

## Are We There Yet? An Exploration of Romans 8

by Kelly Kopic

### Introduction: What Changes?

When a person becomes a Christian a strange thing happens—nothing changes! If they were struggling financially before their conversion, their financial woes are not instantly taken away. If they were previously divorced, the new believers do not awake to find themselves happily married. If they were living under an oppressive government, they are not straightaway ushered into a land of liberty. On the surface of things, nothing changes for the person who becomes a Christian.

However, the great promise of Scripture is that, while on the one hand, nothing changes, on the other hand, everything does. These changes can be understood only in the light of God's Spirit, and when such changes are recognized, they transform how we live in the present, even as we face the pain, frustration, and struggle of this life.

### The Flesh and the Spirit

In Romans chapter 8, the Apostle Paul describes two ways of living: the life of the flesh and the life of the Spirit. The first way looks backward, while the second way looks forward. For us to appreciate Paul's perspective, we must begin by recognizing what he means by "flesh" and "spirit."

When Paul calls Christians to "walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (8:4), he is not primarily making a distinction between the physical and non-physical. In the preceding chapter, Paul argues that the flesh represented living under the power of sinful passions and death, with nothing good being found in one's sinful nature (Rom. 7:5, 14, 18). Flesh in this context is not physicality, but rather it is associated with human rebellion and enmity toward God. "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law" (8:7). This is important to bear in mind when one reads that when God sent his Son "in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh" (8:3). Though exploring the history of debate about this particular verse and its implications is well beyond our purposes here, it is important to acknowledge that "likeness" should not be read as a denial that Jesus was fully human; Jesus certainly did have a real physical body, a human mind and emotions. (For historical context of this debate, see the article "The Son's Assumption of a Human Nature," listed at the end of this article.) Yet by the power of the Spirit, from conception through ascension, Jesus was without sin. Nevertheless, he lived in a fallen world, which meant that real suffering, sadness, and even death were not outside of his experience. Jesus remained, however, free from the power of indwelling sin, and thus he is the embodiment of life in the Spirit as opposed to life in the flesh. Sin surrounded him in the world, but it found no residence within him—no evil spirit could reside in the one who was filled with the Spirit beyond measure. He genuinely felt the pain and anguish of a broken world, wept and expressed anger over death and sin, and was tempted in all ways as we are—yet by the Spirit he remained without sin. This same Spirit, who preserved Jesus in purity, is given to the elect.

The Christian is distinguished from the rest of humanity not by a change in circumstances, but rather by the indwelling of God's Spirit: "You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you" (8:9). Why is that so important?

Because, in Paul's mind, this Spirit is our link to the life of God. Notice Paul's fluidity of language in verses 9–11. Here he speaks of him who dwells in us as the "Spirit of God," the "Spirit of Christ," "Christ is in you," "the Spirit [who] is life." To be given the gift of the Spirit is nothing less than to know that God himself is with us in the present. For Paul, receiving the Spirit changes one's orientation to the present and to the future. It is the Spirit's presence, rather than human faithfulness, that grounds God's guarantee that his promises will come to fruition for the saint (Eph. 1:14; cf., 2 Cor. 5:5). Such a future promise is based on the fact that God's Spirit, who raised Jesus from the dead, dwells in us. He is the very Spirit "by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Rom. 8:11; Eph. 4:30). Paul seems to believe that those who have the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead live not simply in the reality of the present, but in the power of the future which breaks into the present. They need not fear looking forward, for God's Spirit dwells in them presently, and this reality should transform how they view their current circumstances and actions.

Although the language of Spirit/spirit (*pneuma*) appears throughout Romans (thirteen times in chapters 1–7 and 9–16), in chapter 8, Paul pauses and gives extensive attention to God's Spirit (chapter 8 has Spirit [*pneuma*] twenty-one times, far more than any other chapter in the New Testament). In almost all of the occurrences of this word (*pneuma*) in Romans 8, Paul seems to be referring distinctly to the Holy Spirit. What captures the apostle is contrasting life in the flesh with life in the Spirit. Life in the flesh is focused on self, rebellion, and idolatry. Life in the Spirit is understood in terms of freedom before God—freedom from enslavement of sin, law, and self-absorption, and freedom to love God and serve others. Such an understanding of freedom guides the life of the believer.

#### Dying to Live: The Spirit's Ongoing Work in God's Children

Freedom before God is demonstrated in the Christian's life of repentance. John Calvin saw in the Scriptures a pattern for how to frame the Christian experience of repentance, and he drew much from the imagery of Romans 8. The language he used was of "vivification" and "mortification" (Institutes, 3.3.3-16). Philip Melancthon, the great Lutheran reformer, also employed this terminology when he discussed the life of repentance in the first systematic theology of the Reformation, produced in 1521. These exhortations must be understood in terms of the work of God's Spirit outlined in Romans 8, lest the believer fall into an impossible program of "self-help" moralism rather than confidently trusting in the biblical portrait of God's renewing work in his children.

For theologians following in the tradition of the Reformation, vivification (from *vivificatio*) conveys the idea of giving life: to vivify, to quicken. Simply put, the Christian is a person who is made alive by the Spirit of God. According to Calvin, this means, not simply being born again at one moment in time, but also being refashioned by the Spirit throughout time to reflect more and more the image of God. It is, as Calvin says, the "desire to live in a holy and devoted manner" which arises from "rebirth" in the power of the Spirit.

Mortification (from *mortificatio*) conveys the idea of putting something to death. This language was used to convey the Christian's call, empowered by the Spirit, to "put to death the deeds of the body" (8:13). When unpacking the application of this truth it was often portrayed in terms of warfare: war against sin and Satan. Elsewhere Paul employs similar imagery which exegetes have often drawn upon to understand these two aspects of repentance: "put off your old self [think mortification], which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed [think vivification] in the spirit of your minds, and to put on

the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22–24).

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul similarly calls the congregation to put to death the “earthly” in them (Col. 3:5–11): “sexual immortality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” Paul adds to this list other sins that formerly characterized those who now find their identity in Christ. Thus, believers are called to reject previous ways of living, such as “anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.” Lying to one another displays the former life (i.e., life in the flesh), which is to be abandoned since believers have now been called to put on the new self (i.e., life in the Spirit). Again, Paul does not seem to be attacking physicality in general when he says to get rid of the “earthly,” but rather he is warning against sins that characterize their former life in the flesh. Because of the presence of God in them, believers should now seek to display the marks of the Spirit’s presence: “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other. . . . And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:12–14).

As Paul made clear to the Galatians, Christians walk by the Spirit, which means they attempt not to “gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16–26). Why? Because the Spirit and flesh are two different manners of living; one imitates God, the other imitates those at enmity with God. Signs of the Spirit in a person are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, while the marks of the person without God’s Spirit include impurity, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, envy, drunkenness, and orgies. To live according to the Spirit is not about hating your body or God’s good creation, but rather it is meant to describe the person, who by God’s Spirit, follows after him who is “the way, truth, and life” (John 14:6).

When believers read the various traits of the “flesh” as opposed to the “Spirit,” very often they sense they have more in common with the former than the latter. They find themselves far more aware of the sin that so easily entangles them, and far less aware of how they are being renewed. Just as new believers do not awaken after their conversion to find themselves free from earlier established financial woes, neither do they, under normal circumstances, instantly find themselves free from longstanding struggles with anger, jealousy, and lust. If anything, the new saint senses personal failing in these areas to a greater degree. They now have eyes to see their sin with painful clarity.

Here we find the importance of gaining what might be called an “eschatological perspective.” Although a scholarly word, “eschatology” simply means a discussion of the last things (eschatos). Commonly, when we talk about eschatology, we focus our attention on what is yet to come, such as heaven, the dangers of hell, and the return of Christ. According to Paul, however, those realities should never be exclusively relegated to discussions of the future. Eschatology in the New Testament must also be understood in light of the past as well as that which shapes our experience of the present. By God’s Spirit, we taste the future in the present—we enjoy true fellowship with God now, even though in the future such experiences will be far richer. And we must recognize that the Christian’s link to the future is the eternal Spirit who now dwells in them.

Let us try to draw these things together in light of Romans 8. Christians are those who receive the Spirit of life, which has set them free from the bondage and dominion of sin’s reign. In the Spirit, they have been made alive to the Father; now they have the distinct privilege to call out to him in intimacy: “Abba” (8:16). Only those who have the Spirit of Christ can rightly

come to God in such intimacy (Gal. 4:6–7). God’s perfect love has cast their fear of condemnation and punishment and has set them free to enter God’s presence in confidence, knowing that they come as sons and daughters of the King, rather than as slaves frightened of losing their position in the home. God’s Spirit not only gives them life and access to him but also empowers them to mortify sinful desires and actions. Believers live in the tension between the promise of their unhindered communion with God in heaven and their daily wrestling with sin in the present. While sin always negatively impacts the Christian’s relationship with God, it never jeopardizes their union with him. While secure in our union to Christ, we nevertheless recognize the deceitfulness of sin which can cloud our vision, harden our hearts, and make us feel distant from the Father.

We must, therefore, consistently rise up against sin in the power of the Spirit, for this enemy does not grow tired of attacking God’s people. According to Calvin, “this warfare will end only at death.” Similarly, the Puritan John Owen (1616–1683), who wrote an entire treatise based on Romans 8:13, exhorted the Christian with sober words: “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” Owen’s observation that neutrality or premature rest from fighting this battle is not an option, reveals a kind of exhausting, yet accurate truth. None can escape the ongoing battle with sin this side of glory, but believers fight that fight in the confidence that the actual battle has already been won on the cross. Victory has been secured even as we await the full realization of that victory.

New Testament scholar Oscar Cullman memorably argued that the Christian experience is equivalent to living between D-day (June 6, 1944, the launch of the Allied invasion of France in World War II) and VE-day, (May 7–8 1945, Victory in Europe day). Once the bloody battle of D-day was won by the Allies, there was little doubt that final victory over the German army would eventually be realized. Men and women who remained in the towns and prisons still occupied by the Nazis tell of being able to hear the approaching American troops; they waited expectantly for their final deliverance, but many could not fully enjoy their freedom until the advancement was complete on VE-day. Similarly, believers live between a different D-day (the cross and resurrection) and VE-day (the triumphant return of Christ). Our lives must be shaped by the assured knowledge of God’s climactic work on the cross, where we hear the earth shattering words, “it is finished” (John 19:30). In the shadow of the cross, we are confident of God’s faithful ongoing renewal in the present, and the yet-to-be experienced but certain realities of the future. Through the Spirit, saints hold together the past, present, and future in what forms an empowering eschatological perspective.

#### Hope: Confidence That God Is with Us

An eschatological perspective reminds us that we toil and struggle, not in our own strength, but “with all his energy that he powerfully works within” us (Col. 1:29). God’s Spirit in us changes everything. While this is not a life free from suffering and pain, it is a life lived in the confidence that “he who began a good work in you will carry it to completion” (Phil. 1:6).

Notice a remarkable example of promise and fulfillment in Romans 8. Early on Paul claims that we received the “Spirit of adoption,” which enables us to cry out to God as our Abba, Father (8:15). However, later in the same chapter, he highlights the yet-to-be realized nature of our adoption when he writes that “we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (8:23). We are God’s children now, and yet we still long for the time when we will be present fully with the Father without the hindrance and destructive power of sin. We will be free from decay and

transience (1 Cor. 15). This is our hope, and our confidence in that this is God's work. When our eyes turn back to the cross they never remain there, for we worship the risen Lord who has overcome sin, death, and the devil. Jesus has ascended into the heavens and sent his Spirit among us. This Spirit consistently points us to our heavenly reigning Lord, whose love is immeasurable and whose heavenly intercession is unceasing. Such love is the basis for our divine predestination, calling, justification, and ultimate glorification (Rom. 8:30). These promises are based on God's character as displayed in the righteousness of his Son and the power of his Spirit. Here is the foundation of our hope in the present.

According to the Apostle Paul, a Christian's confident hope was not meant as an intellectual exercise to escape present sorrows. Instead, his vision puts our current struggles in a larger context—that of our reigning with Christ in the heavens. “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (8:18). Just as Jesus suffered and died, so we inevitably face such grief, often for his name's sake. In fact, Paul and the Apostle Peter agree that Christian suffering for the gospel is not abnormal, but rather to be expected (Rom. 8:17; 2 Tim. 2:3; Phil. 1:29, 3:10; 1 Pet. 4:12–19).

Christian hope is not about the absence of pain but about the presence of God's Spirit. Our hope is not based on what is seen but on what is unseen and patiently expected (Rom. 8:24–25; Heb. 11:1). We cannot fully see the future, but we have seen him who is the future—the risen Christ. We have his Spirit in us, who enables us to pray in the midst of confusion, fear, and grief. While we may not be able to find the right words in our weak prayers, God's Spirit takes our groans and intercedes for us (8:27). Even when circumstances in our lives cause us to question God's love and provision, the gift of his Spirit reframes our vision to include the future. Paul elsewhere connects the Spirit in us with our ability to see the present in light of God's completed and promised work: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you will also appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:1–4). Consequently, even through our tears we can claim—not naively, but nevertheless with eschatological confidence—that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (8:28, NIV).

What is the evidence that God can be trusted with our hopes? Does not the chaos and sin of this world make hope impossible? The only way to experience hope is to focus on him in whom we hope. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (8:31). How do we know God is for us? Paul argues that it is abundantly clear when we look to the Son. The logic is irrefutable in Paul's mind: if God was willing to give up his own Son for us and then to raise him from the dead, how could we not trust him with our own lives? Our identity is now located in the reigning Lord who has united himself to us by his Spirit. Our Intercessor stands in the authoritative position at the right hand of the Father. In light of this, God's elect stand justified and free from condemnation because they are sheltered in the finished work of Christ. This is the most secure position a person could ever ask for, and it provides the basis for Paul's beautiful doxology. We can do no better than to conclude with Paul's own words, which frame our present struggles in the light of the finished work of Christ to whom we are united by his Spirit.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels

nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35–39).

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