

The Epistle to the Romans Spirit of Adoption - Romans 8:12-27

[English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Today we continue our studies in Paul's letter to the Romans, and make our way further into chapter 8, filled as it is with detailed teaching about the vital part played by the Holy Spirit of God in the working out of God's great plan of salvation. Today we're going to look at verses 12 to 27, and I'm going to begin by simply reading through those 16 verses.

"So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

This passage seems to me to divide into two parts, verses 12 to 18, which I'm going to call the three contrasts, and verses 19 to 27, which I'm going to call the three groanings.

The three contrasts are: in verses 12 and 13, two ways to live (according to the flesh or according to the Spirit); in verses 14 to 16, two spirits (the spirit of slavery and the spirit of adoption); and

finally, in verses 17 and 18, two eras (the present unhappy state of affairs and the future day of glory).

Each of these sections leads naturally into the next, and that third contrast, between the present and the future, opens the door to the second part of the passage, which I'm calling the three groanings, where that contrast is greatly amplified and explained.

Two ways to live

Let's begin then by looking at the two ways to live in verses 12 and 13, according to the flesh or according to the Spirit. We need of course to explain what these terms mean. As to the Spirit, I think there is little doubt that, in most cases in this chapter, where the word 'Spirit' is used, it is the Holy Spirit of God who is being referred to.

But 'the flesh' is what I would call a technical term used in the Bible, and we need to say a bit about it. The Bible informs us that human beings are composed of three parts. We are spirit, soul and body¹. Before the Fall, recorded in Genesis chapter 3, Adam and Eve lived with the three components in perfect harmony with one another, but when sin entered the world, everything fell apart. The internal harmony, the perfect balance between the three parts which God had created, was lost.

The material part of us, the body, is not intrinsically evil. Before the Fall, its natural desires and appetites were in perfect balance, subject to the control and direction of the human spirit. There was no such thing as lust or gluttony. But now that we are fallen creatures, those natural desires have run riot, so that we find ourselves unable to restrain or control them.

Ever since we were infants, we have developed strategies and techniques for manipulating the world around us in order to satisfy the body's desires. It is this repertoire of deeply ingrained mental habits, built up since childhood, which is what I believe is meant in the Bible by this term "the flesh". The flesh is self-centred and self-seeking. It is one of the three great enemies of the Christian, alongside the world and the devil.

Verses 1 to 11 of this chapter, which were the subject of the previous talk in this series, are largely taken up with the contrast between the flesh and the Spirit. The first of the three contrasts in today's passage is therefore really the conclusion and summing up of that earlier section of the chapter.

In verses 12 and 13, then, we are challenged as to our response to a simple choice, whether we live according to the flesh or according to the Spirit. To live according to the flesh is easy. It is just to do what comes naturally to us. To live according to the Spirit is in one sense impossible, because we do not possess, within ourselves, the power to overcome those deeply ingrained habits of which we have spoken. The key to success is found in verse 13: "If **by the Spirit** you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Denying our sinful desires, not by gritting our teeth and trying to exercise will power, but by constantly looking away from ourselves to God, who indwells us by His Holy Spirit, is what we are called upon to do throughout our Christian lives. Though the power comes from God, it is nevertheless a 24/7 battle in which we fight.

Two spirits

Verses 14 to 16 speak of the second of the three contrasts, that between the spirit of slavery and the spirit of adoption. In these verses Paul introduces an astonishing truth. He says we are the sons, or the children, of God! The use of the word "sons" doesn't imply anything gender-specific. Both men and women are equally accorded this amazing privilege of being adopted into God's family.

To our modern ears, the idea of slavery is shocking, but it was an accepted feature of life in the Roman world, where in a household there would be those who were “bound” in the service of the house, in contrast with the sons, who were the heirs. So, Paul is using this everyday situation to illustrate the wonderfully privileged position we have been brought into as believers.

The word “Abba” in the expression “Abba! Father!” is the intimate Aramaic word for Father, the equivalent, I understand, of “Daddy”. Therefore it emphasises how close is the relationship with God into which the work of Christ has brought us. We have not received the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, Paul says. On the contrary, we have been brought into the atmosphere of the Father’s love. As John tells us in his first letter chapter 4 verse 18: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”

Two eras – present and future

If we are God’s children, verse 17 tells us, then we are His heirs. We have an unimaginably glorious future ahead of us as God’s heirs and as fellow heirs with Christ. In the second half of verse 17 there is what appears to be an “if” or a proviso. It is **provided** we suffer with Him. Does that mean that our future inheritance is in some way in doubt? Does it depend on whether, or how much, we have shared in Christ’s sufferings?

The words may simply reflect the fact that just as Christ’s path to glory was only after His sufferings, so the Christian’s path can be no different. It is nonetheless a very serious and sobering thought. It seems to me to suggest that the extent to which we will appreciate and enter into the full enjoyment of that future glory is somehow a reflection of how fully we have entered into and shared in the sufferings of Christ, which He said all His followers should expect. This is what Paul is referring to in Philippians chapter 3 verse 10, where he speaks of his longing to “share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death”.

Finally, in verse 18, is the third of the three contrasts, that between the present and the future. Sadly, it often seems that we believers who live in the western world know very little of what Paul refers to here as “the sufferings of this present time” but the New Testament always takes it for granted that the life of the Christian in this world is far from a life of ease. How those who preach what is known as a “prosperity gospel” – the idea that every Christian should expect to be rich and successful – manage to square their teaching with Scripture I cannot imagine! It seems to me crystal clear in the New Testament that the wealthy believer is the exception and that suffering and hardship of one kind or another are absolutely normal for the Christian. The Lord’s own words were: “In the world you will have tribulation”².

But, Paul says, don’t even try to compare these present sufferings with the glory that is coming. There’s no comparison. That future day is going to totally eclipse anything you may have to endure on your journey through this world. The two things can’t as it were be measured using the same currency, since the one so far surpasses the other! And this final contrast leads us into the great unfolding of God’s purposes which follows in verses 19 to 27.

The groaning creation

I’ve referred to these verses as “the three groanings” and the first of these groanings is a groaning creation.

Now, it really is important to try to clear our heads of a very fundamental error which holds sway in the modern world. This idea, or world view, totally permeates modern culture. It is the idea that the amazing universe in which we live is not “the creation” as these verses say, but rather is the outcome of totally random natural processes operating over a very long period of time.

We are not being cranks, or a lunatic fringe, if we stand up boldly and tell people that we do not believe that everything has just evolved, but rather that it is the handiwork of an infinitely wise and all powerful Creator.

Just as an aside here, let me state very plainly that to reject the idea of Evolution is not to set the Word of God, the Bible, in opposition to science. Evolution is not science. It is a faith. Science works by experiment. Scientists constantly perform experiments to test their theories and see how far they measure up to reality. A key idea in science is that a theory predicts the results of experiments which haven't been done yet. You then perform the experiment to see whether or not the results agree with what was predicted. But Evolution isn't like that. It is a dogma, accepted as fact with no thought of trying to devise experiments to test it. It has achieved that status because it is what the human heart wishes to be true! It is in reality the most spectacular achievement of wishful thinking that the world has ever seen.

To properly understand the verses we are looking at today, you have to start with the first verse of the Bible:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”

and follow on with the details God has given in the rest of Genesis chapter 1. As we study those details it becomes clear, I think, that God's activities in those first six days of the earth's history were leading up to a climax. He was going to unveil His ultimate masterpiece Man, the crowning glory of His creation. Man was to be His representative and to reflect His glory, and it was to Man that He placed in subjection everything that He had made.

People today are taught that we are a little higher than the apes, but God says we are a little lower than the angels³. The catastrophe of what took place at the Fall is that Man, whom God placed at the head of His creation, took the whole of it down with him, as it were, when he fell, and ever since, the creation has been subjected to futility, as verse 20 says, and is in bondage to corruption according to verse 21.

All was lost from the date of the Fall onwards. Where there had been perfect harmony between man and woman, from that day on there was conflict. Where the earth had yielded the fullness of its potential for the joy and blessing of Man, from that day on it yielded thorns and thistles. And Man himself has relinquished his God-given role as the ruler, under God, of all the works of God's hands, and instead has bowed down and worshipped the creation rather than the One who made it. This is stated in chapter 1 verse 25 of the book we are studying.

Well might we ponder the profound question David asks the Lord in Psalm 8: “What is Man?” There is a beautiful piece of dialogue in C. S. Lewis' book *Prince Caspian* in which the young man who gives the book its title has just discovered how ignoble his ancestry is. Aslan, the great lion who is symbolic of Christ in the *Chronicles of Narnia* books, says to him:

“You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve, and that is both honour enough to raise the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor on earth.”

But that is enough about the tragedy of the history of the human race! These verses are not about the bad news. There is an unmistakable ring of triumph running through them. And that is because there was once a Man who walked this earth to whom the creation **was** subject. He could command the wind and the waves, and they obeyed His voice! This Man (called ‘the Second Man’ in 1 Corinthians 15:47) has taken upon His own shoulders all of the ruin caused by the first, that is Adam. As “the Son of Man” (the representative of the entire human race) and on behalf of the

entire human race, He carried it to the cross and there He died for all of us. There He bought, at the cost of His own life, a free pardon which is available for the asking to every one of us.

When He had finished that mighty work of redemption He rose from the dead and went back to heaven. But He has promised to return. The world may be oblivious to this imminent event, but the creation isn't! These verses tell us it is groaning, like a woman about to give birth, as it eagerly looks forward to that moment.

And yet, believe it or not, what the Scripture says here is not that the creation is waiting for the return of its Creator (and the Lord Jesus is in fact the One by whom the work of creation was accomplished) but that it is waiting for the revelation of the sons of God! Isn't that amazing? Man, who was responsible for the ruin of God's perfect world, is still to be the vehicle through which God will finally bring all of His purposes to completion. The creation was designed to have Man at its head, and so it will.

Look at the creation as it is today, its oceans full of the debris of man's profligacy, its air polluted, its resources pillaged. Yet the Bible tells us that it is eagerly awaiting the moment when God will set everything to rights. When He does so, He will reveal the sons of God, sinners like us, saved by grace, and adopted into His family; and then the creation will be set free from its bondage to corruption. It will, verse 21 says, "obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

The groaning saints

"And not only the creation", says Paul in verse 23, "but we ourselves". We are also groaning inwardly. Verses 23 to 25 depict the state of mind and heart which is normal for the Christian. By "normal" I mean normal according to Scripture. It describes the way we ought to be. We may need to confess that it is often very far from what is actually in practice the state of our minds and hearts. But this is what should be true of us!

That we have "the firstfruits of the Spirit" (verse 23) is true of us unconditionally, whether we feel it or not. According to Ephesians 1:13 and 14, the Holy Spirit was given to us, when we believed, as a kind of down payment to guarantee the inheritance God has promised us. But we are meant to be consciously enjoying, every day, the anticipation of the day when God will deliver on that promise. We are eagerly looking forward to the reality of our adoption as sons which we've already spoken about, when our bodies will be redeemed (verse 23). Whether we have died before the Lord returns or we are still living on earth, our bodies will experience a transformation to become like the body of the risen Lord Jesus, as stated in 1 Corinthians 15 verses 51 to 55.

Notice that verse 24 says that "in this hope we were saved." If the Gospel we responded to did not include something about the Christian "hope", that is, not just "going to Heaven when you die" but the anticipation of Christ's real visible return as a serious prospect to be expected, quite possibly within your lifetime, and to be eagerly awaited, then I would suggest it was defective. Because this is the Gospel of the New Testament.

The groaning Spirit

The message of the final two verses of today's passage is about what is really going on when we pray. If you find it hard to pray, you are not alone. Paul says here that we don't know what to pray for as we ought, but he also tells us that the Holy Spirit acts as a go-between, clothing our feeble prayers with power and conveying to God the real gist of what we are trying to say, with "groanings too deep for words".

Finally, then, we are told that the Spirit Himself is groaning! – not only the creation, not only we ourselves, but the Spirit also. To me this suggests that He is longing, just as we are meant to be,

for this sad world to welcome its Redeemer. Isn't this what is meant by those words, very close to the end of the Bible: "The Spirit and the bride say 'Come!'"? The bride – that's us, the church. We are longing for His return, but the Holy Spirit of God is longing too.

Thank you for listening to this truth for today talk entitled "Spirit of adoption" in our series on the book of Romans talk number T1155.

¹1 Thess. 5:23 ²John 16:33 ³Psalm 8:5 (NKJV)

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.