

# *Empowered* “Death to Life”

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**Digging Deeper**

***Empowered: “Death to Life”***

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## **Background Notes**

**Key Scripture Text(s):** Romans 6:4-11; 2 Peter 1:3; Romans 8:2; 8:11; 8:13; 8:39; Ephesians 5:15-20; 2 Corinthians 3:17; Colossians 2:12.

## **Introduction**

The history of human spiritual development parallels the growth of human empowerment. That sentence tempts a certain kind of skepticism, particularly the criticism of movements labeled with the word “spiritual” or “spirituality.” In the words of Gwyn Fallbrooke, “For some people, spirituality has become almost synonymous with spiritual bypass: the condition of using spiritual concepts and practices to avoid, diminish, or dismiss the very real and pressing difficulties of our world.” Further concern rests with the idea of “power” in terms of how it appears in public spaces, whether through overt acts of violence or symbols of hate or abuses of governmental authority. Put those two words together, as in “spiritual power,” and we are inclined to wonder whether the phrase is a conjurer’s trick to distract from the underlying negative associations of both spiritual and power. Spiritual seems to suggest for some a mask for justifying actions or words by appeals to other-worldly authority that remains ephemeral, illusive, or simply downright illusory. Call something spiritual and you might get away with saying or doing almost anything. Call something powerful and you could be inviting nothing more than acts of coercion for any caused whatever.

Given those honest reservations, we nonetheless find good reasons within the sacred creeds and texts of the Christian tradition for identifying the dynamic of spiritual life without any implication in the parodies of spiritual power found throughout the present human situation. “Parodies” are — to refresh the minds of the readers — imitations of real persons or practices deliberately intending to mock or undermine. Religious faith throughout history has never lacked its parodies. There is a thin line between snake oil salesmen and snake handlers; between magicians and televangelists; between the illusionist and the cult leader. In each case there is special pleading for audience acceptance of higher powers which somehow authenticate the authority of the showman’s stagecraft. Feeling excited or feeling good may be the only proof some people need to receive the gifts of power from their benefactors. What we want to counter is that none of these parodies are or ever have been the real deal. Even the early Christian apostles whose stories are recounted in the New Testament knew the difference between God-sent empowerment and the parodies wrought by charlatans.

When the Bible witnesses to the idea of power, the writers distinguish authentic power of the One true God from the power of conjurers and the spirits of demons. Idolatry was rampant in the ancient world, and whole societies were enamored by the signs and tokens of the gods who ruled the natural world. Priests channeled power, either to secure their privileged roles by speaking for the gods or to collect from adherents gifts for the maintenance of the gods. One national community called Israel had risen from the older traditions who “worshipped other gods,” summoned by a call to idol worshipper Abraham who forsook the old ways, left the comfort of Ur within Mesopotamia, and followed the voice of a different God to the land called Canaan. His descendents became a multitude, albeit at times a *mixed* one constantly tempted to fall back into the old ways and worship the old gods “like all the other nations.” The old gods nurtured power in the form of control and enticement, brokering bargains by seeking the bodies and souls of their followers. Israel wavered from time to time, ate the bitter pills of exile and loss, and then returned to their beloved land with promises to do better, to be observant, and to trust God for a new future where His kingdom would be the only power that mattered.

Those renewed intentions led Israel and the Jewish people to stand watch for God's return to the beloved community in Jerusalem, fondly called Zion, the city of the living God. They desired to experience His power, bathed in mercy, full of covenant faithfulness, and maintaining justice for them as well as throughout the whole world. During the period of renewal after exile, Jews awakened to new voices calling them to prepare for the coming of God's powerful kingdom, His just rule, and, yes, through His Son the Messiah who would share His throne. The appearance of this Messiah would signal a pivot in the divine purpose, opening the door for the salvation of Israel and then of the world. These new voices began with a prophet named John who imitated his ancient counterpart Elijah the messenger announcing the Messiah to Israel. Finally "the voice crying in the wilderness" saw the One he predicted, standing in the waters of the Jordan, and telling John that together they would "fulfill all righteous." Here, then, was the earliest glimpse of empowered humanity, where the past, present, and future met; where the Spirit descended like a dove; where the voice from heaven declared "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased."

Beginning a spiritual movement within the community of Israel in the first century where Rome ruled with imperial power over conquered peoples would not be easy. Jesus of Nazareth, the One John baptized in the Jordan River would launch a ministry lasting three years, and he would do so under the watchful eye of all kinds of power brokers. His first public initiative happened in the venerable institution of the Jewish synagogue, largely led by a sect called the *Pharisees* who directed lay education and fostered commitment to the rules and regulations of Torah. Soon, Jesus and this sect would be locked in a conflict, where the power of Jesus' new message to shape Jewish life collided with the *Rabbis'* control over the same life. Then, with even greater force, the *Temple rulers* led by the *Sadducees* relied on the power of the Empire who appointed their *High Priest* to question the authority of both John and Jesus to address the people, perform miracles, render judgment, and reinterpret religious rituals. Add to this growing opposition the puppet royalty of the Herodian kings, and the trifecta of power focused on Jesus was complete. That was the situation around 30 CE when Israel witnessed the arrival of Jesus whose empowerment depended on none of the existing sects but on the sign of the dove in the waters of Jordan where John heard God call Jesus His Son and whose Word was worthy to be heard.

Jesus did power differently. He wanted the least to become the greatest, the disenfranchised to become the empowered, the last to be first, and the weak to be made strong. His deeds of power lacked military luster, but instead glistened with acts of love and mercy: the blind see, the lepers were cleansed, the lame walked, the prisoners had freedom, and the poor heard good news about debt remission. Power that was funded by Jesus waged war against the ideologies of occupation, acquisition, coercion, and deception. Jesus had the power to save. Jesus empowered where death reigned, and to establish himself as the king of life, he allowed the power brokers of Rome, Galilee, and Judea to conspire for his life which he surrender in death through trial and crucifixion.

*His throne was the cross so that his crown would be life.*

Jesus stood the machinery of imperial power on its head when he permitted his execution at the hands of sinful men through intrigues of an unjust regime with the authorization of a coercive empire. He allowed the full force of evil to do their worst against his best, sin executing righteousness, the devil murdering the Son of God. What happened one Friday afternoon in Palestine 2,000 years ago was not the verdict of the Empire on Jesus, but of Jesus and the justice of God on the Empire. When Jesus previously stood trial before Pilate, he stood before the whole Empire which Pilate fully represented. Jesus stood before Rome that day, before the most powerful government yet known to the human race. And on that day Rome rendered its verdict against Jesus. The best justice Rome could give the Son of God was death. And the best verdict Jesus could offer the world that put him to death was resurrection to life "on the third day."

What the gospel story of Jesus tells us is that power is not meant for our undoing but for renewing, transforming, and resurrecting. This, then, is our theme for the first week of our new series, "Empowered," as we consider the dramatic move from "Death to Life." Life and Death vie for control of the human narrative from the beginning of the Bible's story when representative humans face the decision posed in the metaphor by

two trees, one promising life the other invoking freedom and the choice between good and evil. To choose the good opened up the way of life, whereas choosing evil doomed humanity to the vagaries of death in all its forms. Our main text invites the audience to choose life through the dying and risen one, Jesus, God's beloved Son. The gospel proclaims the primacy of King Jesus, Savior of Israel and Lord of the world. And the gospel is the quintessential "power of God."

### **Death and Life (Romans 6:4-11)**

<sup>4</sup> Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. <sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. <sup>6</sup> We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. <sup>7</sup> For whoever has died is freed from sin. <sup>8</sup> But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup> We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. <sup>10</sup> The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. <sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:4-11).

Paul's letter to the Romans was written for an audience in the shadow of the imperial capital, Rome, where emperor and senate shaped the lives of citizen, slave, and foreigner alike. Power was written all over the methods Rome used to achieve its purposes to maintain order in a far-flung empire. The famous *Pax Romana*, "peace of Rome," was the greatest good, and all forms of protest, dissent, insurgency, and subversion were met with the Roman sword and the soldier's boot. Enemies of the state were crucified to assure any other dissidents would think twice before launching a campaign against state power. To be frank: the power to inflict death held the secret to Roman rule, and anything that sought to prevent capital execution was quickly shut down. Rome ruled by death. What is so striking is that the heart of the Christian gospel is the narrative of Jesus the man who launched a movement precisely by being crucified at the behest of Rome, "suffering" as he did "under Pontius Pilate" according to the Christian creed. Death was Rome's way of having the final word. Take away that final word and you take away the edge of Rome's justice to silence opposition.

And yet, what Jesus did "on the third day" after his death by crucifixion put the lie to the finality of Roman power to decide life or death for everyone under its rule. By rising from the dead, Jesus cut the ground out from under the complex of imperial power. For Christians to go around preaching new life on the basis of its founder's defeating death by resurrection to life put them squarely in the crosshairs. The power of the resurrection turned out to be greater than the power of deathly intimidation. Rome had no recourse when Christians declared that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not. "Take my life," said the follower of Jesus, "and I will rise again." There was no effective Roman answer to that declaration.

Therefore, when Paul pens *Romans* he incorporates within its central message the promise of life in the face of death, and the practice of righteousness in the face of sin. Life defeats death; righteousness overcomes sin. Jesus is the Lord of both life and righteousness for human beings. It is no wonder, then, that when the apostle begins his letter, he makes the following affirmation:

<sup>16</sup> For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is *the power of God* for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. <sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." (Romans 1:16-17).

Crucifixion should have shamed the promise of early Christianity by announcing, not victory, but defeat. Dead Messiahs were, after all, failed Messiahs. Jesus died surrounded by the marks of shame and loss, and yet "death could not keep its prey...he tore the bars away" for, says the hymn writer, Jesus is "my Savior ... my Lord." Welcome to the gospel, the "good news" for human beings trapped in death's inevitable future! Paul says, "No, I am not ashamed of the cross preached by the gospel, for God responds to Rome's shoddy justice by raising His Son from the dead so that there might be "*salvation* to everyone" who *trusts* God. The same gospel also promises *righteousness*, the powerful activity of God to make the world "right" again, to restore the lost, and to rebirth the depleted. *Faith* is the noun form of "believe" and refers to relationship between God and humanity rooted in *trust*. Life after death, righteousness after sin, and faith after distrust come from "the power of God."

The biblical writers, like Paul in Romans 1:16, prefer talking about *power* by using a very specific Greek word. That word is *dunamis* and it points to that which *makes something happen*, that which *enables* it to take place. Our English words "dynamo" and "dynamite" derive from this Greek root. The former *produces* something, while the latter *deconstructs* something. Of course, the apostles knew nothing about either dynamos or dynamite, but they knew about the Holy Spirit, the promised gift of Jesus, sent from the Father.

From the very start of a person's Christian journey, empowerment is front and center. We come to Jesus in death, weakness, skepticism, and sin. He, in turn meets us with life, righteousness, and trust, and by doing that Jesus *empowers* us to become God's children, members of His family, and participants in the community of the Church. Early followers of Jesus — the very first ones, in fact — took a very public stand when they decided to follow Jesus, and they did so through the sacrament of baptism. The word "sacrament" has its roots in Roman military practice when a soldier took an oath of allegiance, and thereby began a new life. Christians, following the advice of church father Tertullian, saw baptism as the oath of allegiance they took as they began their new life as newly born persons. The water of baptism became a symbol of birth to new life. Paul's words in Romans 6 (see text above) speak explicitly about the "burial by baptism into death," and then about being raised like Christ from the dead "by the glory of the Father." "Glory" (Greek, *doxa*) refers to the entire majesty, greatness, and goodness of God's being, the visible expression of God's full identity is brought to bear on the world He has made. Glory is His energy for empowering creation. The Greek *doxa* was used to describe the brightest part of the sun, thought to be the source of its radiance and heat. Just as the sun empowers creation through its light, so also God empowers human beings through His own glory.

Jesus is the full expression of God's glory made particularly visible when He raised the crucified Jesus from the dead. In turn those who are baptized by water shared in his death and burial not only in symbol but also in reality. From the watery death of burial, God raised up new human beings through the power of Jesus' resurrection, and thus grant them new life and a new way of life ("walk") empowered by this new life. Paul further unpacks the language crucifixion, death, and resurrection dramatized in baptism. "Our old self" — who we once were by birth and behavior — went to the cross with Jesus, and "the body of sin" — the external evidence of evil in our lives — has been destroyed. Sin held us captive, like Pharaoh held Israel as slaves in Egypt, but "no longer." Death with Jesus on the cross terminated the master slave relationship; our indenture papers are no longer valid because we are not the same person anymore. We are "freed from sin."

Furthermore, death with Jesus is followed by resurrection with Jesus into a new life that supremely durable, reborn to last forever. Death with Jesus is death to sin. Sin had been the energizing agent of death. Jesus defeated sin on the cross, and he also defeat sin's power over us. If sin dies, then death dies! What remains for the person who embraces Jesus in the waters of baptism is to embrace the implication of baptism: "Consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus," Paul writes in 6:11. The question of death and life must be examined through the achievement of Jesus on the cross and in his resurrection. Baptism personalizes that question by applying the dramatic narrative of Jesus to ourselves. The Church witnesses this baptism and rejoices. The world witnesses this baptism and wonders. Baptism redirects the candidate away from the past of sin and death to the present and the future empowered with newness of life to live like Jesus lived. Something dies and newness lives. The movement from death to life is about the "no longer" and the "once for all"; about the "never again" and the "also live." Empowerment draws on the capacity of God to release the life-giving energy of Jesus crucified and risen into human lives like our own where the death dies because sin is defeated. Life is about freedom from and freedom for. No longer must we live under the rule of sin. No longer must death hang over our heads like the sword of Damocles.

And so "we consider" what has happened to us through the narrative of our baptism. Here are a few key points from Romans 6 which emphasize the "death of..." something:

1. "We died to sin" (6:2).
2. "Baptized into his [Christ Jesus'] death" (6:3).
3. "Buried with him through baptism" (6:4).

4. “United with him in his death” (6:5).
5. “Old self crucified with him” (6:6a).
6. “Body of sin done away with” (6:6b).
7. “Died ... freed from sin” (6:7).
8. “Died with Christ” (6:8).
9. “Dead to sin” (6:11).

A death is celebrated in our baptism. We re-enact a death in our baptism, going down into the water where we cannot breathe and where the world above us disappears for a brief moment from our sight. Our environment changes into one that doesn't seem natural to us, where the air no longer enters our lungs. We become a character in the drama of death, as Paul expresses that fact in a variety of ways indicated above.

And then there are key points about the “life of” something described in the paragraph immediately following in 6:12-14:

1. “Count yourselves dead to sin” (6:11).
2. “Don't let sin reign in your mortal body” (6:12).
3. “Don't offer your body to sin ... as those brought from death to life” (6:13).
4. “Sin shall not be your master” (6:14a).
5. “You are not under law but under grace” (6:14b).

A strange twist occurs in the tale told by the gospel. At one time sin acted through death to put human nature in slavery. Now, in a wondrous turnabout, we are given the opportunity to “die to sin.” That is, death becomes a good thing when he takes the weapon out of sin's hand and uses that weapon in sin itself. What Jesus did on the cross and through his resurrection — events symbolized by baptism — was to defeat sin on its own terms, seizing death from sin, and turning death back against sin. It's as if sin grabbed the weapon of death from sin with the defiant words, “Give me that! That's mine to use to put an end to you.” When we commit ourselves to Jesus Christ and make public testimony of that through baptism, we are entering the world of Jesus Christ — a new environment — where death is not what happens to us any longer, but death is what happens to sin.

What this means in practical terms is that we deny to sin the use of death against us by following Jesus into death and into resurrection life. Through this process we leave behind the world where sin rules through death, and we enter a new world where grace reigns through life. Since the two worlds co-inhere, the one embedded in the other, they are not sealed off from each other. We still have human lives consisting of human bodies with human frailties. We still live in human societies where sin has damaged human institutions. All of that affects us, to be sure. But it need not affect us decisively!

### **Finding Life in the Son and the Spirit (Selections from Romans 8)**

Two chapters beyond the text we've just discussed, Paul unleashes the capital he uncovered in Romans 6 when he announced new life beyond death, righteousness beyond sin. Romans 8 is an especially hopeful chapter because in it the apostle explores the implications of the new life made possible through the gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and raised, then witnessed in Christian baptism.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. <sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup> so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. <sup>5</sup> For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law--indeed it cannot, <sup>8</sup> and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. <sup>9</sup> But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. <sup>10</sup> But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup> If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

<sup>12</sup> So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-- <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. <sup>15</sup> For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" <sup>16</sup> it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ-- if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:1-17).

A pair of connecting words introduces Romans 8, "Therefore now..." (Greek: *ara nun*), but only after the powerful negative adjective "no" (*ouden*). Everything preceding is swept up in the purview of this introduction. Romans 1-7 serves as the ground for what Paul is about to say. He has already told the story of sin, slavery, and death — all bad news, yet has incorporated the announcement that Christ's atonement on the cross has dealt the final blow to Sin's mutiny of human existence — the good news. Standing firmly on these proofs of grace ("the grace where we stand" of 5:2), Paul presses forward by telling what the life of the Spirit looks like when Christians take full advantage of its provisions.

More specifically, Romans 8:1 seeks to address the problems of Romans 7, especially the huge dilemma that climaxes with the utterance in 7:24, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Beginning with the words "Therefore no..." the apostle tackles the despair of 7:24 with his resounding claim to follow. He leaves no doubt that Christians ought not to remain in the despondency of the "wretched man," but claim new ground as "the new humanity in Christ."

#### *No Condemnation: Freedom Instead (8:1-2)*

Charles Wesley began one stanza of his famous hymn "And Can It Be?" with the words "No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in Him, is mine." He no doubt had been re-reading Romans 8:1! The word for condemnation is *katakrima*, and it has to do with God's final judgment on Sin (see 5:16, 18; 2:1-16). Since Christians are "in Christ Jesus," they are included in the outcome of his death on the cross where he suffered and died. His death meant that condemnation for Sin had fallen on him, the one who took humankind's place when he died. Since Jesus put an end to the penalty and power of Sin, we need no longer capitalize that insidious noun in these *Notes*. Sin has become sin: defeated once and for all. Any further role sin has in the Christian's life is due to conscious choice and not to intractable slavery.

Liberation and immeasurable freedom is the consequence of God's new verdict in Jesus: "Not guilty!" The doors of the prison swing open and the sentence of death set aside. Those who are "in Christ" walk into the sunlight of God's forgiveness and His cleansing from sin. Like their Jewish forbears who marched out of Egypt free persons, so those who obtain the mercy of the cross where the lamb of God died in their place have been set free "from the law of sin and death" (*tou nomou tēs hamartias kai tou thanatou*). The verb for "set free" is in the aorist tense, implying the decisive nature of this freedom. Just as Pharaoh no longer had jurisdiction over the freed Israelites — his "law" no longer applied outside the borders of Egypt — so also those who enter into the new relationship with God through Jesus Christ belong to a new jurisdiction where a new law holds power over those who are "in Christ." Paul calls this "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (*ho nomos tou pneumatos tēs zōēs en Christō Iēsou*). We might accurately refer to the Spirit as "the new law." Its hallmark is "life" as opposed to "death," through achievement of Jesus on the cross. By defeating sin, Jesus defeated death, sin's ultimate weapon against human beings.

Again, the phrase "in Christ" has to do with the *realm* where people may now take up their residence and where they have their citizenship. To be *in Christ* means to be in the kingdom of God where Christ is King and where the Spirit is the agent of citizenship — the one who implements life in the kingdom for each of its residents. Recalling the familiar Exodus scenes, Israel passed through the Red Sea, "in the cloud and in the sea," symbols with typological value for those who are *in Christ*, as Paul taught in another of his letters:

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup> and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, <sup>3</sup> and all ate the same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ (1 Corinthians 10:1-4).

During the forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, Israel was in the constant company of the “pillar of cloud and fire” that served as a single canopy over their heads, like the sky of a new world in which they took up their residence. The two-fold pillars, as Professor Meredith Kline used to teach, served as *the frame for the doorway* into the temple of God — His heavenly kingdom experienced on earth where His presence could be experienced. In the passage just cited, Paul connects entrance into the new world after Egypt with Christian baptism and further with the Eucharist (“spiritual food and drink”). For Paul, Christ was the “spiritual rock” who accompanied Israel! Thus, when persons enter into Christ, they join with their ancient brothers and sisters in freedom and provision and common community.

Something has happened to “Law” when it reaches its fulfillment in Christ (the Messiah) and is reconnected to God as His living word through the activity of the Spirit. Torah had gotten disconnected from God during the Second Temple period, and had become an end-in-itself, a kind of *God-substitute*. For devout Pharisees, Torah study and Torah observance could legitimately replace Temple. Yet, as an agent to defeat sin and create righteousness in Jewish lives, Torah-*in-itself* failed to measure up to the high standard as God’s Word. Remember that in 3:2 Paul said that Jewish *advantage* rested with *ta logia tou theou*: “the words of God” that had been entrusted to Israel. Properly understood, Torah was the persistent witness to the “living word of God” spoken by Him to His people in the midst of their concrete history. However, reduced to an object for study alone, and treated with the same sacredness as God’s own presence, the written word became hard cold letters written in stone (see 2 Corinthians 3:3, 7). Such letters, cut off from the life of the Spirit, actually kill rather than give life (2 Corinthians 3:6). Torah became an end-in-itself, or, as we have been stating it, “Law-in-itself.” But Law-in-itself had lost its connection to the living God, and so ceased to be the living Word for Israel. The Spirit changed all of that by restoring the life to the letter, and allowing Scripture — Old Testament Scripture — to function as the “living words of God” once more, pointing to Jesus the Messiah (again, see Romans 1:2,16-17, where Scriptures are the place where the promise of the gospel first appears).

#### *Doing the Undoable (8:3-4)*

The failure of the law was not due to any fault in the law as given by God. That law, Paul has clearly stated in 7:12, 14, “... is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. ... For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am flesh-bound, sold under sin.” The human problem rested with the human condition, not with the law as given by God, only with the Law-in-itself which was incapable of doing battle with sin. The word *adunaton* simply means “the absence of power or ability to do act.” Law-keeping requires an agent, and in this case, that agent is a human one whose own inability comes from a frail, weak, fallen, and sin-ruled human nature. If law had a voice, it might well say, “Don’t blame me. Look what I have to work with!” Still, Paul does not entirely sideline the law. For, as we have noted previously the law served to reveal the human condition and human inability to keep its requirements. Once again, if law could speak, it might well say, “Humans, we have a problem.”

In the face of this problem, God does not remain idle, but, like His faithful response to the cries of Israel in Egypt, he heard the pain of sinful humanity, crying out in the words of Romans 7, “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death” (7:24). And having heard, Paul reminds his audience, God sent, not Moses, but His Son to deliver enslaved humanity from the tyranny of sin and death. This Son “came in the likeness of flesh ruled by sin.” What we refer to as the *incarnation* has to do with God joining Himself, in Jesus the Messiah, to the human race, so that their enslaved human nature might become His new human nature. As a human being God the Son does battle with sin on the same ground as human beings. The outcome of that engagement with sin was that Jesus defeated — “judged” — “sin in the flesh.” In this description of what happened on the cross, Paul does not say that God condemned Jesus, though it is certainly true that he condemned sin *in the flesh of Jesus*.

More needs to be said about this. Sin, as Paul consistently uses the term, is a power at work in the world and like a mutineer has invaded the human space, enslaving human nature. What happens on the cross is that a *bona fide* human being, Jesus the Messiah, takes upon himself the full force of sin’s fury, like a magnet

attracting evil to himself. Then, in a decisive moment, the judgment of God passed sentence on sin, dethroned it, and broke its power. On the cross, sin was gathered together in one place where God could finally deal with it. On the cross, Jesus represented all of humanity, dying where they ought to die, for their sins. On the cross, the law caused sin to be heaped up in one place, to flourish and abound in that single location ... *upon Israel's true representative, the Messiah*, in order that it might there be dealt with, be condemned, once for all. God sent the Son "in the likeness of sinful flesh" to bring this sequence to its appointed climax, that in his death Torah might do the necessary, if apparently negative, work for which it was designed.<sup>1</sup>

His death, according to 8:3, was *peri hamartias*, that is, "as a sin-offering," as the NIV correctly translates the phrase. In the Old Testament usage, "sin-offerings" of the sort suggested by this phrase were offered for what Torah considered to be "unwilling sins," that is, sins that fit the situation of Romans 7 where the "wretched man" declares that he cannot extricate himself from the power of sin at work in his life. The form and shape of the offering by Jesus on the cross fits this precisely. Sin as the power which enslaves human beings, even when they "delight in the law of God," met its match on the cross, where Jesus defeated it "as a sin-offering" in the classic priestly sense.

What results from Jesus' action on the cross is the creation of a new way of obedience. God's verdict *on sin* is also His righteous verdict *about those who trust in him* — who receive Jesus by faith. Everything that Torah — God's holy law — intended for human beings can "be fulfilled in us," 8:4 informs us. This is the intent of the Greek word *dikaiōma* — the righteous decree or intention or purpose of Torah. All along God made known what He wanted to have happen to human beings, namely, that they should be restored in His image as His children within a renewed creation where sin had at last been defeated. Torah was the place where God's wishes and His promises were proclaimed to Israel, and, through Israel, to the world. Now that sin's power had been broken at Calvary, the way was clear for God's righteousness project to move forward with all haste.

The verdict that God handed down about us because of Jesus' death in our place was a verdict of "not-guilty," so that sinful persons, now forgiven, might stand in the presence of a holy God. But the verdict also declares that what has been handed down *in jure* must also become true *in re*. That is, that the rendering made by God about us through Jesus, might actually become reality in the lives we live, freed from the power of sin. How will that new rendering of our lives take place?

The answer lies with "the Spirit," whose *other way* becomes for us the new law *if we follow the leading and the direction of the Spirit who actively is at work in our lives*. The risk remains, Paul indicates in 8:4, that Christians will lapse back into reliance on their own efforts to live this new life, and that temptation is especially acute among Jewish converts who lived their pre-conversion life "under the law." By using the word "walk" (from *peripateō*) Paul indicates the *manner of life* and *where it is lived*. The imagery is that of walking on a road led by the Spirit, or of walking on a road led by the flesh. "Flesh" in this case has the negative connotation of frail and rebellious humanity, wanting life on its own terms. There are echoes of Psalm 1 in this language of "walking," as this excerpt illustrates:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. ...<sup>6</sup> For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

The "way of the righteous" corresponds to "walk according to the Spirit," while "way of the wicked" equals "walk according to the flesh."

### *Thinking the Unthinkable (8:5-8)*

The pivotal term in this section is "think" as expressed in one several forms. The main verb form is *phroneō* (8:5) which means to "think, have understanding, be wise, be minded, mean, intend, purpose, be of his mind, side with, take heed, or be in possession of one's senses." In relationship to "Spirit" and "flesh," Paul is saying that to walk according to one or the other means to have a certain *kind of thinking*. *Thought* has to do with more than simply the private act of thinking about something, or having something in one's imagination. To *think* is

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, *Romans*, 578-579.

to orient one's life, as well as to contemplate one's life. Through thought a person directs her life. When Paul wrote about the "mind" in Romans 7, he agonized over the disconnect between what human beings think and what they do. The mind stood in direct contradiction to the will and to the lived experience of the individual. Here, things look quite different. *Thought* as a matter of *choice* suddenly contributes freely in one of two directions: according to the flesh or according to the Spirit. How we "put our minds" truly determines how we live.

In 8:6, the word for "think" shifts to the noun form: *phronēma* which also has to do with "one's mind, spirit, thought, purpose, will, resolution," and even in a more negative sense can mean "highmindedness or pride," the overestimation of oneself evidenced by presumption and arrogance. The flesh has a certain way of thinking that in turn influences how we live. Likewise, the Spirit has a certain way of thinking that influences us. The road to actual righteousness through the Spirit comes from having "the mind of the Spirit" and not "the mind of the flesh." Paul's emphasis on the *mind* grows out of his earlier statements in 1:22, 28 where the darkened mind led human beings into all sorts of sin. The beginning point for transformation and renewal must, therefore, be the mind. He will say this again in Romans 12:2. In his letter to the Colossians we hear echoes of this same idea: "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior" (Colossians 1:21). "Enemies in your minds" implies the pivotal point for sin's further activity in human life.

By contrast the mind of the Spirit — following the counsel of the Spirit, being led by the Spirit — leads to "life and peace." The addition of the word "peace" fits well with the contrary notion of "enemy." Persons who were once enemies have been reconciled and are now at peace with each other. This is how Paul summarizes in the last phrase of 8:6, and then transitions to the theme of enmity in 8:7. "The mind of the flesh" (*to phronēma tēs sarkos*) is "enmity toward God" (*echthra eis theon*). A clear dichotomy operates here: "my way" vs. "God's way." Christians face the choice of either serving self or serving God. At this stage of *Romans* the choice is real and does not face the same struggle found in Romans 7. Freed from the power of sin, we are able to disengage from "the mind of the flesh" and choose the "mind of the Spirit." However, choosing the flesh immediately puts us back into a state of enmity with God and will also weaken our ability to obey God's law. The flesh is still the flesh, even if sin no longer reigns within it. Weak, frail, and rebellious the flesh acts through self-interest, and therefore loves self above God or neighbor. In this dual failure it fails to keep "the whole law."

Only the mind of the Spirit can keep the Christian lined up with what God's law requires. Those who think as the Spirit thinks will live consistently with the law. Further, in 8:8, flesh-thinking cannot "please God." Lest the whole matter of choosing between flesh and Spirit ends up with a new form of law-based righteousness, Paul reminds the Roman believers that *pleasing God should be the real goal of the righteous life*. Pleasing God puts relationship with God as the highest priority. The Spirit is the personal dynamic within us that leads us to cultivate such a relationship. Persons who please God will want to obey God, and by obeying God they fulfill the righteous requirements of His law. *Rooted in relationship, righteousness flourishes under the direction of the Spirit*. Pleasing God has to do with wanting what God wants, doing His will, and aligning one's life with His holiness. Paul develops this theme elsewhere in his letters (Romans 12:2; 14:18; 1 Corinthians 7:32; 2 Corinthians 5:9; Ephesians 5:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:1). When discussing the Spirit's role in revealing the deeper purposes of God, Paul makes this additional statement: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). The phrase "mind of Christ" corresponds to the mind of the Spirit in our passage.

#### *In the Spirit and the Spirit in Us (8:9-11)*

After drawing the sharp line between flesh and Spirit in the preceding sections, Paul proceeds to discuss the unique relationship persons in Christ have to the Spirit. He will not quickly move beyond his consideration of that relationship, as it lingers well into the second main section. In the present sub-section (8:9-11), the language swings between "in the Spirit" and the "Spirit in them" — a puzzling pattern. Following the storyline of ancient Israel in the wilderness, Paul elaborates the Spirit's *indwelling* by paralleling God's *Shekinah* glory

above the earthly tabernacle or the Jerusalem Temple (compare 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). So what do we do with “in the Spirit”? Technically, there is a difference between the Spirit in us and ourselves in the Spirit. To be “in the Spirit” has to do with our condition or situation or relationship to the Spirit. Paul, in the present passages, contrasts “in the Spirit” with “in the flesh” so that Christians might thoughtfully choose to be “in the Spirit.” The apostle feels free to express this in other places as well (Romans 9:1; 14:17; 15:16). “In the Spirit” is really the answer to an implied question: “How do we live our lives?” As such “in the Spirit” parallels “according to the Spirit” (see also Galatians 4:29).

The real reason why persons are “in the Spirit” or “according to the Spirit” is that “the Spirit is in them.” To be “in Christ” is “to belong to Christ” (see Galatians 3:27-29). What Paul does in 8:9 is take the word “Spirit” and the word “Christ” and brings them together in the phrase “Spirit of Christ” (*pneuma Christou*), adding that either we “have” or do not “have” this Spirit. When the Spirit dwells in us, Christ dwells in us: the ministry of the Spirit for believers is to make the risen Messiah *present in their lives*. What then are the implications of *the Spirit in us*? Three features come from 8:9-11. 1) The Spirit of God/Christ living in you means that you *belong to Christ* (8:9), and thus the presence of the Spirit means possession by Christ. When the Spirit lives within you, he becomes a sign or seal of your ownership by Christ as his devoted followers. 2) The Spirit of Christ “in you” means that your human spirit comes alive with actual righteousness, making the crooked straight and the rough places level (8:10). 3) The Spirit of the One raising Jesus from the dead living in you means resurrection one day for our mortal bodies “through his Spirit who lives in you” (8:11).

#### *New Obligations: Led by the Spirit, Not the Flesh (8:12-14)*

The word “flesh” generally refers to the self, but looked at from the outside as the fulfillment of desires through actions of the body. When the self has strong desires, lusts, and loves, they seek expression and satisfaction through the life of the external world. We might say that our desires “lead us around by our nose,” refusing to let us go until they have been fully satiated. Desire controls us unless we are empowered to redirect desire. Having desire for some imagined good is not implicitly bad unless the desire in question compromises our well-being or fails to deliver on the goods it promised. Money is not intrinsically bad, but the excessive love of money results in a world of hurt and disappointment. Money isn’t everything. Shopping isn’t everything. Accumulation of possessions isn’t everything. But if our loves and desires become inordinately focused on those things, they will in the long run lead to dissatisfaction and even boredom because they were never intended to meet the deepest longings of the human life. Augustine called them, “Disordered loves” since they introduced considerable chaos and corruption of our intentions and actions.

In place of the “debt” desire calls due from us, the empowered life of the Spirit provides a better way, namely, the way of *death to destructive desires* (addictions) and the way of life as “children of God.” The Spirit leads us away from the slavery of raw passion so that we might become liberated children of the living God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Relationship replaces debt to desire with empowered life as God’s children.

#### *New Relationship to God: Abba, Father (8:15-17)*

We now come to 8:15-17 where Paul unpacks for his readers this “Spirit” who breathes new life into Torah and into us. “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to gear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (8:15-16). Among the many roles assumed by the Holy Spirit in the life of Christ’s followers is that of reaffirming their personal identity before God. Remember the theme of Romans: “Who gets to be part of the people of God?” The short answer is simply, those who become His children by faith in Christ Jesus, whether Jew or Greek (see Galatians 3:26-28). God offers relationship to everyone without making any of the old distinctions based on race or language or culture (see Romans 10:12). Though Abraham was a towering figure in Jewish history and certainly acknowledged by the Christ followers as their “Father”, still, it was more important to be “son of God” than “son of Abraham”. As Jesus once put it, God can raise up “stones” to become Abraham’s children (see Matthew 3:9; Luke 3:8), a not-to-subtle jab at the hard-heatedness of Israel’s leaders, and perhaps even Jesus’ way of telling them, “Sons of Abraham are a dime-a-dozen!” But to be related to God

as His children, and to call Him "Father" in the most respectful and intimate sense: this is a supreme "reason for celebration" and for worship!

There is Exodus language in the text. Not a slave, Paul writes, but a son. That's what happened to ancient Israel when Yahweh delivered them from the bondage of Egypt: the people went from being slaves to becoming sons and daughters of God. Consider the word picture painted in this Exodus passage:

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself (Exodus 19:4)

Those "wings" are the wings of a mother eagle carrying her precious young to a high and safe place. Israel went from the "low place" of slavery to the "high place" of God's precious children.

What is so important about "Abba", the Aramaic/Hebrew expression for "Father"? A great deal of popular commentary has arisen around it, with some claiming that it is equal to the idea of "Papa" or "Daddy", almost without any formal pretensions at all, stressing the sense of informality and intimacy. I do not doubt the "intimacy" part of this definition, but there is reason to question the "informality". The word took prominence in the early Christian community because of Jesus' own use of it, both in his own prayer life, in his teaching about God, and in the "Our Father" prayer he taught his disciples. If it was good enough for Jesus, mused his followers, it's good enough for us! The Father-Child relationship between God and His people was not original with Jesus, since texts like Exodus 19 (and others) plainly teach that Israel saw God in this way. However, with the coming of the Spirit, God's people learn what it means to be God's child in a fresh new way. *The Exodus experience becomes my Exodus experience.* And all of this without loss of reverence or awe. Remember how the "Our Father" begins, "Our Father in heaven, holy is your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven..." Hardly words of casual familiarity, but still retaining the deep sense of relationship. After all it is "our" Father who is in heaven, who is holy, and whose kingdom comes! What a privilege is ours to be related to the One Who is like that, and who does that! Every time we pray "the prayer", we acknowledge that we are the "Exodus people", the "set-free-people".

To utter the word *Abba* is to celebrate and worship in the most intimate and liberating way what it means to be the children of God set free. To worship God "in Spirit" is to joyfully and gratefully celebrate that God is our Father (and marvel at it), and we are His children (and humbly accept it). The testifying of the Spirit that we are God's children is the heart of worship, whether public or private. It is what Israel experienced through the "Song of Moses and Miriam" after the Exodus. It is what we experience every time we reflect on our Exodus from sin and death and on the new life which the Spirit offers us. As a spiritual discipline, worship carries us from Sabbath to Sabbath, filled with the knowledge that God is our Father, *Abba*, and we are His children.

"So what if we are children?" a reader might ask. What does that mean? What are the implications? "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" (8:17). In this closing verse of our chosen text, Paul unpacks further the significance of "being God's children" and advances yet another cause for celebration and worship. Imagine these declarative statements spoken with an exclamatory tone: "We are God's children!" "We are heirs of God!" "We are joint-heirs with Christ!" "We suffer, but we share the glory!" Each statement is punctuated implicitly by the exclamation mark.

The Greek word for "heirs" is *klēronomoi* and points once again to a shared history of Christ's followers with all of ancient Israel. God's covenant with Abraham had inheritance themes. Abraham was directed to look at the future as holding promise for his "offspring", and that's what inheritance looks like in ancient Near Eastern terms. What about the future? What does it hold? Will we survive as a people? Those are all "inheritance" questions. From such questions arises the sense of "hope" and expectation: Messianic expectation, that one day Yahweh would fulfill what He promised. That, too, is an inheritance theme. God has a continuing purpose, and we have continuity with that purpose, Paul is telling his readers. We actually now know what the future looks like: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. And (here's the good news) we are "co-heirs" with

Christ, which means, we died and have been raised with Christ, and so when he comes again, we will be with him "in glory".(Colossians 3:4, and others). Later in this chapter (8:18) Paul wonders aloud about "the glory that will be revealed in us", an event that lies out in the future when God liberates, not just us, but all creation from its bondage to sin and death (8:21). Our inheritance is the future, as well as the present, when God uses our experience of liberation, our Exodus, as the basis for the Exodus of Creation itself.

Part of our worship includes the celebration of our "inheritance", that is, our future. Worship, whether private or public, must not become locked in either the past or the present. Our prayers should include those hopeful words, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth... Yours is the kingdom, power and glory forever". Our music should resound with references to God's glorious future for planet earth and for the people who will forever live there in the paradise of God (the sense communicated by Revelation 4-5 and 21-22). Sufferings? Worship can hardly neglect them, since they belong the present human condition. Our liturgy includes "sorrow for sin", "prayer for those in need", and "prayer for the world". How can we miss suffering at the heart of our worship? Did not Jesus himself "bear our sins", "suffer in his body on the cross", and in so doing become an "offering for sin", lifted up in worship to his Father? Is not the suffering of the cross the central component of all worship? Still, Paul reminds his readers, that suffering is eclipsed by the coming glory. And herein lies the secret of the inheritance of which Paul speaks. John, writing in his letters, says, "Loved ones, *we are God's children now*. But it does not yet appear *what we shall be*, but when he shall appear *we shall be like him*, for we shall see him as he is. He who has this hope in him purifies himself..." (1 John 3:2-3).

Inheritance, in the New Testament sense, also includes the notion that we are valuable to God. Elsewhere Paul wrote that as His people *we are the inheritance of God* (Ephesians 1:18), and He treasures us, as those destined to bring honor to His name. In our worship, we ought to celebrate God's love for us and how much we matter to Him, though we are "sinners saved by grace". Worship, expressed in this sense, is a deeply humbling thing: "Who am I, Lord, what I have ever done, to deserve even one, of the blessings...?" Whether in the company of other Christ followers, or in private praise, gratitude belongs to the celebration of our value to God. Would Christ have died for creatures who had no value to his Father? Or, did he not say that those who were once made in God's image, might yet, once again, bear that image of the glory of God? This, then, is part of Paul's burden and joy in these brief texts from *Romans*, fitting theology for a healthy life of personal and public worship.

### **Empowered by the Love of God (8:31-39)**

<sup>31</sup> What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." <sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> 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. (Romans 8:31-39).

Many grand human projects have marched onto the stage of human history, filled with dreams of utopia and the promise of a new world. They have each in turn perished, tripped up on the uneven ground of human nature. Each project had some sense of "the law," with its guidance toward the good and its goal of justice. Scarcely did any of these projects get it wrong as to their goals. As Aristotle stated more than once in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, we rarely are in doubt about what the good is; we are in utter confusion about how to achieve it. The issue is not *ends* but the *means*. Judaism shared his frustration, at least in light of Paul's incredible display of psychological genius in *Romans 7*. Into the depths of human nature, the Spirit of God plunges his mighty discernment and comes back to the surface with the report about the "Wretched man" who has yet to find deliverance.

The confident cry we met when we began with Romans 8:1 is simply, “No condemnation,” and the hopeful message of forgiveness and freedom, that, in the words of the hymn-writer, “He breaks the power of canceled sin and sets the prisoner free.” The means lies with the actions of the loving God who loved sinners — outrageous as that seems — and then pours His love into their hearts extravagantly through the Holy Spirit. Who are we, in light of this radical claim? We are the beloved children of God, given equal standing with one another, and set on the course toward bearing the image of God’s beloved Son. We are the co-heirs with the firstborn Son, who are glorified together for the long-term restoration of all creation.

Yet, as other utopian projects testify, will not passion for this exalted vision of humanity’s vision eventually founder and fade? How strong is this *love* that binds God to His creatures, even in their sin? Does not the history of Israel leave reason to doubt, especially in light of the exile and Israel’s continuing quest to become one more the fully blessed people of God? What gives Paul reason to think that the new people of God will reach their intended goal within a renewed creation? Does not Paul give a thousand hostages to fortune in his insistence that all of this will, indeed, one day come true?

In the closing section of this week’s study, Paul pursues the question of God’s faithfulness through the lens of His unremitting love. Perhaps the apostle had been reflecting on Isaiah 49:15:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

The word translated as “show compassion” is the Hebrew verb *raḥam* which shares its root with the noun for “womb,” the place where a mother’s child lives until birth. When the word “forget” appears in contexts like this one, the association is with the covenant. To “remember” or to “forget” in the covenantal sense means to keep or fail to keep the solemn oath-bound relationship between the great king and his vassals. God applies covenant to His maternal relationship with Israel, and declares that He will keep covenant *always*.

Paul introduces four sections in this last text from Romans 8 with an overarching question: “What, therefore, shall we say to these things?” If any of his audience remains uncommitted to “the good news bringing righteousness,” the apostle now calls them to make their decision in light of the overwhelming evidence of Romans 1:1-8:30. He implies, “We must say something; we cannot say nothing.” The whole world was *silenced* by the universal verdict of sin:

Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God (3:19).

But the world can no longer *remain silent* in the face of God’s gracious gift of Jesus the Messiah.

1. (8:31-32). “*If God is for us, who is against us?*”

God empowers us with His fidelity. This question precedes the good news that “He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else” (8:32). Nothing withheld. Nothing kept back. Where in the Old Testament does that theme find its best expression? Surely in the story of Genesis 22 where Abraham held back nothing from God, but gave his only *promised son* to God without condition. In what Jewish scholars call “the binding of Isaac,” Paul sees a typological statement of God’s willingness to offer up *His Son*. Earlier, in Romans 4, the apostle tells much of Abraham’s story but omits this detail. He keeps the best for last! If Abraham’s faith serves as a model for ours, then Abraham’s offering up of Isaac, anticipates the cross as the supreme act of grace from God to us; “from faith, to faith.”

The idea that God is “for us” reverberates through Paul’s letters, most especially in telling how the death of Jesus was “for us” (see Romans 5:6-8; 14:15; 1 Corinthians 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 21; Galatians 1:4; 2:20; 3:13; Ephesians 5:2, 25; 1 Thessalonians 5:10; Titus 2:14).

That persons stood *against* the early Christians — and against Paul — is beyond dispute. The amount of persecution is documented in the biblical record and in the church history which followed. But Paul’s point is that the *charge* brought *against* them did not succeed in the courtroom of God. Surely the announcement that Jesus is Lord attracted all sorts of inquiry from Lord Caesar, eventually, but even then, the opposition failed to

make its case in the judgment of history. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” (Tertullian, 2<sup>nd</sup> century church father).

2. (8:33). *“Who shall bring a charge against us?”*

Court is back in session, as Paul raises this second rhetorical question. Whereas the whole world outside of Christ remained entirely condemned in Romans 2:1-11 and 3:19-20 with no adequate defense, the situation in 8:33 is different. God has rendered his verdict, and has pronounced the liberating words, “Not guilty! Justified!” There’s no point bringing charges into the courtroom of the Judge “whose righteousness has been fully displayed.”<sup>2</sup>

3. (8:34). *“Who shall condemn us?”*

Condemnation only matters where a successful guilty verdict has been given by the Judge. No such verdict ever came, because “Christ died, rose, and sits at the right hand of the Judge!” From that privileged place, he turns to God on our behalf. The verb, translated “intercedes”, is *entugchanō*, used earlier of the Spirit (8:27). Used here in the present tense, the word emphasizes the *continual* work of Jesus as our great high priest as Hebrews 7:25 explains. Matters of accusation, in the style of Satan against Job (Job 1-2) or Satan against Joshua (Zechariah 3) or Satan against the saints (Revelation 12), have ended with Christ’s ascension. Christ sits to represent the whole people of God in the council of God as God’s faithful Son. His presence with the Father testifies to the acceptance of his sacrifice, even as the resurrection is proof of God’s acceptance of the cross.

4. (8:35-37). *“Who shall separate us from God’s love?”*

As we enter the environment of Romans 8:35, it’s as if a change in key has taken place in the performance of a massive symphony. From now on the emphasis falls on God’s love and whether anyone can drive a wedge between us and that love. Ancient Israel often faced the specter of losing the covenant blessings. But, as Isaiah 49:15 affirmed, God can never forget his beloved child, the fruit of His womb. So it is with the Christ follower. Much along the lines of Hosea’s prophetic vision where God’s separation from His faithless wife was followed by His wooing of her again and her betrothal to Him in righteousness (Hosea 2:19), so God’s persistence to his newly sealed covenant through Jesus the Messiah is evidence that nothing can separate us from His love.

What follows this query is one of Paul’s famous lists, in which he details possible “things” that might compromise the faith of Christians and create the basis for a break-up in the holy marriage. The list includes: “trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, or sword.” These various forms of hostile and violent attack on the Christian’s commitment fall under the ancient Scripture from Psalm 44:22, “all day long we face death for your sake and are sheep to be slaughtered.” For Paul’s other lists see passages like 2 Corinthians 4:7-15; 11:23-29; Colossians 1:24.

Calling the Christian community “conquerors,” Paul uses the verb form *hupernikaō* which means “to be completely victorious, more than conquerors.” The prefix *huper* corresponds to the English “hyper” and indicates that which is over and beyond. This assurance derives, not from any natural ability, but from “him who loved us.” Love as the great victor, wearing the victor’s crown, causes us to imagine the Lord Jesus, crowned with thorns, the supreme victor over sin and death. The sufferer’s crown is, in this case, the victor’s crown.

(8:38-39). *Nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ.*

Then, in a final movement of this great love symphony, the apostle begins, “I am convinced,” from the Greek word *peithō*, a favorite with Paul, occurring no less than twenty-two times. Unlike the person in Romans 2:19 who was confident only in themselves, Paul’s assurance rests with “the Lord Jesus,” as he affirms in Romans 14:14 (see also Philippians 2:24; 2 Timothy 2:12, and elsewhere). The confidence Paul shows in God’s love stands in stark contrast to any confidence “in the flesh” which is utterly unreliable (Philippians 3:3-4).

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<sup>2</sup> Wright, *Romans*, 613.

What follows is a series of paired opposites, with two exceptions, a literary strategy that emphasizes the universal list of possibilities, both positive and negative:

1. death, life
2. angels, demons
3. present, future
4. any powers
5. height, depth
6. anything else in all creation

Since creation introduced the comments in 8:19ff, Paul may well think back to the crisis in the natural world, occasioned by the situation of the suffering children of God. Not even creation's crisis, he may be suggesting, can interfere with God's overwhelming love for us.

This love has its foundation in "Messiah Jesus our Lord." Notice the use of "our" to characterize the Christian's relationship to Jesus. What gives the Christian identity rests with the personal connection to Jesus, "our Lord."

Readers can here discern the past, present, and future dimensions of the Spirit's presence "in us." Each of these affirmations describes the achievements of the Spirit and belongs to our new reality in Christ and the basis for our victory, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

## Conclusion

Peter, in his second letter, unequivocally tells his audience that being a follower of Jesus unleashes the power of God in a variety of ways. He says in effect that God gives us power to supply everything we need to live the life of Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. <sup>3</sup> *His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness*, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. <sup>4</sup> Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. <sup>5</sup> For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, <sup>6</sup> and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, <sup>7</sup> and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. <sup>8</sup> For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:2-8).

Like Paul, Peter understands that decimating and corrupting influence of the world, primarily through its capacity to trigger desires in us that can never be truly fulfilled. God's remedy is to supply an extreme makeover of our character, gradually developing in us the cascade of valuable virtues: faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love. God plants the seeds for them in our hearts and then nurtures them so that they "are increasing among you" producing effective and fruitful lives. These virtues comprise the holiness God develops within us so that He might work through us. *He empowers us by the power of virtue, for in fact the word "virtue" means power to do the good, to aim at the very best.*

With equal emphasis, Paul adds his voice to the supreme importance of the empowered life that lives out the godliness of God's character:

<sup>15</sup> Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, <sup>16</sup> making the most of the time, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup> So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. <sup>18</sup> Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, <sup>20</sup> giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:15-20).

"Be careful how you live" isn't spoken to Christians in solitude but as people living in a community who are filled with the Spirit. Using the imagery of intoxication, he reminds his readers that the spiritual life devoted to Jesus is about who's in control of our wills, our intentions, our purposes, our hearts. Wine controls by excess, he reminds us, and that is why being filled with the Spirit ought to exceed any other elixir of control. Wine controls *irrationally*, rendering the intellect, emotions, and will incapable of *coordinated action*. By contrast the Spirit controls *wisely* (5:15), tempering the whole person with sobriety, watchfulness, and understanding.

The Spirit summons us to live carefully, using time prudently and understanding the will of God clearly. What's even more empowering about Paul's counsel is his emphasis on acts of worship that include both emotion and desire. Worship happens "among yourselves," "to the Lord in your hearts," by "giving thanks to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Hearts filled with the music and the Word of God are thereby empowered to live wisely and fully, filled with the Spirit of God. Music releases the desires of the heart directed toward the love of God in the attitude of joy and gratitude.

*The empowered life has freedom through the Spirit.* Freedom has more than one possible meaning. It is generally believed in modernity that freedom is about acting without restraint as much as possible. However, such a definition offers no guidance on how to act for the maximum good in any given situation. What should I do? How should I do it? Where will it lead me? When is the best time? Who will be affected? Which choice will result in the greatest good? These questions cannot be answered in a vacuum apart from moral guidance. To be free also mean to remain free after we act. Actions without restraint may appear to be free but in fact implicate the person acting in a greater loss of freedom if they are not wise in their conception and good in their purpose.

Paul tells us about the framework of Christian freedom and how the Spirit empowers freedom when we act in true freedom:

<sup>17</sup> Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup> And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:17 - 4:1).

In this text we learn that the Spirit is the agent of the kind of freedom resident in the "glory of the Lord" reflected back to us like a mirror. Our "faces" turn toward the light of this glory and are thereby transformed in much the same way as a flowering plant turns toward the sun by the law of phototropism, so that the energized rays might empower the production of nourishment in leaves and blossoms. Life springs from light, and freedom lifts the veil so that the Spirit might enlighten our hearts and transform our lives. The glory which belongs to God's very nature is thereby transferred to us by the Holy Spirit, and in this transfer comes transformation. Paul says this happens by "degrees," and we experience them through practices led by the Spirit, including prayer and contemplation, virtue and holiness, Spirit and gifts, compassion and justice, word and evangel, sacrament and incarnation. Each practice scintillates with the power of God for our change and His glory.

A final text this week summarizes much of what our study has been saying.

<sup>9</sup> For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, <sup>10</sup> and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. <sup>11</sup> In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; <sup>12</sup> when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. <sup>13</sup> And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, <sup>14</sup> erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. <sup>15</sup> He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it. (Colossians 2:9-15).

*Empowerment is about receiving the "fullness of God" through the ministry of Christ* whose position and authority call us through baptism out of death into life. No longer burdened with the weight of sin, since God through Christ has forgiven us "from all our trespasses and has erased the record that stood against us...nailing all of it to the cross." Christ went to war with "rulers and authorities" that were in rebellion against his authority and that challenged his power. Christ seized their weapons, shamed them in defeat, and became victorious on the cross and through his resurrection. This is the gospel — the good news — of which Paul earlier wrote, "It is the power of God for salvation for those who trust in Him" (Romans 1:16). The good news radiates with this power, this *dunamis* (Greek), which delivers from sin and transforms with righteousness.

**Glory to God! Amen.**