

Romans 8:4-39

In chapters 6 and 7 Paul addressed several questions raised by people who hear his proclamation. His point in answering these questions is to demonstrate that life in Christ is a new type of living. At the end of chapter 7 he described seven various "laws" that governed living. Transitioning into chapter 8 Paul has introduced a new law, the law of the Spirit. This new law introduces a new way of life; a life Paul will now describe. Chapter 8 of Romans is one of the most popular chapters in the New Testament, owing mainly to Paul's positive descriptions of what life in Christ really is. But he has not forgotten the old life and uses that "life in the flesh" as the mirror to reflect the far better "life in the spirit."

Since life in the spirit fulfills the requirement of the law (8:4) it is critical to understand what this life in the spirit encompasses. Paul describes this life in 8:5-8 by use of comparison and parallel statements. He describes two groups of people, those "according to the flesh" and those "according to spirit". In order to demonstrate and more clearly demarcate between the two we will deal with one first and then the second.

Those according the flesh think about the things of the fleshly realm. The result of thinking about the things of the fleshly realm is death. This statement that the fleshly realm ends in death draws up the previous description of Paul that death is the wage sin provides. Therefore, one can conclude that thinking about the things of the fleshly realm is simply a synonym for Paul's concept of sin. But Paul is not done; those of the flesh also are hostile to God, do not subject themselves to God's law, and are unable in any shape or fashion to please God. In other words, this life according to the flesh is in a downward spiral away from God and God's way of doing things.

But in this parallel description, those according to the spirit think about the things

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of the spirit obtaining the result: life and peace. This path of living according to the spirit is totally contrary to the other way of living that Paul describes. Not only does it bring life, which we could easily understand to be that free gift of God described in 6:23, but this life according to the spirit also brings peace. The concept of peace reminds us that in chapter 5 Paul notes that we have peace with God as a consequence of the justification God provides through the death and resurrection of Jesus. At this point in Paul's description of life according to the spirit it is necessary to "read between the lines" since he stops talking about the benefits of this life. However, because Paul is describing parallel features it is very easy to understand the final three benefits of life according to the spirit: they are not hostile toward God, they do subject themselves to God's law, and they do please God. As a brief note, the word please as it is used here has nothing to do with our own attitude but refers to a state of relationship in which two parties are agreeable to one another. This life in the spirit means that we are in a friendly relationship with God because God has mended the relationship.

Paul continues his description of this life in the spirit by affirming it in a positive sense in comparison to the life in the flesh. In the first description Paul maintained an abstract, "those who are," approach in his description, while in the second he makes this a personal description addressing his audience directly. He affirms them by saying "you are not in the flesh" but you are in the spirit if these things are true in you. These three verses describe this life of the spirit possible in Jesus. Life in the spirit is recognized because God's spirit lives in that individual, that in itself is a very powerful statement. We see Paul is not splitting hairs in his theology because in the next sentence he says the spirit of Christ is in one thus identifying the spirit of Christ with the

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spirit of God and to further complicate the matter theologically Paul then says that it is Christ in them. Regardless of which member of the Trinity actually resides in them, this new life in the spirit is far better than the old life in the flesh. Giving a nod to his discussion in chapter 6 about the dead bodies and the new life in Christ, Paul again affirms that the resurrection of Jesus indicates and demonstrates that our mortal bodies will receive life from the very same spirit who gave life to Jesus' dead mortal body.

Having thus described the two options, life according to the flesh and life according to the spirit, Paul proceeds to describe the impact of this new life in the spirit on our present reality. First and foremost, there is no obligation to the old way of living. Reminiscent of 6:14 and his discussion on slavery this passage again contrasts the death available to the old way of living with the life available in the new way of living by the Spirit. But more importantly he begins to describe the new relationship with God that this life in the spirit entails. In chapter 6, Paul described humans as slaves to sin who have become slaves to righteousness. In chapter 8 he drops this analogy to slavery and introduces the relationship of sonship, which would also include daughtership, if there is such a thing. Paul is not describing simple childhood by using such terms; he is describing a formal relationship recognized within the culture of that day.

As sons of God, those "led by the Spirit" have been adopted into God's family. This adoption indicates a formal relationship with benefits that he will describe very quickly. The first benefit is that of familiar address, in other words we are now able to use language indicating a close bond with the father. Because of this close bond and because the spirit is the one who determines our relationship: we are children of God who because of this newly recognized status also become heirs. The very interesting

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part of Paul's description is how he describes our status as heirs of God. The Greek language permits the combination of prepositions with verbs to create new verbs as well as with nouns to create more meaningful nouns. In 8:17 Paul utilizes three words having this combination: heir, suffer, and glorify. The first, to be a joint heir in English translates the phrase, with-heir. The second and third are verbs that highlight the manner by which we know that we are "with-heirs," suffering which results in glorification.

What is unusual in Paul's description of our status is that he does not merely describe the status quo. Inheritance in the Jewish sense divided the property among the sons in shares with the eldest son receiving two shares. This is demonstrated in the division of the land among the 12 tribes of Israel. Although there are 12 sons of Jacob who are named, there are 13 shares divided. Joseph represents the eldest son of the favorite wife and gets two shares that go to his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Paul is not describing this type of inheritance model, indeed he describes an almost unfathomable model. Paul describes an inheritance in which all sons (and daughters) of God share equally with the inheritance of Jesus himself. That is remarkable! Truly remarkable!

The questionable element Paul describes is that the only way we know we are heirs with Christ is that we suffer with Christ — another remarkable description. The concept of suffering is what Paul will describe in 8:18–25. But for the moment, Paul's focus is on describing the status of all those who live according to the spirit. There is no slavery, there is no fear, there is no death. Instead there is adoption into the family, there is confidence in our relationship with God, and there is life not only in the future but in the present mortal body that we inhabit. This is truly good news!

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Because we have become familiar with Paul's pattern of writing we understand that when he makes a statement, he follows it with an example. Paul has introduced two themes: suffering and glorification. He now needs to discuss the relationship between the two by providing an example that moves from suffering to glorification. One of the best approaches for viewing 8:18-25 is to remember that earlier in 5:3-5, Paul connected the three ideas: hope, suffering and glory.

Paul opens his example by contrasting the present suffering with the eternal glory that is yet to come. He describes the creation that has suffered needlessly as a result of the sin of humans. Creation hopes and waits for the time when the children of God will be fully realized and slavery to sin will end. Just as creation has waited, Paul affirms that the children of God now wait until the full recognition of what adoption as sons truly means. Once again we hope in the glory of God that one day we might see it and we wait for it with perseverance because in Paul's view suffering brings perseverance which brings character which brings about hope, 5:3-5. The key idea that Paul does not mention here from chapter 5 is that hope does not disappoint. This idea is described in the following section 8:26 – 30.

Crucial to understanding 8:26 – 27 is the interaction of the social positions Paul has used as images to this point. In chapter 6 Paul identifies us as slaves but in chapter 8 we are identified as sons who are awaiting their inheritance. Slaves were forced to obey their master, while children not yet of age were in need of someone to represent them. Since Paul describes humans who believe that Jesus is the Messiah as having not yet come of age and waiting for the time we do, then his audience would understand that a guardian is needed. He describes this guardian as the spirit who, because we are

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not yet fully mature, i.e., we are weak, intercedes with the father for us. In an ancient Roman home the father would appoint a slave to serve the role of intermediary between the parent and the child, giving that slave the responsibility of raising the child until he came of age to be a son. This imagery provides a background for Paul's discussion of the spirit's interceding.

God's method of working is clearly stated in 8:28, perhaps the most famous verse in all of the letter to the Romans. The real difficulty with this verse is finding the proper context for interpreting what Paul says. The modern reader too frequently assigns a modern concept for the word "good." In a modern world, we define good and what it means and whether something is good or not. This is not the case when one hears Paul in the letter to the Romans. A few examples from the Old Testament and the words of Jesus will help.

After five of the six days of creation recorded in Genesis God stopped and saw that what he had done was good. Indeed, in Genesis 1:31 it was very good. Here the adjective good is used to describe God's work. Ezra 8:22 states "The hand of our God is upon all them that seek him, for good; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him." (ASV) This is the only time that the phrase Paul uses in Romans 8:28 is repeated in the entire Bible. Here we see that good is associated with God's purpose for those who follow him. Finally, in Mark 10 Jesus says that no one is good except God. From these examples we find that the small word in English, good, is not such a small word in the biblical text. Good is associated with God's purpose, plan and perhaps most importantly for this context, creation.

Immediately following 8:28 we find the controversial passage on predestination.

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For our purposes it is sufficient to recognize several of Paul's writing styles. First and foremost, he is writing as an example of his earlier statement that we are joint heirs with Christ. Second, we know that Paul likes to repeat himself and we will find that he does so. He begins both verse 29 and verse 30 with the concept of predestination. In 8:29 God predestined these people to be like his Son while in 8:30 the ones predestined are called, justified and eventually glorified. In other words, the ones justified and glorified are like his Son. In summary, those who live according to the spirit are sons who will be like Jesus and experience the same inheritance, the same suffering, and also the same glorification. That is an overwhelming thought! Paul describes those who through the same type of faith that Abraham exercised-believing that God gives life to the dead-find life in the spirit.

As wonderful as Paul's description of the status of those who live according to the spirit has been to this point, he is not yet at his peak. Romans 8:31 – 39 provides one of the epic descriptions in the Bible. Yet in its majesty some miss what Paul is actually saying. He begins with a question, "what then shall we say?" This is not the first time he has asked this question. We saw this question in 6:1, 6:14, and 7:7 as well as earlier in chapter 3. Each time Paul has asked this question he has had one response, "May it never be!" The attentive reader to Paul's rhetoric will find that the same response should be given to the three questions asked in 31, 33 and 35: "if God is for us, who is against us?", "who will bring a charge against God's elect?", and "who will separate us from the love of Christ?" Each of these questions should raise in the attentive reader the response, may it never be! No one can truly be against us when God is for us. No one can charge God's elect. No one, indeed as Paul will describe,

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nothing, can ever separate us from the love that Christ has. These three questions should bring the consensus that each is totally unimaginable. This is an incredible description of the good news. Paul describes a process whereby those who are dead in the flesh can become alive in the spirit and be exalted into the family of God as full children who can never be returned to the status of hostility to God.

There is room, however, for one final thought. Just as we saw Paul return to chapter 5 to describe the process leading to hope, we should be reminded of chapter 5 once again in the opening and concluding responses found in 8:32 and 39. Paul describes God as not sparing his son, a phrase that would allude to 5:6 and 8. God stands behind his love and Christ dies. While we were weak and sinners and ungodly Christ died for us. Who then could be against us if God is for us? Once God demonstrates his love who can separate us from God's love? This pattern that Paul uses at the beginning and the end helps us realize the power of his statement in 8:37: we conquer through God who loved us. There is the essence of Paul's good news, in God, in Christ and in the Spirit we have life, a life untouchable by death.