

Reflections on Romans Chapter 8

Most people know only one thing about this chapter, it has “All things work together for good for those who love God” (verse 28). That’s too bad because this chapter is loaded with important theology that every Christian should know, indeed, *must* know. We should spend some time thinking deeply about this text. The chapter fits right after Paul acknowledges in Chapter 7 that the sin nature, the nature that we all inherit from Adam, is still at work in us. Paul asks, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (7:24). So Chapter 8 will deal with this issue of a sin nature, and more.

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. . . ” (8:1). We have a sin nature, but because of what Christ accomplished on the cross, there’s forgiveness of sin and eternal life for those who are in Christ by faith. Paul already discussed this at length in Chapters 5 and 6. But wait. In 1 Corinthians Chapter 11, Paul reveals that some believers in the church there were under judgment for ungodly acts. Some were afflicted with sickness, and some had their lives taken away. Paul explains, **“When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world”** (1 Corinth 11:32). So “condemnation” refers to the Great White Throne judgment at the end of time, which is what we’re rescued from by faith in Christ. But that doesn’t mean we’re free to live as we please! The first generation of the Nation of Israel was “saved” by faith in the Passover lamb, yet they were punished for their disloyalty to God with death in the wilderness. David was forgiven for what he did with Bathsheba and Uriah, but he nevertheless experienced God’s punishment. Ananias and Sapphira were undoubtedly believers yet they were punished with instant death for what they did. “No condemnation” does not mean license to live as we please!

“Thru Christ Jesus, the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death” (8:2). Paul here answers his question at the end of Chapter 7. In this Church Age, a unique era between the O.T. epoch and the future Millennial Kingdom, God has lovingly gifted believers with the Holy Spirit to empower them to live a life of holiness, that is, a life of obedience to the Word of God. This is not the work of the Spirit that’s promised in the New Covenant, which is for Israel in the future. The Church has, in anticipation of the Spirit’s future work, a special gift, the indwelling Spirit of God. The gift comes because of the work of Christ, His resurrection and exaltation (Acts 2:33). And it’s for all believers whether Jew or Gentile. It’s this free gift that makes the Church Age unique.

But the Holy Spirit is a Person, a humble Person who can be grieved and offended, and His work in us can be quenched by our attitude toward God and His Word. Thus, **“Those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires”** (8:5b). We need to be yielded to the Spirit to live the holy life that pleases God. We need to know the Word of God! We can’t obey something we don’t know. If we ignore God’s Word, it’s for sure the Spirit’s empowering work in us will be nil. And if we’re not committed to obeying what we know to be God’s Word, we can be sure the Spirit’s work in us will be nil. The Spirit desires the Word of God to be lived out in our lives, all day every day; it’s why He indwells us, to give us that enablement.

“Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation . . . ” (8:12). In the paragraph beginning with this phrase, Paul hammers home the above thoughts. It’s that important. Believers are under obligation! Believing in Christ isn’t an insurance policy to assure us of our destiny at the end of life. It’s the beginning of a whole new life, a life of holiness (that is, obedience to God’s Word), enabled by the Spirit. We have a responsibility to live by the Spirit – or else. **“If by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live . . . ”** (v. 13b) means we not only are to live holy lives but we’re also to refuse to practice sin. The term for putting to death our sin nature is mortification. Both mortification and sanctification go together, they’re two sides of the same coin. We not only *do* what pleases God, we *don’t do* what offends God. In verse 13, Paul seems to be saying that the person who persists in sinful living isn’t even saved (“you will die”). The death could be a disciplinary act, as many commentators suppose, but in the context of this chapter, it seems rather to refer to eternal death. (Look carefully at verse 9c.) The one who lives according to his sin nature is not in Christ at all. We have a terribly serious obligation: to live a holy life by the Spirit, and *not* according to the sin nature that is still in us.

Pursuing holiness is not an option. It’s not something super-spiritual Christians may want to do, nor is it just for church leaders and missionaries. If we’re saved, obedience to God’s Word is our *obligation*. Just because we don’t murder, steal or commit adultery doesn’t mean we’re in compliance. Our unsaved neighbors don’t do those either. We need to know the Word, think how it applies to life today, and then intentionally obey it. Dear reader, do not neglect the Word of God!

“You received the Spirit of sonship/adoption” (v. 15b). The gift of salvation includes adoption, and the Spirit in our lives enables us to live as sons of the living God. But sonship involves more than just a precious relationship. A son reflects the

person of his father, obediently fulfills the will of his father, and a son exhibits the values of his father. This is part of the obligation that comes with salvation. Privileges, indeed, but obligations too.

We see in America today a hopelessly abridged version of Christianity. The notion that we can be saved *and* we can live as we please is simply a self-deception, a lie. There's no such thing as a one-time decision to be saved and life goes on as before but with assurance of eternal life. Rather, the one-time decision to be saved begins a life-long war against sin and a life-long practice of holiness. We're in constant war against sin, our personal sins. This war evidences the Spirit's enabling presence and is enabled by the Spirit's presence. Mortification and holiness are necessary and possible. The person who has faith that saves loves God's Word and actively obeys God's Word.

“[W]e share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (verse 17b). This verse says that just as the cross came before the crown for the Son, so it is that way for us adopted sons. There's to be suffering in our lives now if we hope for glory in the future. What kind of suffering? Paul doesn't explain. But at minimum it should include struggle with sin, although in other parts of the world and in other points in time the suffering was (and is) physical, ie, due to persecution. We American Christians suppose we can live a comfortable, peaceful, safe, happy and enjoyable life *and* go to heaven when we die. Huh? Where is the warfare with Satan (Ephesians 6)? Warfare with sin? Carry a cross? Where's the willing loss of *anything* for Christ's sake? Is the bother to go to church on Sunday and lay \$5 in the plate “suffering”?

Not every believer is (or was in the past) called upon to suffer persecution or martyrdom. Nevertheless, a follower of Christ should be willing and prepared to do that. And we should be living sacrificially, as Jesus did, giving generously to others of our substance (not just of our surfeit), eschewing reputation and political rights for the joy of serving Christ.

In the couple of paragraphs that begin with **“the glory that will be revealed in us . . . ”** (18b), Paul changes from discussing holiness to the subject of hope. The word “hope” recurs six times in vv. 18-25. **“For in this hope we were saved”** (v. 24a) refers to the hope of a future fulfillment of all that has been promised. So, for example, we have been adopted as sons, but our hope in salvation is for the future day when our adoption will be complete, that is, fully realized. We hope, or wait expectantly and confidently, for all that God has promised to be realized. There's a goal, in other words, a future state of fulfillment, and that is the Christian's hope. We have easily missed that the essence of Christianity is what's coming in the future!

Paul possibly got this idea of holiness and hope for us as adopted sons from the OT, where Israel was adopted as God's son, obligated to practice holiness (the reason for the Law), and was given many great promises, the hope of future glory. What was true for Israel then is even more true for us in this church age. Or, Paul got the idea of holiness and hope in the future from the example of Christ. As the Son, He obeyed perfectly (holiness), and He trusted his Father (hope). And we are sons too, although we're adopted, whereas Jesus is the pre-eminent firstborn, the only begotten.

“God . . . predestined [us] to be conformed to the image of his Son” (v. 29). Our ultimate conformity to the image of Christ will be the future fulfillment of our present lives of striving to be obedient and holy, humble, loving persons, trusting the Father to fulfill His many great and precious promises. In other words, as Paul wrote elsewhere, we imitate Jesus. The Son is so beautiful, so perfect, that God's intention is to have many – *very* many – created beings just like Him.

“If God is for us, who can be against us?” (31b). Satan is against us! So is his massive army of wicked demons. Plus Muslims, Marxists, and etc. The list is long. But their charges are empty. Why? Because “God is for us.” God's love isn't a slogan for a bumper sticker. Even though Nero would chop off Paul's head, and many of Paul's initial readers would be torn apart alive by lions, Paul wrote this gorgeous hymn of praise for God's love, extending from here to the end of the chapter. It doesn't matter what those who hate us (or hate Christ) do to us, our vindication comes on the other side of death. And what a vindication it is! We are joint heirs with Christ for “all things.” As Jesus went to His death fully confident of a resurrection, so can we. Because God promised it, sure, but more importantly because God loves us and He's committed to us. And Christ himself is continually interceding for us in heaven for when we fail. It doesn't get any better than this. So we can take risks, we can submit to persecution however severe it may be, we can serve Christ without fear, or suffer losses without concern. How? Knowing that God's love never fails. Only one thing though, that love is “in Christ Jesus our Lord.” God's love isn't diffuse and universal. It's “in Christ.” We are in the beloved Son.

God's great cosmic purpose throughout all time is to glorify or exalt the Son and to share the blessed life of the Godhead, and of course also to deal with evil. That all comes together here in this one magnificent chapter. You might want to go back and read it again. And then again, and again.