

A NEW LIFE IN CHRIST: A SPECIFIC EXEGETICAL FOCUS ON ROMANS 6-8

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Abstract

There is little doubt that the importance of Romans 6-8 is to be found in what Christ did as Saviour. Within these chapters, one sees Christ opening the way to intimate fellowship with God by the Spirit; and bringing believers into sonship through the infilling of the Holy Spirit. This receiving of the Spirit places one into sonship through adoption (Rom 8:15). The ultimate evidence of this “*sonship*” is the believer’s use of the Son’s own address to the Father in prayer, *Abba*. Through this crying out, the believer not only gives voice to his or her consciousness of belonging to God as His child, but also to having a status comparable to that of Jesus Himself. In ascribing to Christians indwelt by the Spirit the use of this same term in addressing God, Paul shows that Christians have a special relationship to God that is similar to Christ’s own relationship to the Father.

1 INTRODUCTION

Although there is much debate over the structure of Romans, there is little question, according to Fee (1994: 499), that 6:1-8:39 forms a major section in the letter. It basically responds to the double questions about sin posed in 6:1 and 15, and to the related double questions about the law posed in 7:7 and 13. Although the issue is still that of “righteousness” it is now put in terms of behaviour. The obvious question from the perspective of Paul’s Jewish Christian interlocutor is: What happens to righteousness (*righteous living*) if one dispenses of the law? That is the basic question addressed throughout this section.

2 ROMANS 6:15-23 (FREED FROM SINS POWER TO SERVE RIGHTEOUSNESS)

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!

Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin to death, or of obedience to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered.

And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness.

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In 6:1-4, Moo (1996: 396) states the following: Paul responds to an objection that the very abundance of God's grace in Christ encourages sin by arguing that Christ, in fact, sets believers free from sin. In 6:15-23, Paul responds to a similar objection by stressing the "flip side" of this freedom from sin: slavery to God and to righteousness. Moo further states that, the slave imagery seems to dominate this paragraph. Paul uses δούλος ("*slave*") and

δουλω (“*enslave*”) eight times, and in every verse except 15, 21 and 23; and the related word υπακοη (“*obedience*”) and υπακουω (“*obey*”) occur three times. Further to this, Paul also uses the language of freedom, but less often, for example, ελευθερος (“*free*”) and (“*set free*”) occur together only three times, and two of these refer back to the teaching of 6:1-14. Thus it is not “*freedom*” that is the topic of this paragraph but “*slavery*” (cf. Kaye 1976: 117; Schottroff 1979: 497-510).

This emphasis on the Christian slavery, which Paul admits is not the whole picture; cf v.19a – is necessary to show that the freedom of the Christian “*from sin*” is not a freedom “*to sin*”. Between the dangers of legalism and immorality Paul steers a careful course. He makes it clear that Christians are free from the binding power of the Mosaic law while at times stressing that Christians are “*under obligation*” to obey their new “*master*” – God or righteousness. Against those who would insist on the necessity of the law as a force to curb and restrain sin, Paul proclaims the release of Christians from the power of the law as a necessary step in overthrowing the reign of sin (4.14; cf 7:1-6) (see also Moo 1996: 397).

What is significant here, in Fee’s view (1994: 504), is Paul’s tying together the law with sin and the flesh. These sentences (7:7-25 and 8:1-17) affirm two things about this relationship. Firstly, in keeping with the argument of Gal 5:13-24, one sees that both the law and the flesh belong to the past i.e. on the pre-Christ, pre-Spirit side of eschatological realities. Although this is argued by Sanders (1983: 72) and Cranfield (1975: 1,331), who suggest that “*the law*” to which believers have died, is merely “*the law’s condemnation*”, this is, in Fee’s view (1994: 504), to miss the eschatological and covenantal character of much of this language as well as to read into the text something Paul neither says nor implies. Secondly, unlike the argument in Galatians, the law is explicitly declared to serve as an agent for the passion of sin which “*used to be at work*” in believers’ flesh. The law, instead of leading to righteousness, “*bore fruit*” to sin and death. “*Life in the flesh*” then, does not belong to a believer’s eschatological present, but to their past. Only by a most complex kind of reasoning can one

argue that to be “*in the flesh*” in the former sense means also to be “*in the flesh*” in the latter, an argument which Dunn (1975: 43-48) is for and perpetuates in his commentary. However, Fee (1994: 363) rejects Dunn’s view on this, stating that it is Dunn’s mistaken view of 8:5-8’s meaning of the internal struggle within believers, between life in the Spirit and the life of the flesh, a meaning that seems foreign to both the language and the context of the passage - (cf Moo 1996: 442-43) who also rightly observes that “*in the flesh*” cannot here equal “*the sinful nature*” of the N.I.V. Although it derives from anthropology, the term has become for Paul an eschatological, more than an anthropological term. Therefore, this passage, as well as the further explanation in 8:1-17 - not to mention Gal 5:13-24 - makes it certain that for Paul, believers are not “*in the flesh*” in the sense of living in keeping with the values and from the perspective of the former age, which is now passing away. Thus, the outcome of this release from the “*law*” is that believers (true sons and daughters of God) serve God no longer under the law, but by the Spirit. The Spirit is God’s effective replacement for the observance to the law.

To underscore this, Paul picks up the contrast between “*letter*” and the Spirit mentioned in 2:29, but expressed now in the language of 6:4 (“*newness of life*”). According to Fee (1994: 507), the present emphasis is on *both* terms in the two phrases (cf. Cranfield 1975:1,339, & Dunn 1975: 366). “*Oldness*” and “*letter*” belong to the past. This is the relationship (to the letter) severed by Christ’s death; this is the oldness ended through the resurrection. “*Newness*” and “*Spirit*” belong to the present. The Spirit, as previously mentioned, is God’s effective replacement of the law’s observance; “*newness*” has to do with life over against the death resulting from the “*oldness of letter*” (*law*). The new has thus replaced the old, or in the expressive language of Käsemann (1980: 191), “Christianity is not just a Jewish sect which believes in Jesus as the Messiah, it is the breaking in of the new world of God characterised by the Lordship of the Spirit”. Just as in 2 Cor 3:3-18, the Spirit serves for Paul as the essential element of the new covenant.

3 ROMANS 8:1-13 (NO CONDEMNATION)

In this section Paul elaborates on what he had previously settled in 7.5-6: the Spirit is God's alternative to the law, and it is an antidote to the sinful nature of the flesh; since both of these belong to the "before Christ" side of things. Although the flesh (*the fallen nature*) still influences the Christian, the flesh no longer dominates him or her. It does not characterise his or her life as it did before he or she was made alive and energised by the Holy Spirit (Steele & Thomas 1963: 66).

In Fee's view (1994: 516), the coming of the Spirit means the end of the time of the law; the Spirit makes both Jew and Gentile God's children and thus heirs together of God's final glory. At the same time the Spirit is the eschatological down payment, the first fruits, of the future, including the final resurrection and glorification of the present mortal body. One should, of course, understand all of this within the framework of Paul's "*already but not yet*" eschatological perspective, meaning: Christians are already in the Spirit; but they have not yet arrived. If there is no internal struggle with sin evident in Paul's theologising, neither is there triumphalism. Temptation still exists.

Therefore, according to Fee (1994: 559), by the Spirit's help they are to become "what they are" and "what they are" and "are to become" is what Paul spells out in vv.14-17.

4 ROMANS 8:14-17 (SONS OF GOD)

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father".

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

And if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

Paul now brings the argument that began in v.1 to this somewhat surprising conclusion; surprising since nothing said up to this point prepares one for what happens here. What begins in v.14 according to Fee (1994: 560), as a further explanatory word to v.13 becomes in vv.15-17 a further explanation of v.14, and thus a further description of life in the Spirit in its own right. The metaphor is not altogether new, either to believers today or to the original recipients. For believers it serves as a further, less impassioned elaboration of the Father-Son metaphor explained specifically in Gal 4:4-6 (cf. Jewett 1971: 198-99). For them it comes as an echo of, but now alternative to, the “*slave*” metaphor in Rom 6:14-23. Paul it seems is “apparently” aware that he has introduced a new metaphor, “*sons of God*” which needs some explaining. Thus v.15 puts the metaphor into perspective. When they received the Spirit, what transpired was not a return to “*slavery*” and “*fear*” (cf. 6:14; 16), but adoption as “*sons*” (cf. Gal 4:5), evidenced by the Spirit causing or enabling believers to cry out the well known “*Abba Father*”. In this way, Paul goes on (v.16), the Spirit Himself bears witness with believers’ own spirits that they are, as affirmed in v.14b, “*God’s very own children*”. Nor is that all (v.17), for being a child in terms of the metaphor “*adoption as sons*” means also to be full heirs, in this case heirs of God and thus fellow heirs with Christ His Son. Moo (1996: 496) states it this way: in a word, being a “*child*” of God means to be an “*heir*” of God also, and thereby one must look to the future for the full enjoyment of “*sonship*” (v.17, in relation to vv. 18-30). Osten-Sacken (1975: 143-44) is among those who think that verses 14-30 are one large unit of thought, focused on the eschatological existence of the “*sons of God*”. Hamilton (1957: 32) lays it out as follows. The inheritance to be received is defined with respect to Christ. Because heirs of God are fellow heirs of Christ συγκληρονόμοι χριστού (v.17), they will receive what He received, that is, they will be glorified with Him συνδοξασθωμεν (v.17), and will have the future glory μελλουσνδοξαν revealed in them as it has already

been revealed in Christ (v.18). With this future aspect of sonship still to be fulfilled, Paul describes the leading of the Spirit in the present, and the witness of the Spirit in the present, as merely first-fruits which the Spirit gives of the complete sonship *την απαρχην του πνεματος* (v.23). Verse 23 then, according to Hamilton, is a summary of the whole preceding section of Rom 8. The actions of the Spirit within the believer are only first fruits in the present, of the complete action of the Spirit in the future. In relation then to sonship specifically, believers wait eagerly for *απεκδεχομενοι*, adoption which is further defined as the redemption of the body *την απολυτρωσιν* v.23. This future redemption of the body is the not-yet-fulfilled, future aspect of sonship which the Spirit will fulfil. That it is a function of the Spirit is clear from v.11. Thus in the case of sonship, the Spirit's action in the present is merely preliminary. The Spirit's properly completed work lies in the future. In saying this, it is of great importance to see that there is also a close connection between being "*led by the Spirit of God*", according to Fee (1994: 563), and "*being the sons of God*". This is brought out by both the content and the word order, which in Paul's sentence runs:

"as many as...by the Spirit of God...are led
These...the "sons" of God...are,"

Paul's point is emphatic, the true evidence of sonship is not the law's observance; rather it is marked as one who follows in the paths of the Spirit's leading. As in Gal 3:1-5, the Spirit alone identifies the people of God under the new covenant. This new identity now expresses itself in the imagery of family; God's children according to Fee, although this imagery is not common in Paul, except in the regular use of the vocative "*brothers and sisters*", this is nonetheless a fundamental imagery for the Church.

The final sentence, v.17, which has no direct reference to the Spirit, spells out the further, now eschatological, ramifications of affirming in v.16, that the Spirit's presence assures believers that they are God's children indeed. Still following the general sense and order of the passage in Gal 4:4-7, Paul now elaborates on the ultimate significance of believers being "*children*" of God – that

they are thus His “*heirs*”, which means further that they are “*fellow-heirs*” with Christ.

What should be pointed out and highlighted now is that verses 14-17 contain four proofs of believers being sons and daughters of God. Boice (1992: 853-854) lays it out as follows:

If the Holy Spirit has indeed brought us into God’s family - first, we are led by God’s Spirit, this refers to our conduct. If we are following after Christ in true obedient discipleship, then we are Christ’s and can be assured of salvation. Second, we have the internal witness of our spirits by which we cry “Abba, Father”. We know that we have a new family relationship to God. Third, the Holy Spirit witnesses to us ... Fourth, we participate in Christ’s sufferings.

Although Christians acknowledge the problem of suffering and sometimes wrestle with it, few would think of presenting it as proof that the suffering person is a true child of God. All one has to do is to read the New Testament with suffering in mind, and one will be startled to discover how extensively it is mentioned. Jesus said, “*in this world you will have trouble*” (Jn 16:33b). Suffering is as common to God’s people today as in New Testament times, and believers need to understand that.

5 ROMANS 8:18-30 (PRESENT SUFFERING, FUTURE GLORY)

18. “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

19. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God.

20. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope;

21. Because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

22. For we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now.

23. And not only they, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

24. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?

25. But if we hope for what we do not see, then we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.

26. Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

27. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

28. And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

29. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.”

30. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

The suffering of the present (v.18) are not merely the Christian’s lot, but is experienced by the whole created order (vv.19-22), for nature now lives in subjugation to emptiness and futility. Paul probably has in mind, according to Polhill (1976: 434), Gen 3:16, where on the basis of man’s sin, God subjects all creation to the limitations of sin, death and decay. Viewed then from a perspective that holds this world to be a “*closed system*”, suffering is a harsh and final reality that can never be explained nor transcended (Moo 1996:511| Further

to this, he states that the Christian nevertheless views this suffering in a larger, world-transcending context that, while not alleviating its present intensity, transcends it with the confident expectations that suffering is not the final word. In Paul's view, the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that shall be revealed to believers. One must, Paul suggests, weigh suffering in the balance with the glory that is the final state of believers (Moo 1996:511).

Paul was certainly not the only ancient author to contrast present sufferings and future glory; see, for example, 2 Apoc.Bar.15:8: "*for this world is to the (righteous) a struggle and an effort and much trouble. And that accordingly which will come, a crown with great glory*". But, since the Christian's glory is a partaking of Christ's own glory ("*glorified with Him*"), Paul puts more stress than does Judaism on the righteous person's participation in this glory. "*Glory*" like salvation in 1 Pet 1:4-5, can be thought of as a state that is "*reserved for believers*", a state that Christ, the forerunner, has already entered. This is not then to say that the Christian already possesses this glory, but at the last day, by bringing the believer into the scope of the glory of God, it will manifest the decision that has already been made on his or her behalf. In saying this, both the larger context and the nature of the argument in Fee's view (1994:573), suggest that v.23 is the main point of everything in vv.18-27. Its relatively late appearance according to Fee; is the result of Paul's momentary digression on the role of creation in the present eschatological order of things. As it turns out, believers' present mortal bodies share in being subject to the same decay from which the whole creation awaits its final freedom. Once that point is made, Paul returns to the twofold concern with which he began in vv.17c and 18 – believers present suffering and future glory. Thus Paul reaffirms the believers certain future. They have been saved in hope, v.24, a word which; in the New Testament never connotes mere wishfulness, but full assurance with regard to what is yet to be; it has merely to be "revealed". Thus, bound to the visible and impermanent, the believer becomes all too aware of the limitations communicating with God. Further to this, according to Polhill (1976:433),

believers, living solely under God's grace, are also aware of their weakness and ever-present inclination to sin. But believers have an advocate with God in the person of the Holy Spirit, who intercedes for them with "*unutterable groanings*" (v.26b). This probably means "unformulated", unexpressed words (Polhill). When filled with the Spirit there is an immediate communion of the believer with God, which needs no spoken word, in the view of Barrett (1957:168), verse 27 rounds off this treatment of the Spirit's intercession and prepares for the affirmation of the divine plan, which follows in v.28. Because the Spirit comes from God, He is able to intercede for believers and to assist them in bringing to completion what He has already begun in them, by keeping them in sure accord with God's ultimate plan and God. Verses 28-30 thus give believers the final assurance that God will bring to completion the fullness of "glory" for which the Spirit is the present guarantee.

6 THE CHRIST-CENTRED GOAL

The indicated goal, "to become conformed to the image of His Son" shows in Murray's view (1959: 318), not only the dignity of the ordination (as sons), but also the greatness of the love from which the appointment flows. Dunn (1988: 483) declares, "It is the sureness of the end as determined from the beginning which Paul wishes to highlight".

God's purpose for His children is their conformity "*to the image of His Son*". "*His Son*" denotes Christ's unique and eternal sonship.

On the basis of Christ's perfection as the incarnate Son, it is now God's purpose to form a great family of sons, all of them patterned after the "image" of the incarnate Son of God. Wuest (1955: 145) states that through the new birth we become children of Jesus Christ (Heb 2:1) and thus inherit His image. Thus the goal of God for His chosen sons is that they shall be conformed to and manifest something, not merely like Christ, but "*what He is in Himself, both in His Spiritual body and in His moral character*" (Vine 1966: 2,247). This blessed hope in Hiebert's view (2002: 182), that believers will be conformed to the image of His own Son, explains God's dealings with them as His chosen sons in this present

age. He is ever at work to reproduce the moral image of Christ in them. All that now comes into their lives, God uses for their good to further that glorious goal. He now uses, according to Hiebert, “all things”, the sad as well as the glad, the painful as well as the pleasant, the things that perplex and disappoint as well as the things they eagerly strive and pray for, to further His eternal purpose for them.

Thus Paul concludes his discussion of the life in the Spirit. It seems appropriate at this point to list the various affirmations about the Spirit he makes in chapter 8:

- On the basis of the work of Christ, the Spirit, as the Spirit of life, sets believers free from the “*law*” of sin and death.
- As one walks in the Spirit, the righteous requirements of the law are thereby fulfilled, thus bringing its time of usefulness to an end.
- People who live by the Spirit are materially and behaviourally in a different mode of existence from those who live by the flesh. Thus the presence or absence of the Spirit is the one single distinguishing “mark of identity” for God’s people in the present age.
- For Paul, Christ has affected the new covenant for the people of God through His death and resurrection; but the Spirit is the key to the new covenant as a fulfilled reality in the lives of God’s people (Fee 1994: 844).
- The Spirit is both “*the Spirit of Christ*” and “*the Spirit of God*”. Since He indwells the believers in the present age, this is how Christ and the Father are currently present with God’s people.
- As the indwelling Spirit who now gives life to God’s people, He is also the present guarantee of the future.
- Since God’s people are Spirit people, they must not live in keeping with the flesh: it is by the Spirit that they thus “put to death” the deeds of the flesh, that is, the sin that belongs to their past.
- On the positive side, God’s people are described as “*being led by the Spirit*”, which means that He leads them in the paths of righteousness that fulfil the law.

- The Spirit is the certain evidence that God's people are His children having been "adopted as children" through the work of the Spirit and evidenced by the Abba-cry, which the Spirit inspires. Indeed, the Spirit Himself bears witness with believers that they are God's children.
- The Spirit is the "*firstfruits*" of the final eschatological harvest. He is the essential element of eschatological life, and His presence now in the lives of believers is both evidence, that the future has begun and guarantee of its glorious consummation, where the children realise their inheritance (Fee 1994:590-591).

So it is evident that the door to sonship can only be opened by God, who is the sovereign Lord of all, and by His initiative, He sent forth His only Son, to be born under the Law and to die under the Law, so that the chosen of God may be freely adopted into the kingdom as justified sons of God. Spiritual adoption is received, not acquired, as the apostle John tells us in John 1:12.

By the power of God, His children are enabled to receive Him, and are given the right to become children and heirs by believing in His name and thereby being justified. This new birth does not come by blood inheritance, nor by the desire of the flesh and human nature, nor by mans own will to be a son, but rather by the will and plan of God. Through adoption God promises, "And I will be a Father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me, Says the Lord Almighty" (2 Cor 6:18).

7 CONCLUSION

Through spiritual adoption, the believer has passed from death to life, from darkness to light. In this new relationship, obedience secures the benefits of adoption (Matt 12:50), and barriers between sinner and God are broken down as strangers and aliens are changed into fellow citizens with the saints, and incorporated into God's household (Eph 2:19). Christ is no longer ashamed to call His people brothers (Heb 2:11). The apostle Paul expounded on these truths further in the letter to the Romans:

For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, Abba! Father, the Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (8:14-21).

Further to this, the present operation of the new covenant, as seen in 2 Corinthians 3, is demonstrated in the working of the Holy Spirit. But this operation is only partial and preliminary. At least one element—the element of moral renewal—is operative in the inter-advent era. Partial fulfillment of the new covenant, instead of arguing against future complete fulfillment, actually demands it. This progressive dispensational perspective on the new covenant does not diminish but enhances the future expectation that all the elements of the predicted new covenant will be fulfilled.

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