

## Freedom and Life in the Holy Spirit

### Romans 8:3-8

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If we think of great acts of freedom in history, they all happened by extraordinary means. British slavery was abolished by an Act of Parliament led by William Wilberforce. Israel was led out of Egypt by the power of God through Moses. American slavery was abolished through the Civil War led by Abraham Lincoln. In each case, freedom was the outcome, but the freedom was accomplished by some means. The greater the bondage, the greater the price required.

A major and glorious theme of Romans is freedom. Freedom from guilt, death, and the wrath of God. Romans is an in-depth anthology of how this was accomplished. Romans is God's *War and Peace*. Chapter 8 is the crescendo. Its most famous portions are later in the chapter. Today, we are in verses 3-8 which unpack how our freedom was achieved. We looked at verses 1-2 last week,

*"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death."* (Romans 8:1-2 ESV)

No condemnation. No guilt and no punishment. The condition is if we are in Christ Jesus, which is like saying, are you in the boat? Are you in the life preserver? Are you in your seat belt? To be in Christ is to be in union with Christ and therefore in union with all the saving benefits of Jesus accomplished in his death, burial, and resurrection. The result for all who are in Christ? No condemnation forever and ever and ever. We are free from it. But how?

*"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 for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 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. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."* (Romans 8:3-8)

If you're a bit confused by this, so was I as I studied it. There is so much crammed in here and Paul rarely illustrates. It's pure dense doctrine and description. I'm thankful for trusted teachers like John Stott and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones who helped me make sense of it and I hope to make it plain to you as well.

Nearly every verse begins with the word "for" in verses 3, 5, 6, and 7 with verse 4 starting with "in order that." This is Paul the lawyer. Paul the apologist for the gospel telling the story of freedom by explaining how it was accomplished. Verses 3-4 sound very familiar as it rings with the language of justification.

*"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 for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us."* (Romans 8:3-4)

Over and over in Romans we hear "the law." The Torah. The Old Testament law. Paul pounds home that the law is great at identifying our sin, but terrible at doing anything about it. There were Jews in the Roman church for whom their whole pre-Christian life was attempting to be righteous by obeying the law. Problem: sinners are incapable of fulfilling the law, so instead of giving right standing before God, the law can only condemn us. Further, it can only diagnose the problem, it can't fix anything.

The law is like expecting the X-ray machine to fix your broken leg. X-ray machines are really good at telling you your leg is broken. You can shout at the machine in pain, *fix my leg! Heal my leg! Make the pain go away!* It can't do it. It takes a surgeon and casting and time for bones to heal.

The law is a great X-ray machine, but a terrible surgeon. "The law" in Romans applies to any of man's attempts at self-salvation in any religion. It doesn't matter how often you wash in the Ganges river or do a pilgrimage to Mecca or climb the holy stairs in Rome on your knees in prayer, all these attempts to have right standing with God based on human effort and merit fall short. The law can't save us. We can't save ourselves.

But hallelujah, God did it. How?

*"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 for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us."* (Romans 8:3-4)

This is a little John 3:16 type gospel in one verse. *God sent his Son.* God is God the Father. The Son is the second person of the Trinity. "Sending" infers pre-existence with God. Indeed, Christ is eternal God. *"In the likeness of sinful flesh."* There is so much discussion on this phrase. *Likeness* could suggest Jesus wasn't actually human, merely like human. And *"sinful flesh"* could be taken that Jesus in the flesh was sinful. What? Both suggestions are serious heresy.

Paul here is threading the Christological needle. Jesus was fully man without being at all sin. Yet, he was *like "sinful flesh"* without *being* sinful flesh. He threads the needle grammatically keeping Jesus both fully human and fully without sin. Yet don't miss that Jesus was as close to us in all our humanity and sinfulness as he could possibly be. As Hebrews tells us, he is our faithful high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses yet remain the pure and unblemished God-man (Hebrews 4:15).

*"He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us."* (Romans 8:3-4)

Most often when we see *"righteous requirement of the law"* it is plural, "righteous requirements" and it speaks to Jesus' fulfillment of all the moral demands of the law making him a qualified Savior and sacrifice for sin. However, notice that here it is singular. Requirement. *"In order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us."* What does that mean?

It shows that Paul isn't talking about Jesus' life, but our lives. We are free from the law's condemnation and are enabled by the Spirit to live righteously.

If I can return to my X-ray illustration, the X-ray says we are morally broken. God, the spiritual surgeon, repairs the break through Jesus and now we can walk again. Run again.

Dance again. When is an injured athlete “free?” When they can run and jump again. Ever since Adam’s sin, we’ve been spiritually lame. Broken. But now, by the Spirit of God, we are “free” to live out God’s plan and purposes again. That’s freedom.

Any young people with braces on their teeth? You have a day of freedom coming. I know. I had my day. When they take those braces off, when you are free from the braces, your teeth have never felt as good. You are free to smile and eat popcorn.

*“...who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” (Romans 8:4)*

Paul draws a comparison between living according to the flesh and according to the Spirit—our old way of life and our new way of life. “Flesh” is not our physical bodies. It is the sinful inward inclination of our hearts. Some translations go with, *sin nature*. We can either live according to the priorities of our sinful nature or live according to the priorities of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Notice the contrast here:

*“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. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” (Romans 8:5-8)*

<u>The Flesh-led Life</u>	<u>The Spirit-led life</u>
Motivated by worldly priorities	Motivated by spiritual priorities
Leads to Death	Leads to life and peace
Hostile to God <i>Hates God’s purposes</i> <i>Cannot please God</i>	

The repeated verb is “sets their mind.” This is the controlling inward motivation of our hearts. One author calls it the “absorbing objects of thought, interest, affection and purpose.”<sup>1</sup> Is that inward core of our being animated by our sin nature or the Holy Spirit? Indwelling sin or indwelling Spirit? The unbeliever has no alternate life motivation. Through common grace they can enjoy creation benefits and blessings of love, family, vocation, and golf. However, they never have true freedom. They are never free NOT to sin. They are never free to please God with their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, p. 285.

*"And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."* (Hebrews 11:6)

Without faith it is impossible to please God. They may be wonderful neighbors and family members, but what we think of people isn't what matters. It's what God thinks. Apart from God's grace, no human being can please God.

*"For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace."* (Romans 8:6)

Here are two motivations with two very different results. The flesh leads to death. Yes, physical death, but even in life the flesh-led life is a kind of dying. Death is separation and distortion of who we were made to be. Sin takes us further and further from God's good purposes and blessings. Sin is a long path away from God.

I'm sure you've seen the pictures of aging rock stars. They don't look good. Drugs, sex, and rock 'n' roll hollow out your life. The local paper posts pictures of recent arrests. Theft, domestic violence, drugs, etc. The people in those photos look terrible. Why? Sin is a journey further and further from ourselves made in the image of God.

But the Spirit-led life is the opposite. It draws us closer to God. It renews our humanity. It resurrects us to who we were made to be and directs our lives in the direction of spiritual priorities.

Paul isn't exhorting Christians to live by the Spirit (although he does elsewhere). What he is saying in Romans 8 is that true Christians do. Why? We've been set free by God. We have been indwelt by the Holy Spirit. God is actively doing a work in our lives. He set us free in justification and he is in the process of setting us free from all the sinful ways of thinking and living. As Stott points out, "Thus God justifies us through his Son and sanctifies us through his Spirit."<sup>2</sup>

This new life is by the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit, we can neither understand the gospel nor live it out. *"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."* (1 Corinthians 2:14)

The story is told of famous British politicians William Wilberforce and William Pitt. In the decades following the American Revolution, they were close friends. It was quite a power friendship as today both have statues in their honor in Westminster Abbey. Pitt was Prime Minister of Britain at age 24. Wilberforce was a devoted Christian. Pitt was a cultural Christian. Wilberforce had a preacher he desperately wanted Pitt to hear. Pitt finally went with him. The whole sermon Wilberforce basked in the truth. When it was done, Pitt said to Wilberforce, "You know Wilberforce, I had not the slightest idea what that man has been talking about."

Perhaps you are William Pitt today. None of this makes any sense. It certainly doesn't thrill you nor does it interest you. Why? Has God the Holy Spirit taken a hold of the core of your life? Is your life separation from God or movement toward God? Death or life and peace? Without the Holy Spirit, the gospel doesn't do anything.

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<sup>2</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Romans*, p. 219.

A few weeks ago, on one of these really cold nights, Jennifer called me. She was by the mall on Highway 30. She said, "The van's battery is dead. It won't turn over at all." OK. I said, "We have jumper cables in the van, could anyone give you a jump?" A couple was walking past, and she asked them to help. They said yes. She called me back, "It still isn't working." OK. I gathered the daughters and we headed up there confident. No problem. I'm the husband. I got this. I pulled our car up, hooked up the cables. Nothing. We let it charge. It's getting dark. Still nothing. Did I mention it was cold out? I said, "I think we need to go to AutoZone and get a new battery." So, we did.

The manager said, "Before you buy a new battery, how about I look at it?" Now that's customer service. I'm now a big fan of AutoZone on Highway 30. He drove over and hooked up the cables. Gave it a try. Nothing. Dead. He took our battery out and we went back to the store. Their computers were down, and they said, "You have to pay cash." Who has \$130 cash on them? Not us. What do you do? I called an elder in our church who brought the money up. Bought the new battery. The manager went with us back to our van. Hooked it up. Guess what happened? It immediately turned over and started.

I was so moved by the manager's help I offered him some of the elder's money as a thank you. He declined. So, let's all do business with AutoZone on 30 by the mall. Great people.

What's the point? The unbeliever is the van with a dead battery. All our attempts to make it work couldn't make it work. You can have Billy Graham on the TV 24/7, put verses up all around the house, and keep the car radio on Moody. The battery is totally dead. Humans can't jump start the dead human heart.

But God can. How did God set us free? He didn't try to resuscitate our old nature. He didn't try to energize our flesh and make it go. That's why William Pitt had no idea what the preacher was talking about and explains why you may have no idea what I am talking about.

What's needed? You need a new battery. You need a new heart. You need what only God can give you. You need the Holy Spirit who gives life and brings peace. Repent of your sin and trust in Jesus. When you do, you get a new battery. The core of our lives is directionally changed from flesh and self and sin toward God and truly a whole new life. Where are you today?

You may say, *I'm really not sure*. Galatians is another letter by Paul which helpfully shows the difference between a life directionally led by the flesh and a life directionally led by the Spirit.

<i>Fruits of being led by the flesh</i>	Fruits of being led by the Spirit
sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these	love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self- control
Galatians 5:19-21	Galatians 5:22-23

Get this, Paul is not urging unbelievers to try and show these fruits in their lives. It won't happen! It would be like me urging my van to start with a dead battery.

This passage is both an explanation and an exhortation for sinners to turn in faith to Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit. The net effect is a Spirit-led life whose ongoing reality is life and peace.

*"Deliverance from the tyranny of sin, effected through the atoning work of Christ, as an experienced ongoing reality, is the work of the indwelling, life-giving Spirit."<sup>3</sup> (Gordon Fee)*

Freedom. Freedom not to sin. Freedom not to live motivated by sin but by Spirit. One kills. The other gives life. One empties my humanity. The other restores and renews. Indwelling sin or indwelling Spirit? Which is the controlling principle of your life?

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, p. 528.