

# LIVING BY THE SPIRIT

by Steve Zeisler

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Tony Campolo wrote this account of a little girl he knows:

A friend of mine has an adorable four-year-old daughter. She is bright and she is talkative. If tryouts were being held for a modern-day Shirley Temple, I think she would win hands down. One night there was a violent thunderstorm. The lightning flashed and the thunder rumbled. It was one of those terrifying storms that forces everyone to stop and tremble a bit. My friend ran upstairs to his daughter's room to assure her that everything would be all right. He got to her room and found her standing on the window sill spread-eagled against the glass. He shouted, "What are you doing?" She turned away from the flashing lightning and happily reported, "I think God is trying to take my picture!"

No self-image problem there! The frightening power of the storm probably seemed threatening to others who had lived longer than her four years and recognized how dangerous and difficult the world was. But this little girl assumed that all the power of the heavens was being brought to bear as God's flash camera to take her picture, so valued was she in the eyes of her heavenly Father.

Our God wants us to live with the same level of confidence and certainty in this world. We know it is dangerous, that there are storms and pressures, and we are well aware of our inadequacies and the reasons that exist not to love us. But as much as we are aware of those things, the greater truth is that our Father loves us beyond measure.

In the course of studying through the book of Romans we have come now to the eighth chapter. This chapter is in many ways the most confidence-building passage of Scripture I know of. Some have likened the Bible to a treasure chest with each chapter a fabulous jewel with its own particular beauty in the message it speaks. Romans 8 may well be the most valuable jewel of all. Our Lord's intention that we approach life with Christ-centered confidence is going to be a theme for us to learn this week and in the two weeks to come.

A second theme that we're going to return to repeatedly is that the things that are invisible are more powerful, important, and real than the things we see. Though the tangible world is more familiar to us, the power of the Holy Spirit, who is unseen and unpredictable, is greater by far than the force we can measure. We need to begin to realize that that is true and operate on that basis.

Now to prepare for our study of Romans 8, let's think back to the logical observation Paul makes in Romans 5:10: "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" If God would send his Son to die for us when we were his enemies---rebels who affronted him and everything he stood for---how much more, having reconciled us to himself, will he apply his life to us to save us! But the question is, how do we gain this life?

So far, as we have looked at the process of sanctification, in chapters 5 through 7, it seems to resemble driving lessons. My first efforts as a driver were in a car with a standard transmission, so I was trying to learn to operate the clutch. If I didn't give it enough gas it died. If I gave it too much gas it lurched. I was going back and forth trying to get the timing with my feet worked out so that I gave it just enough gas to make smooth transitions. But I forgot to steer. And as soon as I started trying to steer, I went around a corner, overcorrected, and hit the curb on the left. Then I went back to the right. I braked too hard the first time, and the guy behind me nearly hit me because I stopped so suddenly. Later I braked too softly and rolled through a

stop sign.

In the process of learning to drive you make a mistake and then overcorrect the other direction. That is a bit like what we see described in these chapters of Romans where grace is announced to us. There is a whole series of questions that go back and forth trying to make sense of it. Having veered off too far in one direction, we go back the other direction making a different mistake. We learn of grace---does that mean that though we're forgiven we continue in sin and failure, exactly as before? By no means! So we overcorrect and determine to clean up our act, follow the law with great determination only to discover that the law is inadequate to renew our lives.

In the seventh chapter of Romans we saw last week that sin can deceive and frustrate believers who are inwardly renewed, but find "another principle at work in the members of my body." And so Paul cries out in 7:24, "What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

### **Set Free From Condemnation**

But he immediately follows that with a word of gratitude: "Thanks be to God---through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Paul is certain that he is not going to be a defeated Christian all his life. He is going to learn by the grace of God to live a life that is honoring to the Lord; to be changed in this life, not just in heaven. In Romans 8 we are going to encounter the remarkable mystery of the work of the Spirit of God. This is the truth that makes all the difference. Let's begin reading in verses 1-4, which summarize truths taught in earlier chapters:

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. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

We spoke briefly of the opening phrase of Romans 8 last week, and we cannot return too often to the wonderful declaration of the apostle, "There is therefore now no condemnation." As we found last week, there is no tragic or gross sin you have committed that God remembers. You and I will never approach God carrying with us the baggage of what we have done. We are told in verse 3 that Jesus was sent as a sin offering, and he paid the price. Sin itself was condemned, and the law was announced as being too weak to make changes in us.

We are condemned neither because we have sinned nor because we fail to fix ourselves. You may feel, as I often do, that to go back to God with the same problems is painful. And I may feel condemned in needing to say to God that my best efforts at reform are inadequate. But we are told here that there is no condemnation. We must always approach the throne of God's grace with our heads held high, assuming his loving approval.

### **Controlled By The Spirit**

Verses 5-11:

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit,

who lives in you.

Here the ministry of the Holy Spirit is brought clearly into view. He acts in ways that are not always obvious to us and that can't always be measured by what our five senses tell us. Yet he himself is the life-giver. Paul says here that if you belong to Christ, the Spirit of God has given life to you. There is a time for everyone before they come to Christ when the human spirit in them is dead or dormant; it produces nothing. Having only souls and bodies, and their outlook on life is based entirely on things that can be physically sensed and measured and remembered. There is no spiritual life in them. If, however, we have bowed our knee to God and received the offer that he made to us that we should be united with his Son in death, burial and resurrection; then the Spirit of God has taken up residence in us and everything has changed.

The invisible Spirit of God never takes bodily form as did Christ. But he resides in us and has given life to our spirit, and we must learn to see things based not just on what we can see with our eyes, but what we can see with the eyes of faith.

I don't know very much about weather, but one phenomenon I have been fascinated by is the mysterious heating of the Pacific Ocean called El Niño. It is nothing you can see with the naked eye. At various places in the currents of the ocean the water heats up by just a few degrees. It sometimes takes place far to the south, sometimes farther north. And it has a dramatic effect on the weather we experience on the west coast of North America. El Niño determines where along the coast the jet stream-driven storms will come to land. If to the north, the storms all go through Canada, Alaska, and Washington; and none come through California. That was the case in the hard six-year drought we just experienced in this area. But if the storms come further south as they did this year, we can experience record precipitation, even flooding.

We tend to deal with our experiences as Christians in the same way we deal with the weather. Most of us simply respond to the weather as it comes to us. If there are drought conditions, we do everything we can to build aqueducts and conserve water to somehow manage our way through them. If there are flood conditions we build dikes along the river front and fix the roof. The most we try to do is manage the effects of what comes our way. But what Paul is teaching in Romans 8 is that a tremendous invisible power, like El Niño, is available to bring about real change in us. Psalm 1 says the people of God are like trees that are planted by streams of water; their roots run deep and they have an everlasting source of water and life available to them.

You have probably observed things in yourself that you don't know how to account for if you are a Christian. Perhaps you have observed that sins that you used to enjoy now bring you no joy at all. Perhaps you once enjoyed putting down weaklings or making fun of fools. And now even though people are just as foolish as they ever were, you find yourself less willing to humiliate them because a change has taken place in you. Maybe the party life that used to seem so attractive now is unsatisfying.

You may have had the experience of reading through the Scriptures, and verses that you had read a number of times before suddenly sprang to life for you, and you realized that God was speaking to your heart. Something in you is mysteriously teaching you to respond to truth you never understood before. You hear a hymn, perhaps a familiar Christmas carol, and find yourself in tears at the truth, deeply moved by something that never touched you before. Most of the people in this world don't think very often about heaven and hell, but those in whom the Spirit is bringing about these changes fear hell and long for heaven fervently. Being in God's presence now means a great deal to us, and the threat that we might lose that is a horror to us. There is something deep within bringing about change.

A number of years ago I was in Nigeria and spent a day there with a believer named Chris Alagbu at his home in the city of Enugu. His children were raised. He had almost starved to death during the Biafran War of the 1960s. His house was small, and the culture of his city was absolutely different than any place I had been raised. Outwardly, we had almost nothing in common.

We spent a marvelous day together drinking tea and talking about Jesus. I have thought back on that day a number of times and realize that I would look forward more to spending time with Chris---I expect to enjoy his fellowship more in eternity---than I would to spending time with my freshman roommate in college. I lived with him for a year. We had friends and acquaintances in common, similar experiences socially and

academically. But he isn't a believer. I have a deeper relationship from our day's spiritual fellowship than from a year-long relationship with no spiritual element.

It is the Spirit alone who accomplishes deep eternal change in us. Paul says that we can set our minds on the things of the Spirit, let our roots go down into that stream, and cooperate with him. Or we can set our minds on the things of the flesh and depend on our strengths and do everything we can to diminish our weaknesses, take on life and try to fix things, get people to do what we want them to do, and use all the skills we can muster to live a life consisting only of what can be seen. Now, unbelieving people have only one option. There is no stream that their roots can tap into. There is no possibility of pleasing God, nothing to draw on except the visible and tangible.

But the Spirit of God himself is available to us. And because this is so, we know that someday we are going to learn to live this life the same way we once learned to drive a car. The Spirit of life is greater than all the old habits of death. And even though they come back and deceive and threaten us, even though twenty years later we are still making mistakes we thought we wouldn't ever make again, even though we are subject to deception, there is something greater still. The power of the Spirit of God is absolute. So we may choose to by the Spirit put to death the misdeeds of the flesh.

You may know non-Christians whose appearance is a lot more impressive than yours. They are richer, they were taught gracious habits of speech, they were very well educated, and they have learned how to use kindness and sensitivity as a way of making their way through life. They were given not the mysterious power of God for change, but a great deal to work with in this world. And it may appear to you at times that your rough edges and your hard habits, the things you are asking the Lord to change in you, put you at a significant disadvantage compared to these refined unbelievers. But the facts are exactly the reverse, because those of us who are in Christ have available to us the conquering power of God. Though the Spirit is invisible, if we begin to cooperate with him we will please God, and he will "give life to our mortal bodies" (verse 11). He will make us in this life what he wants us to be.

## **Children of God**

Verses 12-17:

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. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 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.

It often seems to me that I am under obligation to the flesh, and I'm sure you have the same experience. That is part of the deception of the old nature, its capacity to make me do what I desire to be free of doing. The sense that I must do it again seems very strong at times. But Paul says that we *are* obligated, yet not to the flesh. We are obligated to the Spirit. We have been set free; we can now put to death the misdeeds of the body. Have you ever felt as if sin were inevitable? "Well, maybe I can make it through today without taking that drink, but I'm probably going to get back into drinking again. What's the use---it's inevitable I'm going to fail. So I might as well give up now." Or you might think, "I know that I'm going to be depressed by the end of the week, so I might as well get depressed right now because I'm more or less obligated to live this way." Or again, "I know I'm going to react in anger toward my neighbors who drive me nuts. I'm going to strike back---so I might as well get it over with." That sense of obligation to the flesh is exactly what Paul is saying doesn't have to exist for us anymore. When we listen to that it is because we are willing to be deceived, but we have the power to resist it.

The last important point here, which we'll return to next week, is the ministry of the Spirit to teach us that we are children of God. Verse 15 tells us that we did not receive a spirit to make us slaves to fear again, but a

spirit of sonship. The Spirit of God is in us powerfully testifying that we belong to our Father; he accepts us. Remember the story of the prodigal son who, filled with shame, started for home hoping to serve as his father's hired hand. And he couldn't get near home before his father saw him---because his father had been looking down the road every day for his son to return---and ran to meet him, embraced him, and cut him off in mid-sentence, saying, "No, don't tell me all your misdeeds. Let's kill the fatted calf! Put a new robe on him, bring a ring for his finger! This is my son! He was dead and now he is alive." It is the Spirit of God who tells us that in the same way our Father wants us near him, that we can climb up into his lap and call him "Daddy." That is what the Aramaic word *Abba* means; it is the most tender word of a little child for a loving father.

We were once slaves cowering in fear. Sin commanded us and made us do things because we were afraid of what would happen if we didn't. We struck back because we were afraid we would be hurt if we didn't. We grabbed for this moment's pleasure because we were afraid that if we didn't have it nothing good would ever happen to us. We were afraid of looking like a fool, so we put down other people. We were afraid of all kinds of things and slaves to fear, so we did the bidding of the deceiver. But now we do not have the spirit that would enslave us and make us afraid. We have a Spirit who is saying we are beloved children of God. And we are not only the little ones climbing up into the lap of our heavenly Father and calling him "Daddy," but we are sons who will some day receive an inheritance.

As we cooperate, the Spirit teaches us and reinforces again and again that we are beloved of God, approved by him, and that we can enter his presence with confidence. Therefore even when Paul was saying, "What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me?" in the next moment he could say, "Thanks be to God---through Jesus Christ our Lord!" It is not just the experience of four-year-olds to imagine God's taking their picture, thinking of themselves as so much in the heart of God that they feel the beautiful confidence of his love. It can be our experience as well.

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