

Romans 8 – Life and Purpose in the Spirit

As we start into **Romans 8**, it's as if Paul now settles into what he has wanted to share all the time. Everything that he has taught so far leads towards this chapter, especially as regards our own personal experience and understanding of what our Father God has provided for us by joining us to his Son.

He starts the chapter by referring to believers in Jesus as *'those who are in Christ Jesus'*, and by confirming what he has already 'discovered' for himself in the closing verses of **chapter 7**, that we are free from condemnation. Not that we should be or might be, but that we are. We have 'travelled' with Paul through the frustration of the last chapter, perhaps identifying with him as he found himself so full of failure that he simply could not accomplish what he wanted to do – live a life that was really pleasing to God – but then 'coming out the other end' and finding that we really have been set free from 'this body of death' by being *'made to die to the Law through the body of Christ', so that we would be 'joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we would bear fruit for God.'* (**Romans 8:4**)

As we go on through this chapter, we shall find Paul reminding us that our lives are joined to the life of the Lord Jesus and pointing to the results in the lives of those who are 'according to the Spirit' as contrasted with those who are 'according to the flesh' – the natural human nature. The weakness and total inability of his own humanity, so graphically lived out in **chapter 7**, is clearly 'shown up' by the 'law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus', by which (and by whom) Paul and we can now learn to live!

As we have seen in many other places, Paul uses the **aorist** tense in **verses 2 & 3**. The tense that says 'this was done once for all, at a point of time in the past.' So all that he describes in these two verses are events that are done and completed – check them out! 'Fulfilled' in **v.4** is also in the aorist, and the 'might be' is not a point of uncertainty but a description of the **purpose** – that the requirement of the Law **would be fulfilled** in us!

And how is that going to happen? As we learn to 'walk' (i.e. 'live our lives') in the Spirit. Is this a new set of rules and regulations? **NO!** This is the 'law of the Spirit of **life** in Christ Jesus' which Paul wrote about in **v. 2**, and which he goes on to explain more about in the next verses.

In **verses 5-8** he sets out the potential problem, and then in **verses 9-11** he shows us the solution. He uses the expression 'the flesh' to mean just his/our natural human nature, our physical existence as human beings, and contrasts it with 'the Spirit' as the new life of Christ which **is** now in us.

The Problem

In **v.5** he sets the scene: Natural people set their minds on natural, ordinary things and make them their goals and sense of direction. Those who are 'according to the Spirit' have a very different focus – 'the things of the Spirit'. But, he says in **v.6**, 'the mind of the flesh is death, but the mind of the Spirit is life and peace' (literal translation). A sobering thought, that all the natural things that we and other people set as goals have the sentence of death on them! As Paul wrote back in **7:18**, 'nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh' – including all his attempts to live a good religious life!! (But that is all behind us; we are dead to the Law (**Romans 7:4**).)

In **v.7** he goes a step further: The 'mind of the flesh' is positively hostile to God. With minds set that way, people don't bring themselves under the righteous and just demands of God's law and in fact are totally unable to comply with it, even if they want to. So pleasing God is completely out of the question for anyone living this way. This is what Paul was writing about all through **Romans 7!**

The Solution

'However' he writes in **v.9** – and here comes the glorious answer to the problem – **'You are not in the flesh.'** First of all, let us hear that clearly for ourselves and not get hung up on the 'if' which

follows! The 'if' simply spells out the basis of our new life: we have the Holy Spirit making his home in us. If that's not the case, then we don't truly belong to Jesus. If we find ourselves questioning whether that is true of us, then we need to go back to our 'threshold experience' of being born again. Jesus made it very clear to Nicodemus: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."* (**John 3:5-6**)¹

V.10 So, if that is the case, then we really have a wonderful solution. Even if our body is 'dead' because of sin and failure (as Paul found his own body to be in **Romans 7:23**), our spirit is alive (literally, 'life' !) through righteousness – given to us by our Father, as we found in **Romans 4**.

But **v.11** takes it even further. Resurrection! That 'mortal body' does not need to stay dead, unable to live a life that pleases God. The Holy Spirit who lives in us now is the same Holy Spirit who caused the Lord Jesus to be raised from death (**1 Peter 3:18**). At first glance, this verse looks like it could be referring to our future resurrection after our physical death, but what Paul is actually referring to is our present-day 'walk', in which the Holy Spirit gives life to our physical (and very mortal) bodies so that we now can live lives that follow God's law and are pleasing to him. What was (and is) impossible for us with our natural human nature now becomes very possible by virtue of the Holy Spirit living in us. Paul is picking up again what he wrote about in **Romans 6**, about us being dead to sin and failure but 'alive to God in Christ Jesus'. It is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit that makes all the difference.

Now that this foundation is clearly set into our lives, Paul shows us in **v.12** where we stand. We have an obligation! 'Oh no', we may say, 'I thought I had escaped all these obligations!' But he says 'so'; in other words, as a result of what God has done by giving us new resurrection life **now**, we find ourselves 'in debt'. Not the old 'debt', to live following the goals and directions of our old human nature, but a new 'debt', to follow on with the new life of the Spirit inside us.

But what about **v.13**? What does he mean by 'putting to death the deeds of the body'? He uses very much the same words in **Colossians 3:1-11**, explaining the same process that he has been sharing in **Romans**, that we are dead to the old life and raised to new life in Jesus. It is precisely because we are already dead to sin and law (by being joined to the death of Jesus) that we are able to 'put to death' the way we used to live. The word translated 'deeds' means something that we practice, i.e. do habitually, and Paul is writing about seeing those old ways consigned to death.

Maybe an example will help. Perhaps I tell a lie and you come and challenge me about it. You show me my fault, and hopefully I acknowledge it, confess that it was wrong and receive forgiveness from you and from God. **1 John 1:5-10** is a familiar passage that deals with that process of forgiveness and 'walking in the light' with each other. But then there is another aspect to it, with a question: 'Am I a habitual liar?' No amount of confessing sin and receiving forgiveness will deal with that underlying part of my human nature, so am I stuck with an endless round of failure and forgiveness, or is there a more radical solution?

Yes, says Paul (in both **Romans** and **Colossians**), the solution is to see that my old lying nature has been included in the death of Jesus, so I can consign it to death – where it belongs! And no, I can't do that on my own; I need to co-operate with the indwelling life of the Holy Spirit to do that in me. Result? Gradual ongoing progress, becoming more 'whole' as we are intended to be.

So, potentially, any time we are faced with sin and failure in our lives, we have a double opportunity. First of all, the immediate need to confess the failure and receive forgiveness – from our Father and possibly from others – and then the second aspect, to see whether there is an underlying sinfulness in us which we can 'put to death' by recognising that it is included in the death of Jesus, to which we have already been joined. It comes back again to what Paul wrote in **Romans 6:11**, *"Even so, consider (reckon, count) yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus."* Maybe this 'worked example' will help us to see how this can work out in practice! And there is

¹ You may find it useful to explore a little more about what really happened when you were born again. Try reading 'Reborn' from www.justonecandle.uk

a promise connected to this process of 'by the Spirit putting to death' the practices of the old life: "You will live" !¹

Paul moves steadily on in **verses 14-17**, to explore more of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Not just what we might see as a negative aspect, dealing with the sins and sin in our lives, but looking at more of our inheritance as 'sons'. (Don't worry, this applies equally to men and women!)

He uses 3 different words to describe us: sons, children and heirs. The word for 'child' means 'a born one' and so reminds us that we have new life from our Father (**John 1:12**). A 'son' is one who has come to maturity and has been acknowledged by his father in the coming-of-age ceremony badly translated as 'adoption'. It actually means 'placing as a son' and was the event in which a son was recognised as adult and became a 'junior partner' to his father in his household and business. And 'heirs' takes that one stage further – inheriting all the father's estate! ²

The Holy Spirit himself is described as the 'spirit of placing as a son', and we have received him in that capacity, confirming that we have been recognised as mature sons. Sons, 'born ones' and so therefore **heirs!** (**v.17**) Suffering is also involved, but with an end in view . . .

Heirs of what? *"Heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him."* What is Jesus' inheritance? We share it! Here is just a little 'taster':— *"far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come"; ". . . So that he himself will come to have the first place in everything"; "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ; and he will reign for ever and ever"; ". . . his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things"; ". . . and to him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and men of every language might serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and his kingdom is one which will not be destroyed . . . the saints of the Highest One will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever, for all ages to come."* ³ Wow!

Back to **Romans 8:18**, and the vision continues to be expanded!

Yes, there will be suffering. We are in an environment which is alien to the kingdom which we have been brought into, and the 'ruler of this world' puts up resistance! ⁴ But, says Paul, any suffering is really nothing 'compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.' (Literally, 'into us'!)

There is a grand consummation coming! All of creation has been waiting for this for a VERY long time – since the fall of man! It was placed under man's control and, when mankind rebelled against God and no longer followed his direction, the whole of creation – still placed under mankind's control – fell away too. 'Subjected to futility' sums it up very well. Creation was designed to fit into God's plan, which was designed to be put into action by mankind. So, all this time, creation has been unable to fulfil its true purpose and has been held down by man's futile rebellion. (**v.20**)

The enormous change will come with the 'revealing of the sons of God' (**v.19**). That's us! When the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, the children/sons/heirs will be revealed and creation will be 'set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children ('born ones') of God.' (**v.21**)

Not surprisingly, Paul describes the whole of creation as groaning, waiting for that moment of release, undergoing pain but longing for the result – like a woman in childbirth. (**v.22**)

And we are the same! We have the 'first fruits' of life in the Spirit. First fruits are really good, and the Jews used to specially celebrate them, but they were always just a foretaste of the full harvest that was coming soon afterwards. In the same way, for us, life in Christ, learning to live by the

¹ **James 5:16** and **1 Peter 2:24** refer to this healing process – being made whole.

² Paul describes the process of 'placing as sons' in more detail in **Galatians 3:23-4:7**. See [The Freedom of Sonship](http://www.justonecandle.uk) from www.justonecandle.uk

³ **Ephesians 1:21, Colossians 1:18, Revelation 11:15, Hebrews 1:2, Daniel 7:13-14,18.**

⁴ **Colossians 1:13, John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11.**

power of the Holy Spirit and gradually moving forwards, is really wonderful – but there is much more to come! (**v.23**) Paul uses that ‘coming of age’ picture again – the placing as sons, which is ours already but which will come into full fruition when we receive physically resurrected bodies and so are prepared to take our place in the newly refreshed and released creation. As we consider all that, we too begin to share that same groaning and longing for it all to happen!

It hasn’t happened yet, so we hope and go on hoping. Waiting eagerly, with perseverance! (**v.24,25**)

We are groaning and longing, but the Holy Spirit goes deeper, beyond words, searching our hearts, knowing the mind of God and interceding for us in line with God’s own intentions. (See also **1 Corinthians 2:6-13**. The Holy Spirit searches the depths of God!) (**v.26,27**)

And so we come to one of the best-known verses in the Bible, **Romans 8:28**. I am indebted to N.T. (Tom) Wright for casting new light onto this for me. We are all familiar with the meaning which is normally attached to this verse taken on its own; a Christian version of ‘it will all work out in the end’. But Tom Wright looks at it in the context that we have just been reading – the grand consummation of God’s purposes – and corrects a couple of missed points.

Firstly, ‘all things’ don’t do the working together. It is God who works all things – together with those who love him. Secondly, the word translated ‘work together’ means ‘to be a fellow-worker’, and it is translated that way in every other passage in which it turns up in the New Testament. So, in seeing his great purpose coming to fruition, God has chosen to have us as his fellow-workers. My attempt at a very literal translation goes like this: “We know that, with those that love God, he works all things into good, with those called in line with (his) purpose.”

And this sense of purpose continues – God’s purpose for us, individually and corporately. Known beforehand, marked out to become like his Son (making him ‘the firstborn among many brethren’), called, justified and glorified. A condensed statement of our Father’s design for us (**v.29-30**).

So, as Paul says, if God is ‘for us’, who could possibly be against us? And he starts to list some of the many positives of our Father’s purposeful hand on our lives . . .

V.32 He gave us his Son, dying for us. Everything else that we need is ours in him. (**2 Peter 1:3**)

V.33 Can anyone accuse us? God justifies us!

V.34 Does anyone condemn us? Jesus died for us and intercedes for us at God’s right hand. (**1 John 2:1**)

V.35-39 Nothing, none of the suffering Paul mentioned earlier – and none of the adverse things listed in these verses – can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ. On the contrary, he says, we conquer in all these things – overwhelmingly! How? Through him who loved us!

There is so much more to explore in this chapter. These notes have only scratched the surface. But here we can see a massive ‘change of gear’ from the earlier chapters. Instead of dealing with the predicament of mankind and how God has stepped in to put it all right, here Paul has drawn back the curtain a little, for us to glimpse a bit more of the purposes of God and how he has put his hand on each of us to draw us into line with what he is doing.

*“I am God, and there is no other;
I am God and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning,
and from ancient times things which have not been done,
saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all my good pleasure.’ ”
(Isaiah 46:9-10)*

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