise. You may know someone like that. I've certainly met my share. By God's grace they've learned the profound connection between suffering and glory that Paul is speaking of here. Listen to one of my favorite authors, Tim Hansel. He writes:

One of the most common and naive sentences in the English language is perhaps the following: "If I can just get through this problem, then everything will be all right." There comes a time, and it may well be the birth of maturity, when we realize that once we get through our present problem there will be another one, slightly larger and a little more intense, waiting to take its place.

Problems are the litmus paper of the human story. How we respond to them may well be a measure of our health. All of us feel overwhelmed at one time or another. But problems in and of themselves aren't necessarily bad. In fact, the root of the word problem means "to throw or to drive forward."

The Bible is certainly not oblivious to difficulty. But it is critical that we begin to understand the Scripture's message that difficulty and joy are not exclusive entities, but mutual friends. Life is difficult. There is no way to get around it. We need to remind ourselves of it each day. Hence, it requires that we have something or Someone within us to encounter the mishaps and transcend them.

Paul was referring to the same thing when he wrote in verse 18: *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."* Now, we need not assume that Paul was blessed with either an unusually high pain threshold or a slightly masochistic side to his personality. He simply saw his suffering as a necessary part of the process of growing up in Christ, and therefore he could accept it without blowing it out of proportion.

I don't mean to trivialize in any way the trials that some people have to go through. What I am saying, however, and what I understand Paul to be saying, is this: We can draw real strength, real staying power, from God's promise here that our future glory will one day redeem all of our present trials. And in the meantime, God has placed his Holy Spirit inside of us to give us the strength to bear those burdens right now.

We began today with a reminder that being a Christian is a lifelong battle; and with the question: How, then, do we stay in the fight until it's won? Where

does the staying power come from? It would be gratuitous advice for me to tell someone who may be suffering right now that all they need to do is to ask God for help. Frankly, there are people whose conditions are so desperate, who may be so confused and distraught, that they don't even know how to pray; they don't know what to ask for?

Let me be so bold as to suggest that the first step, if you have not taken it already, is to give your heart to Jesus; trust him with you life; put your future in his hands. I promise you this: you will never regret that decision. And I'm here to tell you (as Paul reminds us in verse 26) that, if you have given your heart to Jesus, the Holy Spirit is there inside you right now, offering up on your behalf those groans of the heart that may not make a bit of sense to you, but they touch the heart of God. He understands. And God will see you through.

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With gratitude to Stuart Briscoe for his inspiration.