

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS
Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory Mikesch
Lesson 11 – Romans 8:1-30

Romans 8:1-9

We now begin chapter 8. All of this chapter can be considered an answer to the question Paul asked in 7:24, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Jesus Christ is the answer. Because of baptism into Christ, Christians now live life in the Spirit.

Verse 1 is Paul’s universal statement that both Jews and Gentiles are now free from sin and death because of faith in Christ. In the early part of his letter (1:18f), Paul described the state of the Gentiles when they lived without knowledge of God. They were subject to the wrath of God. And the Jews, even though they had the law, were also under the wrath of God because they did not follow the law (2:1). But now all people who accept Jesus as Lord are free from condemnation. Paul had led his readers through the sorrowful effects of bondage to sin, but now he wants them to rejoice in the new life won for them by Christ.

In verse 2, Paul uses the phrase “the law of the Spirit” in direct contrast to “the law of sin and death.” The law of the Spirit is not a written code; it is rather the indwelling presence of the Trinity within the Christian. The Law of Moses was powerless to help a person overcome sin; in fact the Law of Moses even led to sin as Paul described it in chapter 7. But the law of the Spirit indicates that the Christian is so filled with the presence of God that sin and death are conquered. This realization gives spiritual and psychological freedom. The Christian knows in mind and heart that peace with God is now the fruit of the relationship in Christ Jesus.

Verses 3 and 4 are read together. This one sentence expresses much of Paul’s theology of incarnation and salvation. Paul says that God has done what the law could not do, namely, heal the wound which Adam’s sin caused to the relationship between God and humanity. The Law of Moses was ineffective in bringing this about, because the sinful flesh turned the law into an obstacle rather than a help. To heal the wound of Adam’s sin, God sent his own Son to share human nature and endure the sufferings of the human condition. Jesus did not sin, but he endured the effects of sin. At the very time when sin and death seemed to have conquered him, Jesus was raised up in power and glory. By this act, sin was condemned or conquered at its very core.

In chapter 5, Paul had explained how all people share in Adam's sin. But he also stressed how all people of faith share in Christ's victory over sin and death. The Son was completely obedient and fulfilled the will of the Father. Because of this obedience, Christians now are at peace with God.

In verse 4, Paul reminds his readers that what Jesus has accomplished has fulfilled the law of God. Christians are now expected to live in accord with the new law of the Spirit. This is not a means of earning salvation; rather, only Jesus can do that. By following the law of the Spirit, Christians are responding to the love God has already given.

Paul's use of the word "walk" in verse 4 carries significance for his readers. In Hebrew, the word "walk" is "halak." The Jews spoke of the Torah as the "Halakha," for the Torah allowed a person to "walk in the way of the Lord." This is part of the background needed to understand the account in Luke 5:17-26 in which Jesus cured the paralytic. Jesus started by forgiving the man's sins, i.e. making it possible for him to "walk in the way of the Lord." The Pharisees said he did not have the power to do this. Jesus showed his power by not only making it possible for the man to "walk in the way of the Lord," but also to "walk" with human legs. Paul probably has this idea in mind when he tells the Christians that they must not walk "according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

In verse 5, Paul uses the phrase "set their minds" to indicate a choice or an act of the will. When a person "sets the mind" on the things of the flesh, that person has chosen a way of life which is self-centered and shortsighted. The person has been captured by the passing attractions of this life. But the person who "sets the mind" on the things of the Spirit recognizes that God is the beginning and end of life.

In verse 6, Paul reminds his readers of the certain outcome of each path. If a person chooses a life in opposition to God, the end is death, physical and spiritual. If a person chooses life with God, the outcome is eternal life, reconciliation and peace. This person will also experience physical death, but only to be raised up again in glory.

Verses 7 and 8 form one sentence. In these verses Paul returns to the use of the word "law." He says that someone who follows the way of flesh cannot keep God's laws. Paul is referring back to his account of the inner struggle which each person experiences. If a person does not call upon the help of the Spirit in overcoming temptation, then sin holds that person in bondage. Only with the help of God's indwelling presence can that bondage be broken.

At the end of verse 8, Paul uses a simple expression which carries a profound truth. He speaks of how the person in the flesh cannot please God. The reverse implies that those in the Spirit do please God. This way of speaking may be somewhat anthropomorphic (the tendency to describe God with human characteristics) but it is a consistent image in the scriptures. The Greeks think of God as unchangeable, immutable and devoid of feelings.

But in the Hebrew culture, from which Paul came, God is often described as having feelings. He is like a loving parent who is saddened when his children ignore wisdom, and he rejoices when his children recognize what brings true happiness and peace. Jesus made use of this imagery in his parables, particularly in the Prodigal Son. God smiles when his children tell him they love him.

In verse 9, Paul speaks directly to his readers and says that they are now living in the Spirit of God. By baptism into Christ, they are temples of God. God in his Spirit lives within them. This is the new relationship which has been formed between God and humanity because of what Jesus accomplished in his death/resurrection. Paul continues this theme as he expands the reader's understanding of what life in the Spirit entails.

Side Note: The Trinity

Our Christian belief in the Trinity is one of our core beliefs. From this belief comes our understanding of the incarnation, redemption, life in the Spirit, eternal life and so many more teachings. Paul is our earliest Christian writer and so his description of the Trinity is not as developed as that of later writers. This is not to say that Paul did not believe in the Trinity, he obviously did. But centuries of thought have helped the Church to develop insights into the mystery of our faith.

One of the most profound insights into the mystery of the Trinity was given by St. Augustine, cir. 400 A.D. Augustine suggests we imagine God all by himself, before creation. God is all powerful, omniscient and he has perfect self-knowledge. Since God has a perfect image of himself, take this self-image and in your imagination move it some distance from God. Now turn this perfect image of God so that they face each other. Everything that God is, his image is. Everything that his image is, God is. Since we have two, let's call one the "Father," and the image we will call the "Son." The Father loves the Son perfectly, and the Son loves the Father perfectly. Their love for each other is so intense, that their love becomes another person, the third person, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the love that exists between the Father and the Son. As Christians, when we receive the gift of the Spirit, we are actually participating in the love among the members of the Trinity. This is the privilege we receive whenever we receive any of the sacraments. Each of the sacraments gives us a share in the life and love of the Trinity. The promise of God is that one-day we will share fully in this life. This is what we call heaven.

I have greatly simplified Augustine's thought. But perhaps when you receive any of the sacraments or take time for prayer, you may have a deeper appreciation of the reality which is taking place.

Romans 8:10-17

As we continue the segment entitled "life in the Spirit" Paul gives a further description of what it means to live in the Spirit of God. This new life includes responsibilities and gifts.

The responsibilities pertain to living according to the teachings of Christ. The gifts pertain to a sharing of divine life even in this world and a promise of glory in the life to come.

At the beginning of verse 10, Paul reminds his readers that Christ dwells within them because of their baptism. Then he tells them that "the body is dead because of sin." This part of the sentences carries two meanings: First, it states that the ultimate end of unrepentant sin is spiritual death. If a person chooses to spend life in separation from God, this choice may be carried into eternity. Second, even for those who are temples of the Spirit, physical death is still an inevitable experience. But it is a transition experience. The promise of God is resurrection always to those who believe in Christ.

At the end of verse 10, the NRSV gives the translation, "the Spirit is life..." Most other translations say, "the spirit (with a small 's') is alive..." Either translation is acceptable. The implication is that because of God's gracious gift of mercy, the Holy Spirit dwells within the person and the person's own spirit is alive and destined for eternal life.

Verse 11 is a promise of the resurrection. The scriptures indicate that the Father raised Jesus from the dead. Occasionally, as in this verse, the reference indicates that the Spirit of the Father raised Jesus. Theologically, there is no difference. In our Christian theology of the Trinity, we say that wherever one member of the Trinity is active and present, the whole Trinity is present. Paul wants to assure his readers that their hope of the resurrection is a certainty, because of the indwelling Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, Paul addresses this same issue. Some members of the Corinthian community had been saying that there is no resurrection from the dead. Paul says that if there is no resurrection, then Christ has not been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, then our faith is useless. As surely as Christ was raised so too will we be raised from the dead.

Verses 12 and 13 form a continuous thought for Paul. He tells the Roman Christians that they owe no debt to the works of the flesh. They should not give any attention nor feel any obligation to the works which could separate them from God. Paul knows that the works of sin can only end in death. He tells his readers that they have received the gift of the Spirit, and so their debt is now to God. The debt they owe is fulfilled by living according to the will of God and the teachings of Christ. By following the will of God, they will, in fact, put to death the works of sin. Sin will no longer have the power over them.

In verse 14, Paul introduces a new theme. This is the first time in his letter that he speaks of the Roman Christians as the "children of God."

He says that all who are led by the Spirit have become children of God. To understand this image, we need to know something about the Roman customs of the time with regard to children and the adoption of children.

One of the prominent cultural elements in Rome pertaining to the family life was the **patria potestas**, meaning the "father's power." The father of the family had complete power over his children even to the point of life and death. How often the power to kill was exercised is disputed by historians, but theoretically, the power was there. It was possible for a father to give up this right and allow his son or daughter to be adopted by another. But this was an involved procedure and had to be witnessed by seven people. When another man adopted a son or daughter, that adopted child became a full member of the new family. The child had full legal rights to inheritance even if another child was born to that family after the adoption. There were two primary ways in which the child was affected: First, all prior debts and obligations were cancelled. The child became a new person and was set free from any previous bondage. Second, the child became a full member of the new family with all the rights and privileges of the natural born children. This is the basis for what Paul will say in the next few verses.

In verse 15, Paul contrasts the two images of "slave" and "son." He tells the Roman Christians that when they were baptized, they were not held in slavery. Slavery was a cause of fear. Rather, they were brought into freedom, the freedom experienced by a son who has all the rights of a family member. By baptism, they became the adopted children of God. This is the point at which Paul relies on their knowledge of Roman custom. As adopted children of God, the Christians are no longer bound by the previous slavery to sin. They have been freed from the power which sin held over them. Now they have become full members of God's family, brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus, able to inherit all the blessings which the Father bestows upon his Son.

At the end of verse 15, Paul makes use of a term of intimacy and affection. He says that because of this adoption into God's family, Christians can now call God "Abba! Father!" This is the term which a small child would use to address the father. It is the term which Jesus himself used in his prayer at Gethsemane. In Mark 14:36, the Aramaic term is retained even though the gospel was written in Greek. The word "Abba" is believed to be what commentators call **ipsissima verba**, meaning the very word which Jesus spoke. Because of the adoption, which Christians receive through baptism, they can now use the same term of affection when calling upon God the Father.

In verse 16, Paul perceives the Spirit as having a two-fold impact on the Christian. First, it is the Spirit who actually brings about this adoption. Through baptism into Christ, the Spirit is given to the person so that the person becomes a temple for God's Spirit. Second, now that the Spirit has made the person a child of God, the Spirit also makes the new Christian aware of this fact.

The Spirit enlightens the mind and soul of the person now filled with faith, to recognize that a new relationship exists with the Father. This relationship is so unique that the Christian can truly call upon God as "Abba!"

In verse 17, Paul reminds his readers that this adoption means that they are also heirs with Christ. As heirs, they have a right to the Father's estate, and the essence of the Father's estate is glory. Jesus has already shared in this inheritance when he was raised from the dead. In fact, this glory is his by divine nature. The destiny of all Christians is to share this same glory in heaven. Paul is aware that there is suffering to be endured before this full sharing in God's life takes place. But he is also certain that as Christians share in the suffering of Christ, they will also reign with Christ.

Romans 8:18-27

As Paul spoke of adoption, glory and reigning with Christ, he could probably imagine some of his readers saying, "This all sounds good, but why am I now in chains?" In this present segment, "Future Glory," Paul admits that suffering is still part of the life of not only a Christian, but of all creation as well. The kingdom is already here, yet it is not complete. The fullness of glory is yet to come. But, in verse 18, Paul is adamant in his stance that whatever the present sufferings may be, they cannot begin to compare with the joy the Christian will experience in heaven.

In verse 19, Paul expands his vision. He not only proclaims that human beings will experience the fullness of redemption, but that all creation will also be taken up in the harmony of the kingdom of God. Paul is calling to mind the account in Genesis 3:14-19, in which even the ground is cursed because of the sin of Adam and Eve. Humanity had freely chosen to oppose God in the sin of Adam and Eve. Humanity had freely chosen to oppose God in the sin of Adam, but creation was cursed without a choice. Paul looked upon the death and decay of the physical universe as a result of the first sin. Because of the curse, creation itself longs and yearns for redemption. In anthropomorphic style, Paul envisions creation consciously awaiting the full redemption of humanity because creation knows that it will also share in this redemption.

This thought of Paul's should lead us to some reflection. How often do we think of the end of the world as destruction? The coming of the Day of the Lord is imagined to be a time when the physical universe will cease to be. This is the image we receive from the apocalyptic texts in the scriptures. However, if we follow Paul's thought, the vision we receive is that the end of the world is not destruction but transformation. The curse of Adam's sin caused disharmony and alienation in all of creation. But when the fullness of redemption is experienced at the time of the glorious return of Christ, harmony will be restored. Creation will once again be as God intended it from the beginning.

Paul develops this thought in his first letter to the Corinthians. He bases his view on the resurrection of Jesus. The human body of Jesus was a part of this physical world. At the resurrection, his body was transformed, changed into a glorified body. The glorified human body does not get sick or grow old. It is not subject to time or special dimensions. It can be anywhere at any time. The body can be touched. The apostles knew that Jesus was present. He was not a ghost. Paul believes that this transformation in glory is what awaits the entire universe. All will be as God intended it to be.

Verse 20 presents a difficult question. We first looked at this in the previous Lesson. Paul says, "Creation was subjected to futility." This is his way of describing the curse, which was put on creation in the Genesis account. Then he says that it was subjected "by the will of the one who subjected it." The question is, "Who is the one who subjected it?" Was it Adam or God? Some commentators say Adam. They say this because it was Adam's sin, which caused the subjection. But the problem with this interpretation is how to explain the element of hope. How could Adam promise hope for the restoration of harmony in the universe? The promise of hope makes more sense if it is God who subjected the universe and at the same time promised hope. This interpretation is consistent with the whole plan of redemption. From the first moment after the fall, God had already set in motion a plan by which humanity would be saved. Because of this plan, there was also hope for the physical universe. Creation longs to participate in the new life given to humanity.

In 1 Corinthians 15:26, Paul says that in the end Christ will destroy all enemies, and the last enemy to be destroyed is death. This is the same hope, which Paul expresses in verse 21. He looks forward to the time when creation will be "set free from its bondage to decay." The freedom which creation seeks is the freedom which comes from being in harmony with God. Then all creation will praise the Lord.

In verse 22, Paul intensifies the yearning he has described in the previous verses. He says that all of creation is enduring pain, but the pain is not without hope. As the pains of birth give way to the joy of the new child, so too will the groaning of creation eventually give way to the joy of new life in God. The expanse of time also adds to this intensity. Creation has been yearning for freedom from the first moment after the fall, and this longing will continue until the coming of the Lord.

In verse 23, Paul returns to the theme of the gift of the Spirit. He says that Christians have "the first fruits of the Spirit." The gift of the Spirit, which Christians have already received in baptism, is the pledge or promise of the fullness which is yet to come. The adoption into the family of God has already happened, but its fullness is yet to be experienced. Paul says that Christians will have this fullness when their bodies and all physical reality are transformed in glory.

In verse 24, Paul gives a succinct sentence, which is filled with implications. He says, "For in hope we were saved." He uses the past tense because he knows that God has accomplished redemption in the person of Jesus. There can be no greater revelation than the gift of his Son. But when Paul says "in hope," he is indicating that the act of redemption is an ongoing process. The once-and-for-all death of Christ has already taken place, never to be repeated. And yet, the effects of this saving act are still being worked out as the kingdom of God continues to grow.

Paul says that Christians do not yet see that for which they hope. Whatever can be seen in this life is transient and temporal. But that which awaits the Christian is eternal. Verse 25 is Paul's reminder that Christians can be patient in suffering because God's promise is a certainty. The present sufferings are real, but they will not last. What lasts is eternal life, life in God's family as a coheir with Christ.

Verse 26 contains a message which is always important to keep in mind. Whenever a person prays, it is the Spirit present within who motivates that person to communicate with God. The Spirit calls out in praise and love to the Father through Christ. The communication of the Spirit is unique and sometimes can only be expressed in the yearning and desire felt deep within the soul.

Verse 27 presents a comforting thought. Paul says that God knows the intentions of the Spirit, for the Spirit is doing God's will. God has set his plan in motion and in that way he gives the gift of the indwelling Spirit. It is part of God's plan that the Spirit pray within the heart of the Christian, calling out in praise and seeking the union with God which brings true peace.

In many of Paul's letters, he refers to the members of the communities as "saints." Today this term is used to refer to canonized people - those who have lived a holy life, have died, and are now in heaven. When Paul uses this term, he means anyone who is already sharing God's divine life. The presence of the indwelling Trinity makes a person a saint, and it is this indwelling presence, which brings a person to fullness of eternal life.

Romans 8:28-30

We will better understand today's verses if we recall Paul's description of prayer in 8:26-27. He says that the Spirit prays within us offering praise to the Father. Because of the Spirit's presence, we can be certain that God will accomplish his will for us.

If we strive to be open to the will of God, then we know that God will bring about what is best for us. This is what Paul is saying in verse 28. He says that "all things work together for good" and the ultimate good is union with God.

There may even be events which at the time are painful and trying. However, when time gives us some distance, we can see that the hand of God was present.

This is not always simple. How do we know which events are from God and which are not? When people are suffering, they sometimes say, "Why is God doing this to me? Why is God making me suffer?" Is this suffering really from God? How can we tell? We know that sin can never be from God. This would be a contradiction of the very nature of God. He cannot cause evil. This is not to say that God cannot bring good out of a painful situation. This he indeed can do. This, however, is quite different from saying that God intentionally caused this pain. Sometimes our suffering may be the result of our own (or another's) sin. Sometimes our suffering may be the result of the imperfection of nature. Our bodies are subject to illness and disease. At times all we can say is, "I don't know. Lord, be with me in my confusion."

At the end of verse 28, Paul says that for those who love God, his will and purpose will be fulfilled. If we recognize the call of God, we know that his call will lead us to the final victory in Christ. This is God's purpose for us.

The next two verses, 29 and 30, have been the source of much controversy in Christianity since the late Middle Ages. It is in these verses that Paul talks about predestination. There are some Christian denominations today which speak of personal and individual predestination. This is usually understood to mean that some people are destined for salvation and others are not. This is a misinterpretation of Paul's words.

In verse 29, Paul speaks of those whom God "foreknew." This is everyone who has ever lived. God is the source of all life and existence. He calls all people into being. He knows each of us before our lives begin. Each person is created for the purpose of knowing and loving God, and some day sharing the fullness of life in heaven. Paul says that each person is created to share the image of Christ. This is the image of the risen and glorified Christ. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, so too will those rise who believe in him. Christ is the firstborn from the dead, and many will follow him; this is the destiny of humanity.

There are two important elements to note in this discussion. First, the kingdom is not yet complete. Although it is God's will that everyone comes to a belief in Jesus Christ, it is true that over the history of humanity, many people have never heard his name. The kingdom is still in process. The missionary effort of the Church is one of the essential marks of the Church. Second, this destiny does not take away free will. God will never force us to love Him. He created us with free will so that we could choose to respond to his invitation to live and love. But it is always possible that someone, at some time, may use this free will to choose to turn against God.

In verse 30, Paul again employs the technique of crescendo. He uses the past tense in each of the four verbs "predestined, called, justified, and glorified." Paul speaks this way to assure his readers and all of us that God has already accomplished these things in those who have been baptized in Jesus Christ. But the fullness is yet to come. We were created to be with God. He called us in His Son. He justified us in the death/resurrection of his Son. And by baptism, we share in the divine life of the glorified Jesus. This is all God's doing. He loved us first. Our part is to be open.

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