

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND YOU

### *The Spirit's Help in Your Struggle*

I imagine that most of us here sincerely desire to live a life characterized by spiritual maturity and at least some semblance of sanity as we face our hurts, habits and hang-ups. But when faced with sin and suffering within and around us, does it ever seem to you that such spiritual and emotional stability is mere wishful thinking?

Take, for instance, the area of temptation. Scores of books and pamphlets have been written on the issue of Christian growth and victory over sin and temptation. We have been given such formulas as “let go and let God” or “stop trying and start trusting.” These sound so good and certainly there is some truth in them. A fresh perspective seems to bring a moment of sustained stability and victory! But then, inevitably, certain ever-persistent struggles gain a foot-hold once again. We still incessantly struggle with pride, lust, materialism and impatience. We still covet, overeat, criticize others and hold grudges, fail to love our husbands and our wives as we should, and a whole host of other sins which paralyze us and confine us to the realm of spiritual mediocrity.

But we not only struggle with temptation, we struggle with trouble. By that I mean the pain of living in a perverted world, pockmarked by the effects of sin. After all, why do bad things happen to good people? Or even more pressing is the question, “How do I respond when bad things happen to me, God’s child?” In fact, maybe you feel that since becoming a Christian, life is more difficult than before. Why is that? Maybe you feel that you never bargained for such trouble.

Just how does God’s Spirit help us in our struggle in these two areas of temptation and trouble, of sin and suffering? After all, if I didn’t have temptation in my life and if I was free of trouble, I would conclude that I was *already* in the “age to come,” heaven. But as we’ve seen, we only experience partially in the present what we will experience fully in the future. So how does God’s Spirit help us in these “in between times” as we face the ever present reality of temptation and trouble in our lives?

In Romans 8 Paul gives you and me some insightful answers to that question. In these verses the Apostle addresses experiences common to all of us as we face temptation and trouble in our lives. He speaks of guilt, temptation, discouragement and fear. But the encouragement he gives us is that the Spirit of God is there to help you and me in each of these very real, human experiences. Let me explain.

Paul’s expose on the Holy Spirit in Romans 8 can be divided neatly into two portions. In verses 1-17 he addresses how the Spirit of God helps you and me in our struggle against temptation and sin. And then starting in verse 18 he speaks to the issue of the Spirit’s help in our trouble and suffering. In other words, he first talks about the problem of sin within us and then about the suffering around us.

## **The Spirit's Help in our Sin (Romans 8:1-17)**

Paul begins in verse 1 explaining that for us, God's "Spirit people," there is *no condemnation*. And that spells freedom from guilt.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.  
Romans 8:1

The Spirit of God helps you and me in our struggle by reminding us that the *penalty* of sin has been canceled. Guilt is the corrosion of the soul. The Bible says that, apart from Christ, *all* are guilty before God and stand condemned. You might try to deny your guilt. Or you might try to drown it through drink or drug abuse. Some try to deflect it, by blaming others for their sin. How can you get rid of it? You can't drown it, deny it, or deflect it. You can only dissolve it...through the blood of Jesus Christ.

The guilt of sin and its eternal penalty of death are "dissolved" when you take refuge in Jesus Christ. Remember Noah and the threat of judgment that was about to fall on the whole world? After the ark was built, God told Noah, "Go into the ark, you and your entire family..." (Genesis 7:1). And then we read, "The Lord *shut him in*." Noah and his family were "shut in," safe and secure from the universal judgment around them. And Moses goes out of his way to note that they were safe in an ark that was covered within and without by "pitch" or tar. Now it is certainly more than coincidence that the very Hebrew word for "pitch" is translated "atonement" more than one hundred times in the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> What it meant for Noah to be "shut in" the Ark, it means for you and me to be placed "in Christ." We are safe. That is why this chapter begins in verse 1 with "no condemnation" and ends in verse 39 with "no separation." And it is the Spirit of life that makes this a reality in your life.

But the Spirit of God not only reminds us that the *penalty* of sin is canceled, but that the *power* of sin is broken. This is what Paul says in verses 12-14.

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation – but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

If you have the Spirit of God, there is no longer any condemnation *of* sin. And if you have the Spirit of God, there is no any obligation *to* sin. The penalty of sin has been forgiven. And the power of sin has been broken.

But you say, "Pastor David, that sure isn't the case in my life. Even though I have the Spirit of God, I feel that the power of sin is very much alive and well in my life. And all Paul says her about putting to death the misdeeds of the body...well, it doesn't seem to work very well for me!"

But let me ask you, "Do you, believer, know who you really are?" We will never be all we were meant to be until we truly know that we are no longer who we used to be. Or put in other terms, until we realize that we are *not* what we so often think we are and that we *are no longer* what we

once were, we'll never be free from habitual sin no matter how good our intentions are. Our stability as we face temptation begins right here, with a new understanding of our true identity in Jesus Christ as well as the power of His Spirit who lives within us.

What Paul says here in Romans 8 about the Spirit's help in our struggle against sin cannot be understood apart from what he has already said in Romans 6 and 7. And in Romans 6 there are three important words that you must *never* forget as you face temptation in your life. The words are: Know, Consider, and Offer.

First we are to *know* something. Paul says in Romans 6:6 "For we *know* that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin." Simply stated, *we died*. And you and I must *know* this. We must realize that Jesus Christ not only died *for us* – that takes care of the penalty of our sin and its eternal consequences. But more than that, *we died with Christ*. And that addresses the problem of the power of sin in our lives in the present.

Death means *separation*. Physical death is separation of the soul from the body. Spiritual death is separation of our life from God's life. Eternal death is separation from God throughout eternity. But for the believer, our death to sin means *release* and *separation* from sin. And for the believer who has died to sin ... to continue in all the habits and hang-ups of sin is a blatant contradiction. Paul simply exclaims: "How can it be?" [Because this point is so important and we don't have the time to develop it further this morning, I am putting on our web page a previous message from Romans 6 that I hope you'll read and study.]

Some years ago, while working at a funeral home in Tennessee, I had an experience that I'll never forget. One evening while at work we were hosting a large Italian funeral. Now most Italians are far from being sedate, even during visiting hours at the funeral home! I had the impression we were hosting a wedding party.

In any case, the secretary of the funeral home received an outside call requesting to speak to a particular person attending the Italian funeral. She (supposedly) gave me the name of the person requested. I was to go to the funeral parlor, ask for this person in a loud, strong voice (over all the Italian chatter!) and take the individual to the phone across the hall. Well, so far, so good. This I proceeded to do. But to my surprise, when I called for this person by his first and last name – an awesome hush fell over that crowd of talkative Italians. All eyes were turned on me and then one in the crowd said: "Sir, the one you are asking for is ... in the casket!"

The fault was the secretary's; but the point is this. For that dead man to have hopped out of his casket and dash to the phone would have been not only a horror, but an absurd contradiction. Why? The one who had died had died to life! Death means separation. To be *dead* to sin is to be separated from the penalty and power of sin in our lives.

Secondly, we are to *consider* our "death to sin" to be true. And so Paul says in Romans 6:11 "In the same way, count (consider) yourselves dead to sin but alive to God." And finally we are to *offer* ourselves to God based upon what we know and consider to be true.

Do not *offer* the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather *offer* yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. Romans 6:13

Now how does all of this relate to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives? Romans 6 tells us the truth of our historic “death to sin” (even though it goes contrary to what we might feel and experience at times!). Romans 8 tells us how to implement it in our lives. Notice Romans 8:13 –

...if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

Just how do you do that? Picture a coin falling to the ground under the influence of the law of gravity. In and of itself, that coin is powerless to overcome the downward pull of the law of gravity. We might say it is under obligation to fall to the ground. But let’s say that before it has gone too far, my arm reaches out, grabs the coin and takes it higher and higher in defiance of the law of gravity. In a very real sense, the law of life in my arm defies the law of gravity that pulls the coin downward. Does that mean the original law of gravity has ceased to operate? No, but another law has come into play. In a similar way, for the Christian the “law” of sin and death has now been overcome by the “law” (i.e. the principle) of the Spirit of God.

“But I still don’t understand,” you might say. “Just how does this work out practically?” Let’s say that you are being tempted to sin...whether it be lust, anger, bitterness or any other sin. You can tell yourself something like this:

This sin (and you name it) is not my true identity. That life is past; new things have come. The Spirit of life in Christ has freed me from the power of sin. I consider my new identity with Christ to be true and will not offer the parts of my body – mind, will, emotions, eyes, hands or feet – to be used as instruments of sin. I choose rather to offer myself to God as an instrument of righteousness and goodness. In dependence upon the power of the Holy Spirit I will live out my true identity in Christ.

That is how the Spirit of God helps us in our struggle with sin. He empowers us to take the truth of our identity in Christ and apply it when tempted. But God’s Spirit not only helps us in our sin that so often comes from within, but also in our suffering that comes from without.

### **The Spirit’s help in our Suffering (Romans 8:18-39)**

Notice how Paul transitions to this topic of suffering in verse 17:

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. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

Because of that little word “if,” it sounds like sharing in future glory is conditioned upon sharing in present suffering. The opposite would then also be true – no suffering now, no glory later. However, the Greek language doesn’t really say this. The “if indeed” means really “since.” Verse 17 best reads like this: “since we share in his sufferings...” We have here then the first

thing that Paul tells us about suffering in these verses. *Suffering is a normal to-be-expected part of the Christian life.* That this is so is stated again and again in the New Testament. For example:

Jesus: “in this world you will have trouble.” John 16:33

Paul: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him but also to suffer for him.” Philippians 1:29

Peter: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.” 1 Peter 4:12

But in our western, domesticated, cultured America, we have a hard time embracing this. And I can't help but believe that our preoccupation with safety, security, comfort and convenience often holds us back from raw, radical commitment to Jesus Christ. After all, who wants to suffer? And so we opt for a domesticated and tame faith that runs from risk and shuns suffering.

But for those who are wild at heart and passionate to follow our Commander-and-Chief in his sufferings, there is a promise right in the middle of these verses: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness” (Romans 8:26). You and I are “weak” as we face the consequences of living in a fallen world – with suffering and loss and pain and disappointment. But God does not condemn us for this weakness. The word itself carries no bad moral implications. In fact, it is even used of Jesus who, it is said, was subject to weakness (Heb 5:2).

But in our weakness, how does the Spirit help us? Paul gives us two answers. First, the Spirit guarantees our future. Paul tells us in verse 23 that the Spirit is the “firstfruits” of the age to come. When we struggle with the trouble of life this side of heaven, the Spirit of God is there to say, “Remember, look ahead. View the present in light of the future. Remember that the sufferings of this present life are nothing to be compared with the satisfaction of being in Jesus’ presence.” And the Spirit of God within us is the guarantee that our heavenly home is just around the corner.

In the meantime, the Spirit of God also intercedes for us. Notice again verse 26:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

It is often in our weakness that prayer takes on new meaning. And that is understandable. Prayer is the expression *par excellence* of our dependence upon God. It is often in the throws of trouble when we can't make sense of the world around us or the pain within us that prayer expresses our naked trust in God whom we cannot see.

My colleague and co-pastor Reilly Gibby shared with me how early in his ministry he would often linger after the service, talking to this person and that. But once, when he finally stepped outside the church, his then four-year-old daughter, Melody, didn't come out. But by then the building was empty, and the door was locked and could be opened only with a key.

Reilly called through the mail slot in the large oak door, “Melody, are you in there?” A small frightened voice answered, “Yes, Daddy.” Then Melody put her hand through the mail slot so her Daddy could hold it until someone fetched a church key. Melody couldn’t see him, but she knew her father was there, and she was comforted.

Especially in our difficulty, prayer is like a comforting hand through a mail slot. The Father is there listening and comforting in your severest struggles, even when you can’t see him.

Often in difficulty we don’t know *specifically* what to pray. And guess what? Even Paul did not know specifically what to pray! In fact, he includes himself in this statement – “*We* do not know...”

Paul’s ignorance about his “thorn in the flesh” is an example of this. Now we don’t know precisely what that thorn in the flesh was. Perhaps it was an eye disease. But according to 2 Corinthians 12:7 he prayed three times, “Lord, take it away!” And the Lord’s answer was simply, “No...my grace is sufficient for you.” We often pray ignorantly, but the Spirit intercedes for us according to the will of God. As a true friend, the Holy Spirit finds us in our weakness, takes our part and speaks on our behalf.

Now this should be a great encouragement to you and me. Sometimes we place a great emphasis upon the formulation of our prayers. But our prayers do not have to be precisely formulated in order to be effective. In fact, the most inarticulate expressions of prayer, if they spring from right intentions and are offered in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, are truly effective. This is true because the real value of prayer lies ultimately in the intercessory groanings of the Holy Spirit and not in the ignorant praying of weak believers.

So how does God’s Spirit help us in our struggle? He empowers us to overcome temptation and to move through suffering to the glory of God.

As we close today, we want to hear from you. Here’s the question: How had God’s Spirit helped you in your struggle?

---

<sup>i</sup> It is used in Exodus 30:10 for Aaron who makes atonement on the horns of the altar of incense one a year.