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Exegesis Romans 8:1-17

Introduction

Evangelical pastor and author, Ray Steadman, describes Paul's writing of Romans as "the most powerful human document that has ever been penned."¹ Theologian and pastor, John Piper claims Romans chapter 8 is the greatest chapter in the Bible.² The first 17 verses of chapter 8 may be short in length, but unfathomable in theological depth. In this paper I will unpack the theological riches packed into each word of Paul's writing of Romans 8:1-17 explaining the life giving power of the Spirit overcoming the desires of the flesh and the good news for believers in Christ concluding Paul's argument in response to the question, "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! (Rom 6:15).

Background

The literary epistle to the church in Rome was written by the Apostle Paul with contributions from Tertius and Phoebe.³ With the data available in the letter, the corresponding timeline in Acts, and along with other sources, the letter was written from Corinth prior to Paul's trip to take the offering to the church of Jerusalem in AD 55.⁴ Paul did not start this church and had not visited the church in person. However, we know from Paul's personal greetings to many members of the church in Rom 16 that Paul knew of the work and personal matters of many members. He writes to introduce himself and defend his apostolic authority over the Gentile church and to counter other problems among Christians in Rome.⁵ Paul's letter draws from a deep well of pastoral experiences he has dealt with in other churches and is also viewed as his theological treatise on justification, sanctification, and glorification. He builds upon the promises to Abraham, the effects of Mosaic Law, and the power of the Spirit taught to his church in Galatia. He draws upon his admonishment and correcting of the Corinthians in divisions of the body and over spiritual matters.⁶ The Roman church was a mixture of Jewish and Gentile Christians, but like the community of Rome a majority were Gentiles. The background of the

¹ "The Greatest Chapter in the Bible?", accessed November 8, 2023, <https://www.expository.org/romans8.htm#:~:text=John%20Piper%3A%20%E2%80%9CWhich%20of%20us,than%20the%20book%20of%20Romans.%E2%80%9D>.

² "Greatest Book, Greatest Chapter, Greatest Joy," Plenary 5- 2014 National Conference, Accessed November 8, 2023, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/greatest-book-greatest-chapter-greatest-joy>.

³ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 5.

⁴ Marshall, *Exploring the New Testament*, 147.

⁵ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 9-10.

⁶ Michael Gorman, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022), 28.

Jewish Christians is an important matter as it formed their theological outlook. Acts 2:10 and 28:21 taken with statements from the Roman historian Tacitus and 4th century commentator Ambrosiaster give us indications of their origins to Peter and James and the church of Jerusalem that would follow Jewish Christian liturgical rites and reverence to Mosaic law.⁷

Outline for Romans

1. The Gospel as the Revelation of the Righteousness of God ([Rom. 1:1–17](#))
 - i. Salutation: the gospel concerning God’s Son (Rom. 1:1–7)
 - ii. Thanksgiving: prayer for an apostolic visit (Rom. 1:8–15)
 - iii. Theme: the gospel of the righteousness of God (Rom. 1:16–17)
2. God’s Righteousness in His Wrath against Sinners ([Rom. 1:18–3:20](#))
 - iv. The unrighteousness of the Gentiles (Rom. 1:18–32)
 - v. The unrighteousness of the Jews (Rom. 2:1–3:8)
 - vi. The unrighteousness of all people (Rom. 3:9–20)
3. The Saving Righteousness of God ([Rom. 3:21–4:25](#))
 - vii. God’s righteousness in the death of Jesus (Rom. 3:21–26)
 - viii. Righteousness by faith for Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 3:27–31)
 - ix. Abraham as the father of Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 4:1–25)
4. Hope as a Result of Righteousness by Faith ([Rom. 5:1–8:39](#))
 - x. Assurance of hope (Rom. 5:1–11)
 - xi. Hope in Christ’s triumph over Adam’s sin (Rom. 5:12–21)
 - xii. The triumph of grace over the power of sin (Rom. 6:1–23)
 - xiii. The triumph of grace over the power of the law (Rom. 7:1–6)
 - xiv. The law and sin (Rom. 7:7–25)
 - xv. Life in the Spirit (Rom. 8:1–17)
 - xvi. Assurance of hope (Rom. 8:18–39)
5. God’s Righteousness to Israel and to the Gentiles ([Rom. 9:1–11:36](#))
 - xvii. God’s saving promises to Israel (Rom. 9:1–29)
 - xviii. Israel’s rejection of God’s saving promises (Rom. 9:30–11:10)
 - xix. God’s righteousness in his plan for Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 11:11–32)
 - xx. Concluding doxology (Rom. 11:33–36)
6. God’s Righteousness in Everyday Life ([Rom. 12:1–15:13](#))
 - xxi. Paradigm for exhortations: total dedication to God (Rom. 12:1–2)
 - xxii. Marks of the Christian community (Rom. 12:3–13:14)
 - xxiii. A call for mutual acceptance between the strong and the weak (Rom. 14:1–15:13)
7. The Extension of God’s Righteousness through the Pauline Mission ([Rom. 15:14–16:23](#))
 - xxiv. The establishment of churches among the Gentiles (Rom. 15:14–33)
 - xxv. Appreciation and greetings to coworkers in the gospel (Rom. 16:1–23)
8. Final Summary of the Gospel of the Righteousness of God ([Rom. 16:25–27](#))⁸

⁷ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 8.

⁸ ESV Study Bible, Wheaton: Crossway, Goodnews Publishers, 2008.

Romans 8:1-17

8 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 3 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, 4 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. 5 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. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 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. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. 12 So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. 13 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. 14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 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!" 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 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.⁹

To properly analyze Romans 8:1-17 one must fit this profound proclamation into the broader context of the work of Christ explained by the Apostle Paul in the chapters leading up to chapter 8.

All men are condemned to death

Paul describes the wrath of God against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Rom 1:18). Although they knew God, they rejected Him, Rom 1:21, and God gave them over to their passions, Rom 1:26, resulting in death (Rom 1:32). Both Jew and Gentile have sinned and will perish (Rom 2:12). Through the Law comes knowledge of sin and by the works of the Law no one will be justified in the sight of God (Rom 3:20).

Faith Alone

Apart from the Law, the righteousness of God has been manifested in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. All men through faith in Jesus Christ are justified and redeemed (Rom 3:21, 23-24). The justified experience peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ and exult in the hope of the glory of God by grace alone (Rom 5:1-2). As the sin of Adam brought condemnation to all men, Gen. 3:19, the act of righteousness of Jesus brought justification of life to all men (Rom 5:18). The law revealed sin and condemned all men to death, but where sin reigned in death, grace reigned all the more in righteousness.

⁹ ESV Study Bible.

Grace Alone

We are no longer under the Law and the gift of grace exceeds all transgressions of the Law. Starting in chapter 6 and concluding in 8:1-17, Paul explains the theological process of justification through faith in the atoning work of Jesus and sanctification of the believer through the life-giving power of the Spirit. He begins with the literary technique of diatribe answering questions that believers would naturally ask when learning of God's grace through faith in Jesus: Shall we continue to sin because we are not under the Law but under grace? Paul exclaims, by no means! (Rom 6:15). We who were once slaves to sin have been freed and became slaves to righteousness resulting in sanctification (Rom 6:17-19, 22). Paul again uses the diatribe technique to pose the next question Believers may ask: Is the Law sin? May it never be (Rom 7:7). How would we know sin if we did not have the Law? Paul recognizes the battle of the Law of God and the law of sin (Rom 7:25). Chapter 7 ends with Paul's reasoning for the usefulness of the Law exposing sin and his recognition along with his readers of their desperate need for a savior, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom 7:24,25). Paul's desperate pronouncement sets the stage for his concluding response to the question of whether we should continue to live in sin because we are not under the law but under grace.

The structure of Paul's conclusion of Romans 8:1-17:

8:1 In Christ, believers are free from eternal condemnation.

8:2-4 The law of the Spirit empowers the believer to fulfill the righteous requirement of the Law.

8:5-8 The mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.

8:9-11 The indwelling power of the Spirit will one day give life to believer's mortal bodies at the resurrection.

8:12-13. Paul's concluding answer to the question: Shall we continue to sin because we are not under the Law but under grace (6:15)?

8:14-17 The Spirit of God has adopted believers in Christ as sons and co-heirs of God and Christ's suffering, death, righteousness, resurrection, and eternal glory.

8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

"Therefore" connects the foundation built by Paul in the prior chapters. Specifically contrasting the sin of one, Adam, resulting in God's judgment unto condemnation for all humankind to the work of One, Jesus Christ, resulting in the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness in Rom 5:12-21. "Now" connects with the promise given in Rom 7:6 emphasizing we have "now" been released from the tyranny of the Law. "No condemnation" is a theological pronouncement of grace. Schreiner describes the word "condemnation" as a forensic term,

denoting the removal of the curse, Gal. 3:10, from those who are descendants of Adam.¹⁰ This proclamation concludes with the means by which the believer escapes condemnation, “for those in Christ Jesus.” Reaching back to Rom 6:1-11, Paul proclaims believers are not under the condemnation deserved as children of Adam, but our condemnation has been overturned by Jesus Christ’s atoning death and resurrection.

2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 3 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, 4 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.

Verses 2-4 serve to provide explanation why condemnation no longer exists for those in Christ. Paul contrasts the “law of the Spirit” with the “law of sin and death.” The “law of sin and death” refers to the Mosaic Law which condemns all mankind (Rom. 7:7-25, 1 Cor. 15:56). At first this may seem to tarnish the Mosaic Law, but I agree with Douglas Moo emphasizing the Mosaic Law is God’s law given with a positive purpose as part of God’s overall salvation plan.¹¹ Paul contrasts this Law with the “law of the Spirit” that gives righteousness and life. The believer is released from condemnation of the Mosaic Law through faith in Christ Jesus. The word *nomos* is translated “law” on both sides of this comparison, but nowhere does Paul suggest the Mosaic Law provides freedom for Believers and would contradict his message of the Law revealing sin in chapter 7. Schreiner asserts that, in some instances, Paul uses the word *nomos* metaphorically.¹² Since the “nomos of the Spirit” cannot refer to the Mosaic Law, Paul is associating it to more of a principle such as the “law written on the heart,” the law of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34, Ezek. 36:26-27).

“For” begins verse 3 by adding further explanation to the condemnation of the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic Law could not break the power of sin over the flesh and is therefore described as “weak” because it was weakened by the flesh that could not live according to its standard. Note the flesh is not the flesh of our bodies but a worldly orientation that all people share.¹³ The Law only advances the power of sin and condemnation (Rom 5:20, 7:5). Only through the liberating work of Christ did God work by sending His son in the form of sinful flesh to assume the condemnation on behalf of the flesh (Gal 4:4). Paul describes God’s “sending” of Jesus in the “likeness of sinful flesh.” Eduard Schweizer contends that early Christian confessional language expressed a “sending formula” that spoke of Jesus as being “sent” by God” just as the Torah, Wisdom and Logos were sent.¹⁴ If Paul is referencing this early Christian confessional language

¹⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 394, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/houstonbaptist-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5550856>.

¹¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018), 477, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/houstonbaptist-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5966785>.

¹² Schreiner, *Romans*, 394.

¹³ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 501.

¹⁴ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 695.

it helps to understand and add *color* to modern day readers of the text. This “sending” is also supported in Jn 3:16-17, Jn 4:9 and Gal 4:4-5. Describing Jesus being “sent” in the likeness of sinful flesh emphasizes Jesus as fully human, born of the flesh, fully qualified as a substitute to accept God’s judgment of sin in the atoning death of His Son.¹⁵ Some argue that Jesus was fully God and only appeared to be human. Paul’s description of Jesus “sent in likeness of sinful flesh” refers to both his similarity and difference from man and is not declaring Jesus appearing to be like a man but not really human which is Docetism.¹⁶

Verse 4 completes the explanation of why God condemned sin in the flesh. So “that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us.” The Law is not cancelled, and believers are unable to perfectly obey the Law, so how is the righteous requirement of the Law fulfilled in believers? It is through the action of God the Father who places the condemnation that is due to men on His Son who is fully righteous. In this “exchange,” Christ’s righteousness is transferred to believers and “Christ becomes what believers are so that believers might become what Christ is.”¹⁷ Following “us,” the phrase “who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” is descriptive of the believers who received the righteousness of Christ. It does not infer the behavior of believers fulfilled the Law but describes believers who are now empowered by the Spirit to not live according to the sinful nature. Paul undoubtedly connects the OT promise given to Ezekiel,

“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ezek 36:26-27).

What does the Spirit empowered life of a believer look like? According to Douglas Moo, the righteous requirement is fulfilled in the command to love as expressed in Gal 5:14 and Rom 13:8-10.¹⁸

5 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. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 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. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Verse 5-8 transitions from the conclusion that believers can keep the Law by the power of the Spirit in 4 to illustrate why non-believers cannot keep the Law. Here, Paul continues to describe the two diametrically opposed mindsets of flesh and Spirit in living one’s life. Paul starts verse 6 with the inseparable connection of flesh with death and Spirit with life. The death

¹⁵ Gal. 4:4, 2 Cor. 5:21.

¹⁶ Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul's Rhetoric in its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers LLC, 2004), 196.

¹⁷ 2 Cor. 5:21, Gal. 3:13, Gal.4:4-5; Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 506.

¹⁸ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 504-505.

connected with those who have the mind of the flesh is not only eschatological condemnation but also includes death that reigns in this life for all those who are outside Christ (Rom 5:12, 15, 21). Life and peace are opposed to death and speak to the eschatological position of the believer but are also experienced in this life as peace with God through justification.¹⁹ So, are believers who have been declared righteous, empowered by the Spirit, have life and are setting their mind on the Spirit immune from setting their mind on the flesh and experiencing death? Is this conflict between the flesh and Spirit only present in non-believers? Longenecker establishes that Paul recognizes that both non-believers and believers tend to return to their sinful nature and provides examples of Paul's exhortation to believers in Phillipi who need encouragement to live according to the Spirit.²⁰ These believers may have eschatological life and peace, but also experience the results of sin and death in this life when they return to their sinful nature. "Because" in verse 7 explains why a mind set on flesh leads to death. The mind set on the flesh has a completely different worldview and eschatological position than the one who sets their mind on the Spirit. Paul says that the one who sets their mind on the flesh is hostile to God. "For," or furthermore, the mind set on the flesh does not subject itself to the Law of God. The world view of the one who sets their mind on the flesh does not operate according to or subject itself to the Law because it does not value the Law but values the things of the flesh. Schreiner explains, "Those in the flesh don't value God as supreme but worship the creature rather than the Creator."²¹ Not only is the mind of the flesh in opposition to God, but it is also unable to subject itself to the Law of God. However, Christ died giving believers the power of the Spirit the righteous requirement of the law may be fulfilled in believers. All unbelievers and believers are sons and daughters of Adam and are born afflicted by sin (Rom. 5:12-19, 6:6, 17). Verse 8 concludes the phrase declaring the result of all being born in the nature of sin and in opposition to God are unable to please God. But only according to God's grace are believers no longer under the Law, but and can proclaim there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 6:14, 8:1).

9 You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

Many commentators rightly group 5-8 with 9-11 as they generally work together to complete the illustration of how the mind set on the flesh leads to death and the mind set on the Spirit leads to life. I have divided because "You, however" indicates a change in the direction of Paul's address as he completes his argument. He now turns his address to the Roman Christians. "You" and "your" are expressed throughout this declaration as plural pronouns indicating Paul is addressing a group of believers that are no longer in the flesh but in the Spirit.²² To understand

¹⁹ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 510; Rom. 5:1, 14:17.

²⁰ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 697; Phil. 2:5, 3:17, Col. 3:1-2.

²¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 404.

²² Gorman, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*, 199.

these verses properly we must understand how Paul uses the conditional particle “if.” “If” in verse 9a is translated as a note of assurance and a condition or warning in 9b-10.²³ Verse 9 assures the readers that they are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit. Moo explains Paul’s contrasting “in the flesh” or “in the Spirit” as a positional status in Christ.²⁴ Those in the flesh do not have the Spirit of Christ in them. Those that are believers are secured in Christ and free from the law of sin and death (Rom 8:2, 5:12-21, 6:1-23). Paul does, however, add a condition to this statement. The “if” in 9b is a conditional warning, “If in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.” Paul affirms to be a Christian one must be indwelt by the Spirit of God. Gorman emphasizes that there are no Christians without the Spirit pointing to Paul’s writing in Rom. 6:19, 1 Cor. 3:16, and 12:3.²⁵ To ensure there is no misunderstanding, Paul concludes verse 9 saying, “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”

In verse 10 Paul turns and focuses his attention back to the first person as he addresses the Roman Christians affirming, “But if Christ is in you.” Here again, the “if” assures the Roman Christians, since Christ is in you then it follows with a first clause describing “although the body is dead because of sin.” Some scholars suggest this is a reference to being dead to the power of sin as expressed in Romans 6:2, 10-11, but Schreiner rightly argues the reference is to the physical death that believers must endure as sinners.²⁶ This argument is supported by the following verse 11 regarding the physical death of the body of Jesus, confirming Paul is speaking here to a physical death. Even though we are no longer slaves to sin, we still experience the results of sin in a physical death. Paul concludes his point with the second clause contrasting the physical death because of sin with life declaring, “the Spirit is life because of righteousness.” The *Pneuma*, Spirit, conveys life in the deliverance from condemnation realized in the present along with a future resurrection life redeeming the physical body. This present reality and future promise take place because of the imputed righteousness of Jesus giving life.

Verse 11 restates and elaborates what was said in verse 10. It follows the same pattern established in verse 9 using the word “if” to give assurance.²⁷ “If” or “Since” the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, *Then*, the same indwelling Spirit of the God who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies. Paul’s apparent reference to Rom 6:4 and Col 2:12 establishes it is God the Father who raises Jesus from dead. Paul builds upon Rom 6:5 in strongly affirming the cause-and-effect relationship between Christ’s bodily resurrection and the believer’s bodily resurrection in this passage. Paul concludes this pronouncement emphasizing the life given to your mortal bodies is accomplished through the power of the Spirit that dwells in the believer. Moo summarizes this well by saying, “The Spirit’s life-giving power is not circumscribed by the mortality of the body but overcomes and transforms that mortality into the immortality of eternal life in a resurrected body.”²⁸

²³ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 698.

²⁴ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 512.

²⁵ Gorman, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*, 199.

²⁶ Schreiner, *Romans*, 406.

²⁷ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 699.

²⁸ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 516

12 So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. 13 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.

While I agree with Moo that 12 and 13 could be grouped with 1-11 as a conclusion, I separated to emphasize Paul's answer to the question in 6:15, *Shall we continue to sin because we are not under the Law but under grace?* "So then" or "Therefore" signals the transition to the conclusion. Paul uses the vocative "brothers" as an affectionate term addressing the Christians brothers and sisters in Rome. We are *not* debtors to our sinful flesh, obligated to live according to our fleshly desires. So, who holds our debt? We are debtors obligated to God Himself who performed the saving work through Jesus, releasing believers from condemnation and the power of sin.²⁹ With grave concern for his brothers and sisters, Paul builds on verse 12 warning "For if you live according to the flesh you will die." This death is more than just physical death but death "in the fullest theological sense," linking the wages of sin in 6:23 to the condemnation in 5:15-19.³⁰ 13b provides the contrasting power given to the believer who lives according to the Spirit "to put to death the deeds of the body" will live (Rom 8:13). The same way as "die" refers to death in the fullest theological sense, so too does the believer who lives according to the Spirit live in the fullest theological sense bringing the comparison rhetoric of this passage to its climatic conclusion.³¹ Moo does an excellent job describing the balancing of human activity and the activity of God's Spirit in conquering sin.

"Holiness of life, then, is achieved neither by our own unaided effort—the error of moralism or legalism—nor by the Spirit apart from our participation—as some who insist that the key to holy living is surrender or 'let go and let God' would have it—but by our constant living out the life placed within us by the Spirit who has taken up residence within."³²

14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 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!" 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 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.

Paul shifts from the rhetorical comparison of the flesh leading to death and the Spirit leading to life in 1-13 to identify Spirit-filled believers as adopted children of God in 14-17. Paul appeals to the Greco-Roman laws of adoption and family as an inspirational metaphor for the God-given status of a believer in God's family.³³ Roman adoption entitled adopted children to

²⁹ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 702.

³⁰ Schreiner, *Romans*, 411.

³¹ Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul's Rhetoric in its Contexts*, 274.

³² Moo, p 518.

³³ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 702.

full inheritance and would have been understood clearly as an amazing gift.³⁴ A status even the emperor, who was called son of God, did not have. Beginning with “For all who are led by the Spirit of God” in v. 14, Paul signifies the transition adding further explanation to his conclusion in 1-13. This being “led” does not describe the Spirit’s guidance to believers in everyday decisions but describes the role of the Spirit as the “primary agent in Christian obedience.”³⁵ Moo further suggests Paul could be alluding to this leading of believers by the Spirit as “sons of God” to their inheritance with the Israelites as “sons of God” whom were led through the wilderness to their inheritance of the promised land.³⁶ He quotes N.T. Wright, “*What the God of Israel had done in the Exodus narrative....Paul sees as being accomplished by the Spirit.*”³⁷ As illustrated in 1-13 and previously in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, the relationship of the Spirit takes a more active role in controlling or governing the mind and actions of believers (Rom. 8:6, Gal. 5:16, Gal. 5:18). Verse 14 serves to connect and identify those who are governed by the Spirit as sons or children of God. Paul later declares in 8:29, God’s ultimate aim for believers is to be “conformed to the image of God’s son.”

15-16 continue justifying the claims in 14 that believers are children of God. Verse 15 contrasts the “spirit of slavery” which the believer did not receive with the “Spirit of adoption” which believer did receive. Note the “spirit of slavery” references the human spirit of slavery. This is not the same Spirit of God that adopts believers as children of God. We can be certain of this by the believer’s connection to “sons of God” in the proceeding verse along with Gal. 4:6: “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts.” It should be considered that there are alternative views to this interpretation. Moo notes that there are some scholars who interpret the “Spirit of slavery” as the Spirits work under the Law.³⁸ This view can be supported by Paul’s claim that the law is “spiritual” (7:14) and has brought bondage to sin (7:23). I believe Paul is picking up the image of slavery used in 6:16-18 and 7:14 where the believer's spirit was changed from a slave to sin resulting in fear of condemnation to being adopted by the Spirit of God as children of God. Paul beautifully adds “by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” This clause captures the believer’s urgent and sincere prayer of relief and thanksgiving acknowledging their status as adopted sons or daughters of God. “Abba” is the vocative form of father used by Aramaic Jewish children in an affectionate manner for their own human fathers.³⁹ Jesus used this expression in His Gethsemane prayer (Mark 14:36) and represented a new relationship between God and His people. It is followed by the vocative Greek word for “Father” suggesting this affectionate relationship with God was common among Aramaic and Greek speaking believers in Jesus.⁴⁰

In verse 16 the Spirit confirms how believers know they are children of God by bearing witness with our spirit. “Our spirit” cannot be identified as the Spirit of God and provides a second witness to our position as children of God. Schreiner suggests, “perhaps the OT requirement of at least two witnesses (Deut 19:15) is adumbrated here in order to convey the

³⁴ Gorman, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*, 201.

³⁵ Schreiner, *Romans*, 412.

³⁶ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 521; Exod. 4:22, Deut. 14:1, Isa. 43:6 Jer. 3:19, 31:9.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 522.

³⁹ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 703.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

certainty believers have in knowing they are children of God.”⁴¹ This section concludes with arguably the most astounding promise to believers in Christ in all the Bible. Believers have inherited the promise of God to Abraham (Gen 17:7, Gal 3:14, 29). God’s promise to Abraham was more than numerous descendants and land but “heir to the world” (Rom 4:13).

But Paul takes it to another level in verse 17 saying believers inherit not only what God has promised, but they inherit God Himself and is immediately confirmed by “fellow heirs with Christ.” Paul is not correcting or clarifying the first statement, but reminding believers that inheritance is only obtained in and through Christ.⁴² Paul then adds a conditional statement, “provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him.” To be co-heirs with Christ in glory requires co-suffering with Him now (Phil 1:29; 3:10; 2 Cor 1:5). “This is not a statement about suffering as meriting glory but a claim about the nature of full participation in the messianic story.”⁴³ As Christ suffered and entered into His glory (1 Pet 1:11) so must Christians follow in this path to join Christ in glory. Moo calls it the “unbreakable law of the kingdom” that glory can only come by way of suffering.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 415.

⁴² Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 528.

⁴³ Gorman, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*, 202.

⁴⁴ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 528.

Conclusion

In my study of Romans 8:1-17 and supported by the commentaries by Douglas Moo, Michael Gorman, Richard Longenecker, Thomas Schreiner and Thomas Tobin, I found each word exposed layer upon layer of theological riches. When mined, this small section of Scripture revealed Paul's doctrine on theology, soteriology, ecclesiology and eschatology that he invested his life sharing with those early churches and leaders he instructed and mentored. Believers are justified and made righteous through faith in Jesus and his atoning sacrifice. Because of this gift of grace, believers are no longer condemned by the Law. So, Paul asks, why not continue to pursue the desires of the flesh since believers are no longer under the Law but covered by grace? Believers in Christ indwelt by the Holy Spirit have been transformed to become a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Believers in Christ are no longer slaves to sin, but the life the believer now lives is changed and empowered by the Spirit of Christ living in the believer (Gal 2:19-20). While believers remain in the world and are enticed by the desires of our fleshly body, the Spirit who indwells the believer provides the power to overcome the desires of the flesh and fulfill the righteous requirements of the Law. However, those that claim to be believers yet still live in the flesh deny the Spirit of Christ and will die and not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-11). Believers can be assured that the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead will also one day give life to believer's mortal bodies in the future resurrection. Believers not only escape condemnation but are also adopted as 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." Recognizing the gift of being rescued from condemnation is utterly amazing grace, but contemplating the promise that believers in Christ are "heirs of God" Himself is unimaginable, unfathomable, and indescribable. To consider and contemplate the second part of this inheritance for believers to be "fellow heirs with Christ" is again beyond all we can think or imagine. As much as Paul suffered and believers are called to share in suffering, Paul dismisses as nothing compared to the to the glory that will be revealed to us in the future (Rom 8:18). Is it any wonder that Ray Steadman, describes Paul's writing of Romans as "the most powerful human document that has ever been penned" and that John Piper claims Romans chapter 8 is the greatest chapter in the Bible?

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