

Romans 8:1-17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 07 August 2020

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[0 : 00] Romans chapter 8 verses 1 to 17 It says, He is God. You therefore 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. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

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.

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh to live according to the flesh. 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. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 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. The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. 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. Romans chapter 8 is arguably the greatest summit in the mountain range of the epistle. It follows closely the case that Paul has been developing since chapter 5. Romans chapter 8 verses 1 to 11 completes the more immediate argument of Romans chapter 7, unpacking the contrast that was drawn in verses 5 and 6.

Romans chapter 7 ended with an expression of the wretchedness of the self in the flesh, and with a bifurcated self and a bifurcated law. When the spiritual law of God comes on the scene, sin simply tightens its grip upon Adamic humanity, leaving it in an even bitterer bondage than it was before.

While the law was given to Israel in particular, rather than to the nations more generally, under the law Israel responded as any other Adamic people would have done, had they been in the same position.

[3 : 21] There was, however, a light at the end of the tunnel in the preceding chapter, a means of deliverance from the body of death. The second half of Romans chapter 7 unpacked verse 5 of the chapter, and now Romans chapter 8 verses 1 to 11 unpacks verse 6. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. The chapter begins by stating the truth that Paul is about to explain, and then proceeds to unfold it. The opening four verses of this chapter are arguably the most central claim of the entire book. Those in the Messiah Jesus have been released from the condition experienced by the eye of chapter 7. They no longer face the condemnation of the law. How can this be the case? Paul starts to develop an answer in the dense and cryptic statement of verse 2. Once again, there are two laws, the law of sin and death, and the law of the spirit of life, just as there were at the end of the last chapter.

There is the law that tightened the grip of sin and death, and which locked the Jews up and locked the Gentiles out. There is, however, another law, the law of the spirit of life, a law operative in Jesus Christ. Paul has already defended the law against accusations that it is sinful in the previous chapter. The problem was never with the law itself. It was with the human material that the law was working with. As Paul points out in verse 3, the problem was that the law was weakened by the flesh.

Now, however, the law finally achieves its design. The law failed when weakened by the flesh and hijacked by sin, but now it succeeds when empowered by the spirit for those in the Messiah Jesus. The law sought to give life. It declared, do this and live, but the flesh rendered the performance of this impossible.

God, however, has addressed the problem in sending his son. God's son, Jesus the Messiah, entered into the fleshly Adamic condition. He took upon himself the full reality of human nature. As he entered into our condition as the Christ, the representative ruler of the people, he could take the condition upon himself and deal with it within himself. He died as a sin offering, what the words for sin means, so that the power of sin could be condemned in the flesh, the place where it had its greatest hold.

This then made possible the fulfilment of the righteous requirement of the law in us, as we now walk according to the principle of the spirit rather than that of the flesh. There have been questions hanging over Romans since chapter 2, where Paul spoke as though some people would be justified on the last day when judged according to their works. We get something of an answer here. Those in Christ have been delivered from condemnation, as that condemnation has been borne by Christ himself, and the new life of the spirit, which is producing righteous behaviour in them, is conforming them to the judgment that has been declared concerning them in their justification, a judgment that will be reiterated when they are judged according to works on the last day. Although God justifies the ungodly, delivering them into good standing with himself, those who are justified are not left in sin. It is not the case that after justifying the ungodly out of sheer grace, God throws them back upon themselves to live in a way that merits their salvation.

[6 : 50] We never cease to stand in and live by grace. Rather, it is a matter of God's own work within us, transforming us into the image of his son. It is also the fact that this is the shape that salvation and fellowship with God takes. Paul further draws out the contrast between those who live according to the flesh and those who live according to the spirit. They set their minds on different things, being defined with ways of thinking, desiring, imagining and loving. The way of the flesh produces death, while the way of the spirit produces life and peace. Processes of thought lie at the very heart of the problem and are the primary site of the transformation. Paul isn't thinking so much about ideas as he is thinking about dispositions and orientations of the heart and mind, with two very different sets of consequences. The central problem of the mind set on the things of the flesh is that it is fundamentally hostile to God. When the law comes along, it will instinctively rebel against it.

It cannot submit to the law and consequently it cannot please God. It is as though the flesh has a severe allergy to the spiritual law and as soon as it is exposed to the law, it starts to manifest itself in all sorts of unpleasant ways. It spews out sin, it swells up in rebellion. The law then, in a situation of the flesh, makes matters worse. It does not actually produce that life that is pleasing to God.

Rather, it exacerbates the rebellion and the sin. Those in Christ, however, are not in the flesh, but in the spirit. This strengthens the argument that the end of Romans 7 wasn't referring to redeemed humanity, but fleshly Adamic humanity exposed to the allergen of the spiritual law, primarily in Israel, but in a manner illustrative of the common human problem of the flesh.

Flesh was the old realm and sin was its animating power. The new realm is Christ and the spirit, and the animating power is also the spirit. It is the presence of the spirit of Christ within us that marks us out as Christ's own. The spirit's empowering presence within us is also Christ's presence within us. Christ is present within us by his spirit. Although we are still subject to the power of death in our mortal bodies, if Christ is within us, his spirit is life because of God's saving justice, which is setting a broken world to rights. This spirit is the very spirit that raised Jesus himself from the dead, and on the last day, our bodies will also be raised by that spirit.

Until then, however, we already experience the new life of the age to come at work within us. The direct upshot of all of this is that, as people graciously marked out by the spirit of Christ, there is an onus upon us to live according to that spirit, in the newness of life that God has granted us. A life that isn't being lived isn't life, so we must live out the life of Christ if we want to possess that life. The alternative, of course, is living according to the flesh, which has death as its natural outcome. We are indebted to live according to the spirit, because the spirit of God is the spirit of our adoption. To receive the spirit and to continue to live according to our old way of life would be to nullify the meaning of our adoption. It would be like an orphan adopted out of the sheer benevolence of his adoptive parents, continuing to sleep out on the streets. The fact of his adoption needs to be lived out in communion with his new family. Living lives of holiness is part of the shape of salvation, because living in such a way is living out of the life of the spirit and living in the reality of sonship of God and fellowship with him. As those led by the spirit, we are also like the Israelites in the wilderness, led by the pillar of cloud and fire, being brought toward the promised land of the new creation. The danger for us, as it was for the Israelites in the wilderness, is that of returning to the old slavery that we left behind, rather than trusting our loving father and following him into the freedom of sonship. The spirit gives us a filial intimacy with God that leads us to cry out to him, Abba Father. The spirit within us assures us that we are God's dearly loved children, not least in the fact that he spurs us to address God as father in prayer. If we are God's children though, we are also the heirs of God and fellow heirs with his son, the Messiah, as we share in his standing. Sharing in the Messiah's sonship, however, requires commitment to the way of the son, which is the way of suffering. Union with Christ, which entails life in Christ, the place where we enjoy all of these blessings, is a place of trial and testing. However, just as it was the path that led to glory for Christ, so will it prove to be for us. A question to consider. Looking through Paul's argument here, what do you notice about the Trinitarian shape of our salvation?