

## Romans 8:12-17: The Spirit of sonship

The main theme of this study is the relationship of the believer to Christ, the Spirit of sonship. In a much longer section (Romans 8:14-30), Paul elaborates the meaning of v. 9 (vv. 14-17) and then vv. 10-11 (vv. 18-30). Paul likes to build a great tower of argument, with each idea building on the one before. This helps us follow his tightly argued logic but makes it difficult to know where one major section ends and another begins. In our last study, we were considering the 'Spirit of life'. It is possible to include verses 12 and 13 as a conclusion to that section before moving on but we need to worry too much as there is a consecutive progression in Paul's thought.

The Spirit of life (Romans 8:2) has set the believer free from condemnation and the believer can now enjoy a new life in the Spirit and because the 'Spirit is life' (Romans 8:10) the believer is assured of eternal life in a resurrected body. This new life is not to be lived in the old realm from which the sinner has been delivered. Rather, the Spirit gives power to live a new life. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Christian has victory over sin and is under an obligation not to live in accordance with the flesh (sinful nature).

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation-- but it is not to  
the sinful nature, to live according to it.

(Romans 8:12)

From the previous verses Paul indicates a compelling conclusion. The believer is not to live according to the sinful nature (that is to the flesh). For the fourth time in the letter, Paul addresses the Romans as 'brothers' (Gk *adelphoi*, ἀδελφοί). They are brothers to him because he, like them, is under the same obligation. It is clearly possible for believers to continue to live by the flesh for, even though they are 'in Christ', it is possible for them to allow the sinful nature (flesh) to control their lives but they share a common obligation not to live in that way. A misinterpretation of this passage has led some into asceticism or self-flagellation but such a life is incompatible with the freedom that Paul celebrates in the Spirit. The life of the flesh was dominated by a mind-set of self-indulgence and pride. The life of the Spirit is the opposite of that and is a mind-set of self-denial and humility, characterised by thanksgiving to God in all circumstances. Believers are not debtors to the flesh but debtors to God, to Christ and to the Spirit. Our debt to the mercy of God can never be repaid. It is, if you like, a debt of gratitude to God. Whereas life in accordance with the flesh has the destiny of death, life in accordance with the Spirit has the destiny of life, but it is clearly not the 'old life' but the new spiritual, Christ-like life, a holy life.

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,

(Romans 8:13)

The key question that we must ask about this verse is whether Paul is writing only to believers or to the wider community of the church at Rome that would have included unbelievers as well. The reason for asking this question is significant. Paul is clear that the outcome of living according to the flesh (sinful nature) is death. If he is speaking only to believers then we have to ask whether it is possible for a believer to fall from grace and forfeit salvation (as John and Charles Wesley and the early Methodists certainly believed). It is certainly true that Paul changes from 'we' when he is speaking to the Romans as 'brothers' (v. 12) to 'you' (v. 13) but it is hard to infer that Paul is thinking of a wider group of people just from the change of pronoun alone. The warning appears to be given to Christians, not to pagans as yet unconverted. 'Misdeeds of the body' is a fair enough inference from the context but the text really only says 'deeds of the body' (Gk *sōma*, σωμα). The deeds of the body simply satisfy human attitudes and ambitions and as such lead to death. It is only living according to the mind-set of the Spirit that will guide the believer to eternal life.

The relationship between divine grace and human endeavour is finely balanced. For Paul, to live according to the Spirit and put to death the deeds of the body meant sensitivity to the will of God, discerning what was selfish and proud and what was self-sacrificing and humble, simply offering a life of service and thanksgiving. The problem is heightened by the obvious contrast between the two texts:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

(Romans 8:1)

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.

(Romans 8:13)

The tension between the two verses is plain to see. On the one hand, Paul has written to the believers at Rome saying there is 'no condemnation' for believers but now he seems to be warning them against falling back into old ways. The whole situation is made even more complicated by the Calvinist-Arminian controversy.

The Calvinist-Arminian controversy is not well-known in Methodism but is a very live issue among evangelical churches and Christians holding a traditional view of the Bible and salvation. The controversy is difficult to describe briefly without making sweeping generalisations. It is also important to mention some of the current contemporary issues. The most notable debate between Calvinists and Arminians took place in 1618-1619 at the Synod of Dort (Dordrecht) in the Dutch Reformed Church. This synod was a series of 154 meetings to settle the Arminian controversy. After Jacob (James) Arminius (the Latinised name of Jakob Hermandszoon, 1560-1609) died some of his followers published a document opposing the Belgic Confession of Faith. This document was called the 'Remonstrance' (1610) and those who supported these views were called 'Remonstrants'.

The debate centred on five main points. The Remonstrants believed:

- (1) the decree of salvation applies to all who believe on Christ and who persevere in obedience and faith;
- (2) Christ died for all men;
- (3) the Holy Spirit must help men to do things that are truly good (such as having faith in Christ for salvation);
- (4) God's saving grace is not irresistible
- (5) it is possible for those who are Christians to fall from grace.

(Clouse, 1974:70)

The synod rejected these five points of doctrine, setting out five points of doctrine, now commonly called the 'Five Points of Calvinism' (which really are five objections to Arminianism), which are often remembered using the acronym 'TULIP', namely, total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance of the saints. It is the last of these points that is at issue here in Romans 8:13 and from it we may illustrate an important principle of biblical interpretation.

Starting with the whole text of the Bible, by comparing one scripture with another, Biblical theology inevitably constructs a scheme or framework of interpretation whereby the whole framework of Biblical theology helps us to interpret a text without coming to a conclusion that is either absurd or completely out of step with the rest of scripture. On the other hand, one has to be careful not to force every text into a neat system and therefore allow the framework to control our interpretation of the Biblical text.

Romans 8:13 is certainly reluctant to be squeezed into any system. Some people have tried to solve the problem by saying Paul is writing to the wider church community which therefore includes unbelievers and is now referring to them 'you' as opposed to 'we' but it is difficult to see how Paul can tell them to use the Spirit to fight sin. Others think that Paul is using 'death' and 'life' in the physical but not in the spiritual or eternal sense – but until the Lord returns in glory, even the most spiritually-minded people die.

The Calvinist is most at home with verse 1 'no condemnation' but the Arminian remembers verse 13, 'if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die'. The danger of the first view is for a Christian to think that it does not matter how you live because your salvation is eternally secure (this kind of lawlessness we call 'antinomianism'). On the other hand, the danger of the second view is constantly to lack assurance of salvation.

Among Conservative-Evangelical Christians in Britain today, most non-charismatic Anglican and Baptist church leaders tend to be moderately Calvinistic in their views. Scottish Presbyterians, Welsh Independents and Calvinistic Methodists are Calvinistic and many Independent Evangelical Churches are Calvinistic. Methodists and those

denominations with a Methodist heritage (Church of the Nazarene, Salvation Army) are Arminian, as are Brethren, Pentecostals and more charismatic Anglicans and Baptists.

Through the preaching and hymn-writing of the Wesleys, historic Methodism has been uniformly Arminian. The Wesleys addressed human depravity with teaching about prevenient grace and their sermons and hymns stressed unlimited atonement, namely that Christ died for all. Today's Methodists are less sure about the possibility of falling from grace than their founders. As a Methodist minister, I can honestly say that there is clearly a strong understanding of the perseverance of the saints (or as I prefer to say the preservation of the saints) in scripture but as believers, though we have died to the law of sin, we are not free from the responsibility of subduing sin in our lives and living according to God's will.

Although in the *NIV* verse 14 concludes a much longer sentence, the connection between the two parts of the sentence is not immediately obvious.

because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

(Romans 8:14)

Paul is thinking of the church in terms of fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham. The progression of Paul's thought can be seen as he considers the role of the law, the Spirit and the believer's privileges in terms of sonship (in the Old Testament, God is pictured as the 'father' of Israel and Israel as his 'son' and the people of Israel as his 'sons'). Paul will consider the relationship of those who are 'in Christ' to 'Israel' in the second half of his letter (chapter 9 onwards). The idea of human beings as 'sons of God' would not have been strange to the first readers of this letter but divine sonship is determined by the Spirit of God. The 'leading of the Spirit' means not so much 'guidance', in the way the expression is often used today, so much as a strong motivation that shows itself in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:18-25). The difference is that whereas the law constantly referred people to an external written code, the Spirit works from within. The believer, who belongs to Christ, not only has the Spirit but follows the Spirit's leading.

Paul amplifies his thoughts on sonship in the following verse:

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."

(Romans 8:15)

The Spirit that comes upon the believer is the same Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism (Bruce, 1963:158). Proof of sonship is being led by the Spirit. We ought not to miss the point that the difference between slaves and sons has nothing to do with obedience – a good son was as obliged to obey his father as a good slave his master (Ziesler, 1989:213). At the beginning of the Christian life, every believer receives the Holy Spirit. This Spirit was not one of slavery (slavery to the law as in the former age)

with its fear of failing to come up to the mark of acceptability (perhaps not simply in the sight of God but in the view of his fellow Pharisees), but (literally) the 'Spirit of adoption' (Gk *pneuma huiothesias*, πνευμα υιοθεσιωας). Paul is the only New Testament writer to use the idea of adoption (cf. Romans 8:23; 9:24; Galatians 4:5 and Ephesians 1:5).

Adoption was not common in Israel but in Roman law an adopted son had the same rights as a natural son. Paul uses this to show the very great change in the believer's status not only from slave to freedman but also from freedman to adopted son (using the male term because of its legal significance and because Jesus is the Son) before moving on to refer to the believers as 'children'. Paul uses a very similar expression in Galatians (4:6) to express the wonder that the believer has in being a child of God. Paul probably means us to understand an emotional and intense cry, 'Abba, Father'. An Aramaic word, 'Abba' could be translated by the word 'Father' and yet it seems that Paul wants us to understand that the two words, 'Abba, Father', are what the believer is privileged to cry out. 'Abba' was the word that the Lord Jesus used to express an intimate sonship that was characteristic of the close family relationship (Mark 14:36). While 'Daddy' is perhaps too sentimental and misunderstands the father-son relationship in the ancient world, 'Father, dear Father' probably captures it.

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

(Romans 8:16)

The inward witness of the Spirit is an important theme in the Methodist tradition. On hearing that his father was gravely ill, in 1735, John Wesley travelled home to Epworth. The words that his father, Samuel, uttered to John from his deathbed were to have a lasting effect on the young man, 'The inward witness, son, the inward witness; that is the proof, the strongest proof of Christianity' (*Works [BE]* 26:289). These words, with their Puritan emphasis on assurance, energised John Wesley's quest for assurance of salvation to such an extent that it became his obsession (Haley and Francis, 2006:7). His personal quest was not resolved until his experience at Aldersgate Street after which the experience of assurance was one of the vital parts of his preaching.

It is not unknown for Christians to question their salvation. This might happen because a believer feels that he or she is growing so slowly as a Christian that doubts set in. Or, perhaps, some personal failure in the life of the believer causes a lack of assurance. I wonder if it was this kind of experience that caused Alfred Vine, in his hymn on the Holy Spirit, to pen the words:

Be with me when no other friend  
The mystery of my heart can share;  
And be thou known, when fears transcend,  
By thy best name of Comforter.

(*HP 308, O breath of God, breathe on us now*)

It is a matter of refocusing. Assurance is not based on progress in the Christian life. Neither should it be undermined by lack of progress. The Christian is not enabled to cry out, 'I am God's child' (focusing upon self) but '*Abba*, Father' focusing upon God.

Paul continues the comparison between the former mind-set and the old life, which is the way of the flesh, of sin and ultimately death, and the new mind-set and the new life, which is the way of the Spirit, of sonship and of life. He concludes this section with the privileges of the children of God.

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.

(Romans 8:17)

The theme of sonship links to the theme of inheritance. Adoption was normally used in order to provide a suitable heir. Israel was the Lord's inheritance chosen from among the nations to be his own (Deuteronomy 32:9). Paul affirms that Christian believers have not so much the promise of the land (Israel) but the promise of the kingdom. They are all 'heirs of God' because they are all 'joint heirs with Christ'.

By his resurrection from the dead, Christ's status as son and heir becomes one which can be shared with all his children. The word translated 'sufferings' (sympaschein, συμπασχειν, cf. 1 Corinthians 12:26, the only other place in the New Testament the word is used) means 'suffer with' or 'suffer the same thing as'. Paul, no doubt, would have the kind of suffering that he had endured in mind but that does not mean that his kind of suffering (e.g. beating and imprisonment) is the only kind of suffering.

Like all believers, Paul is conscious of his wrestling with the 'body of death' (Romans 7:24) as he seeks to 'put to death the (mis)deeds of the body' (Romans 8:13). There is never any suggestion in the Bible that the Christian life is going to be easy and the battles and turmoil that the believer faces are not only outward but also inward. The believer naturally wants to share Christ's sonship but this includes his sufferings, rejection and death as well as his resurrection and glory. For Paul the whole of history is held in the destinies of two men, Adam and Christ. The inevitable outcome of being 'in Adam', sinful, disobedient and falling short of God glory, is death. But 'in Christ' a life that shares in his sufferings is a life that will also share in his glory.

There is one Wesleyan hymn that stands above all others on this passage.

Arise, my soul, arise,  
Shake off thy guilty fears;  
The bleeding sacrifice  
In my behalf appears:  
Before the throne my surety stands;  
My name is written on his hands.

He ever lives above,  
For me to intercede,  
His all-redeeming love,  
His precious blood, to plead;  
His blood atoned for all our race,  
And sprinkles now the throne of grace.

Five bleeding wounds he bears,  
Received on Calvary;  
They pour effectual prayers,  
They strongly speak for me:  
'Forgive him, O forgive!' they cry,  
'Nor let that ransomed sinner die!'

The Father hears him pray,  
His dear anointed one;  
He cannot turn away  
The presence of his Son:  
His Spirit answers to the blood,  
And tells me I am born of God.

He owns me for his child,  
His pardoning voice I hear;  
In Jesus reconciled  
I can no longer fear.  
With confidence I now draw nigh,  
And 'Father, *Abba*, Father!' cry.

*(HP 217, Arise, my soul, arise)*