

The eighth chapter of Romans brings Paul's discussion of the believer's hope to its apex, and in so doing it closes the context that chapter five introduced. And providing the bookends to the context are Paul's parallel declarations of justification by faith alone (5:1-2), and the end of condemnation for those in Christ in accordance with the delivering power of the "Spirit of life" (8:2). *In this way Paul was careful to ground the believer's confident hope solely in the purpose and work of the triune God.* The Father justifies the ungodly through the self-sacrifice of His Son, and He delivers those so justified from their bondage to sin and death by the life-giving and life-perfecting power of His Spirit. Thus the great gospel reality of "no condemnation" does not end with *atonement* and *forgiveness*, but extends to and encompasses *transformation*. No condemnation speaks to the fullness of *life by the Spirit*.

The crucial implication of these things is that transformation constitutes the ultimate goal of the Incarnation. That is to say, the Son entered the world "in the likeness of sinful flesh" not simply to be a sin offering, but to bring about the *renewal* that could only come through His offering of Himself. This renewal is cosmic in scope (8:18-22; cf. Ephesians 1:7-10; Colossians 1:19-20; also Isaiah 65:1-25 and Revelation 21:1-6), but finds its focal point in the renewal of mankind. Christ became a man in order to bring the Adamic humanity to an end and usher in a new humanity as the Last Adam. Stated simply, *Christ became man in order to recreate man*.

This profound truth underlies Paul's statement that, by coming in the likeness of Adamic humanity ("sinful flesh"), Jesus Christ condemned (on His Father's behalf and according to His will) "sin in the flesh." Deity was impacted in the sense that God joined Himself to man forever, but humanity was also permanently changed. The previous human reality defined by connection with Adam and the principle of sin was condemned and done away with. By becoming man, Christ, the second Adam, transformed humanity; in the process of taking up our humanity He restored it. He is the new Man and so also the progenitor of a new humanity – *a new humanity localized in, and therefore defined by, Himself*. And as was the case with the first Adam who defined the first humanity, connection with the Last Adam is the basis of participation in the new human reality. Neither self nor law can work this transposition; one can only become a new man by sharing in the life – that is, the principle of true humanity – that resides uniquely in the true Man. It was actual connection with Adam that defined his sons, and so it is with Christ.

Philip Hughes observes: "...as a man-in-Christ [the Christian] is in fact a new creation – a reborn microcosm belonging to the eschatological macrocosm of the new heavens and the new earth – for whom the old order of things has given place to a transcendental experience in which everything is new. The expression 'in Christ' sums up as briefly and as profoundly as possible the inexhaustible significance of man's redemption. It speaks of security in Him who has Himself borne in His own body the judgment of God against our sin; it speaks of acceptance in Him with whom alone God is well pleased; it speaks of assurance for the future in Him who is the Resurrection and the Life; it speaks of the inheritance of glory in Him who, as the only-begotten Son, is the sole heir of God; it speaks of participation in the divine nature in Him who is the everlasting Word; it speaks of knowing the truth, and being free in that truth, in Him who Himself is the Truth. All this, and very much more than can ever be expressed in human language, is meant by being 'in Christ.' No wonder that the Apostle describes it in absolute terms as a 'new creation.' Redemption in Christ is nothing less than the fulfillment of God's eternal purposes in creation, so radical in its effects that it is called a new creation."

This participation in the reality of the new humanity – this share in the new creation – is the work of the Holy Spirit. Adam’s seed share in his humanity by *seminal generation*; Christ’s seed share in His humanity by *spiritual generation*. For this reason Paul calls Him the “Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.” His power is wielded not merely in deliverance from condemnation, but also in the impartation of the eschatological life that is the restoration of true humanness in Christ. This new life in Christ was introduced in chapter six, and Paul develops it in chapter eight by closely connecting it with the renewing, sanctifying, preserving and perfecting work of the Spirit.

- In the first thirteen verses Paul’s emphasis is upon the Spirit as the *Spirit of life*. He is the One who imparts, sustains, and perfects life, and for that reason He also overcomes *death*. Thus Paul’s discussion in this passage is focused on the contrast between death as the defining principle of those “in the flesh” and life as the defining principle of those “in the Spirit.” Every human being without exception fits into one of these two categories.
- In the balance of the chapter Paul draws out the implications of life by the Spirit. These implications will be seen to all converge on the glorious *hope* that is the birthright of the believer. Chapter eight, then, brings Paul’s theology of hope to its glorious crescendo: the Christian’s hope – grounded as it is in God’s righteousness in Christ, and vouched safe to him by the outpoured and indwelling Spirit – is *utterly unassailable*. It can never be shaken or destroyed, for it depends entirely and perpetually on the eternal purpose and effectual power of the triune God; nothing can separate the believer from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus and revealed and perfected in him by the Holy Spirit.

Paul presented his summary thesis regarding the “Spirit of life” and His work in redemption in 8:1-4, and he proceeded to elaborate on this thesis in 8:5-13. The first four verses of this context (8:5-8) focus on the contrasting realities of *life* and *death* and show how they are at the same time mutually exclusive and yet defining of every human being. In the next two subsections (8:9-11 and 8:12-13) Paul drew out two implications of his contrast between life and death. The first is *ontological* and the latter is *practical*. That is to say, in 8:9-11 Paul insisted that the Christian is free from the principle of death, and is now defined by a new reality of life as a “new creature.” Verses 12-13, then, set out the practical implication of this new reality, which is that the believer is no longer obligated to the flesh as one *bound by death*; rather, as one alive in the Spirit, he is *putting to death* the deeds of the body associated with the tyranny of the flesh.

4. The connection between *Spirit* and *life* on the one hand, and *flesh* and *death* on the other, is evident in the first four verses of chapter eight, and they become the focal point of Paul’s consideration in 8:5-8. From the outset, three observations need to be made:
 - The first is that the individual concepts expressed within each couplet are inseparable. This means that, in the context in which Paul was speaking, one cannot consider the Spirit apart from His relation to the principle of life, and vice versa. So also the concepts of flesh and death necessarily imply one another.
 - The second is that these concepts are addressed in parallel structures: according to the flesh/Spirit; minds set on the flesh/Spirit; in the flesh/Spirit. This parallelism indicates that *Spirit* and *flesh* refer to the same categories of human existence.

- The third is that these two couplets, although themselves referring to categories of *being*, are indicative of the two ages or domains that comprise salvation history. The Adamic domain is that of flesh and death, whereas the domain of Christ is that of the Spirit and life.

A crucial conclusion to be drawn from these observations is that verses 5-13 cannot be understood as presenting two distinct ways in which Christians can choose to live out their Christianity. This passage is not an ethical exhortation to believers in which Paul warns them of the consequences associated with following the flesh or the Spirit. To conclude in this way is to entirely miss Paul's point and destroy the flow of the context.

- a. Having laid the necessary groundwork, Paul's fundamental axiom can now be addressed: "*Those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit*" (8:5). In the previous four verses Paul established the overarching gospel truth that God has accomplished what the Law could not, namely the justification and renewal of sinners. No matter how hard they try, and how thoroughly they agree with the righteousness of law, men are enslaved to sin – the Law is rendered impotent because of the flesh (8:3). But God has prevailed in His Son by "condemning sin in the flesh." And having condemned sin, God has poured out His Spirit upon justified sinners (5:1-5, 7:6), so that those who are "according to the Spirit" have fulfilled in them the requirement of the Law (8:4).

Thus the principle of the *flesh* – which is the inherent defining property of every member of Adam's race – has been supplanted by the principle of the *Spirit*. The result is that each human being is necessarily categorized according to one or the other. He is either "according to the flesh" or "according to the Spirit."

But these defining realities of human existence carry with them practical implications. Those who are defined by the principle of the flesh are constrained to live in accordance with that principle: *they set their minds on the things of the flesh*. What defines them as creatures is unavoidably manifested in the outworking of their lives. So it is with those who defined by the Spirit: they set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

The critical importance of Paul's observation is that it reveals that *flesh* and *Spirit* are not merely theological categories. They are ontological categories, meaning that they refer to the true nature of a person in his essential being. But because flesh and Spirit speak to *who* a person is, they also indicate *how* he is. Those who are defined by the flesh are **governed** by the flesh, as is also the case with the Spirit. All who are *of* the Spirit are characterized by having the *mind* of the Spirit.

- b. Being according to the flesh or the Spirit implies the governance of either the flesh or the Spirit. But Paul further indicated that the leading of each "governor" is set in the context of **overarching and opposing realities**: "*the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace*" (8:6).

- 1) The person defined by the flesh lives according to the leading of the flesh, and Paul referred to this realm of human existence as *death*. Paul here uses the term “death” as he has throughout the larger context (5:12-21, 6:16, 21-23, 7:5, 9-13, 24). It does not refer either to physical death or the final disposition of the soul in hell *per se*. Both of these are aspects of its meaning, but the “death” Paul speaks of extends beyond them to encompass everything pertaining to the unbeliever’s ongoing *state of estrangement*. First and foremost, he is “dead” to God, but he is further dead to himself, other people, and every other created thing. This death can be best summed up as human existence in the context of the desolation of *shalom*. It is man living outside of his created purpose and function.
- 2) Conversely, the person determined by the Spirit lives according to His leading, and this existence is defined by *life* and *peace*. Paul’s intent was to set these in opposition to death: as *death* is estrangement in the context of the desolation of *shalom*, *life* is communion with God, self and others in the context of restored harmony and the proper ordering of all things.

And precisely because life is human existence according to the reality of *shalom*, Paul declared that life in the Spirit is further marked by the presence of *peace*. The “law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” has set the believer free from the “law of sin and death” (8:2); where there is freedom from death there is life, and where there is deliverance from sin there is peace. Thus this “peace” does not refer to the absence of conflict in one’s life or the sense of complacency that arises from ease or temporal well-being. Peace is *shalom*: the perfect, harmonious ordering of every part of the entire creation according to its intended design, operation, and interrelationship. It is the defining principle of the kingdom of God.

- c. Verse 8:6 provides the outcome resulting from being governed by either the flesh or the Spirit, and in verses 7-8 Paul narrowed his discussion to focus on the governance of the flesh. Specifically, he indicated to his Roman readers the **reason** that human existence according to the flesh yields death. It is so because “*the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God*” (8:7a). This hostility is then addressed by Paul in terms of its operation (8:7b) and its effect (8:8).
 - 1) As to its operation, the hostility of the flesh is first of all hostility toward God. Paul’s point is that those who are “according to the flesh” are *incapable of neutrality* with respect to God. When it is remembered that *all* who are not of the Spirit are of the flesh, Paul’s statement becomes profound. For it indicates that hostility toward God is a defining principle of human existence, and one that is only remedied by the renewing, indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ. Such a conclusion flies in the face of the nearly universal conviction that all sincerely religious people have a harmonious relationship with God. Even those who are merely indifferent toward religion are not regarded as being hostile toward Him.

- 2) Secondly, Paul did not say that God is hostile toward the fleshly man, but that the mind of such a man is itself defined by hostility toward God. Literally, his assertion is that *the mind governed by the flesh is enmity with respect to God*. Furthermore, he was not indicating that those who are according to the flesh are always consciously hostile toward God. Quite the contrary, they may sincerely believe that they are wholly devoted to God. Such was certainly the case with Paul himself prior to his conversion: the one who was in truth a blasphemer and vile offender regarded himself – and was regarded by those around him – as an eminently holy servant of God. The enmity Paul was referring to here is not necessarily conscious or willful, but *innate*. That is to say, whatever its conscious orientation, determination or exercise, the mind governed by the flesh is thoroughly perverse; it is “death” in that it only and always thinks and operates from the perspective of its intrinsic estrangement from God.
- 3) The enmity toward God of the fleshly mind is death (8:6-7a), and death is estrangement. Paul’s clarifying statement in 8:7b provides further insight into the loose linkage between enmity and estrangement: the mind of the flesh is hostile toward God, and the proof of this is that it is unable to subject itself to divine law. Many understand this statement as indicating a posture of open rebellion against God and His righteous commandments, but this interpretation is unsupportable for at least three reasons:
- The first is that it is experientially unfounded. One need only consider the strict legal morality and ethics of the apostle Paul to realize that the mind set on the flesh *can* submit itself to moral commandment. Adherents to various religions spend their lives as ascetics, holding themselves to the most rigorous standard of piety.
 - More importantly, it is contextually unfounded. For in the previous chapter Paul indicated that sinful men are fully able to concur with the goodness and spirituality of God’s law and thereby commit themselves to obedience to it. Not everyone who is “according to the flesh” lives in open rebellion against divine law.
 - The true nature and purpose of God’s law also argue against this interpretation. Most people – including Christians – tend to think of divine law in terms of discrete commandments identifying moral and ethical obligations that God imposes on men. But it has been shown in previous commentary that the purpose for God’s law (in whatever form) is to provide to men the definition of what it is to be authentically and perfectly human. Divine law defines, describes, and demands human *righteousness*, and this righteousness is nothing more than *wholeness*; it is a person being and living in entire and uncorrupted conformity to his identity and purpose as divine image-bearer.

Understanding human hostility and rebellion against God's law in terms of estrangement can alone explain Paul's statements. For men are able to acknowledge, approve, and apply themselves toward the righteousness of God's law; *what they cannot do is submit themselves to God so as to meet their own righteous obligation to Him by receiving His righteousness through faith.* This was the legacy of Israel, and the very reason the Jews stumbled over Christ (Romans 9:30-10:3). Human estrangement from God originated with Adam's and Eve's insistence upon independence and self-determination, and since their expulsion from the garden men have been relentlessly striving to reenter it by means of their own self-righteousness.

Paul, the blameless Pharisee, well understood this, and so could insist that the fleshly mind *cannot* subject itself to God's law. Men can submit in their outward conduct to divine standards of morality and ethics. But they cannot recover and renew themselves, and they refuse to forsake the holy grail of self-reformation in order to find righteousness and the renewal of authentic life by faith in Christ.

- d. Man was intended by God to play a crucial role in His all-encompassing program of *shalom*. That is, the God of all order, harmony, and wholeness created man in His own image for the purpose of administering His rule over the works of His hands. God brought forth His creation and ordered it in all beauty and perfection so that it would reveal and glorify Him. And over all His works God created man to be the epitome of shalom and to mediate His kingdom in His name and under His authority. When this work of creation and ordering was complete, God pronounced all of it "very good." His good pleasure and perfect will had been realized in the works of His hands, and God was pleased (Genesis 1:1-31).

Is it any wonder, then, that Paul would assert to the Romans that "*those who are in the flesh cannot please God*" (8:8)? Human existence "in the flesh" is life lived according to the vandalism of shalom. It is not immorality or overt wickedness per se; it is the perversion and corruption of God's program of harmony and order that finds its focal point in human estrangement from Him. Man's intimate communion with and devotion to God are fundamental to both his created nature and his proper function. When man the image-bearer loses his rightful relationship with God he loses himself. And when he loses himself he loses the ability to exercise his role as administrator and guardian of God's shalom. The result is that, rather than overseeing and bringing fullness to God's harmonious order, man's "lordship" is reduced to the vandalism and perversion of that order.

This is why redemption extends to the entire creation and not merely mankind. It is also the reason that the redemption of the creation awaits the "revealing of the sons of God" at the coming consummation (8:18-22). Because the creation finds its proper relation to God through man, its continuance in shalom depends upon man's continuance in shalom. Man destroyed the harmony of God's created order, and it can only be recovered through man. But this is precisely what God has done: *in the administration of the fullness of the times He will sum up all things in the heavens and earth in the new Man, Christ Jesus.*

5. As used by Paul in this context, *death* and *life* are the two defining realms of human reality. They refer first of all to the two ages of salvation history that are separated by the redemptive work of Christ. But they also represent the two realms or domains in which any individual person can exist. The domain that is “death” is defined by the determinative power of sin (being “according to the flesh”), while “life” is defined by the determinative power of the Spirit (being “according to the Spirit”).

“The contrast between being ‘in the flesh’ and ‘in the Spirit’ is a contrast between belonging to the old age of sin and death and belonging to the new age of righteousness and life. So characteristic of these respective ‘ages’ or ‘realms’ are flesh and Spirit that the person belonging to one or the other can be said to be ‘in’ them. In this sense, then, no Christian can be ‘in the flesh’; and all Christians are, by definition, ‘in the Spirit.’ We miss Paul’s intention if we think of being ‘in the flesh’ here as the condition of mortality that continues to characterize even believers, or as the moral weakness and proneness to sin that, more lamentably, we still possess.” (Douglas Moo, The Epistle to the Romans)

Paul’s treatment of these two realms in 8:1-8 is not a shift in his argument from chapter seven, but a continuation of it. It is the conclusion to which his argument was leading: “There is *therefore* now no condemnation...” For in the previous section Paul made clear that sin’s dominion (the *flesh*) cannot be broken by the two available human resources of self and law. To the contrary, sin effectively employs both to strengthen its own dominion. Only Christ’s self-sacrifice conquers sin (8:1-3), and only His Spirit delivers men from its enslaving power. Regardless of their morality, zeal, or piety, those in the flesh have minds that are hostile toward God, for even their personal devoutness is a lying and rebellious delusion that opposes God’s gospel. Whether they give themselves to strict piety or licentiousness, those who are in the flesh *cannot* please God, and the only remedy is His triune provision and renewing power (8:5-8). This being the case, three conclusions naturally and necessarily follow:

- As rightly indicated by Moo, *flesh* and *Spirit* must be understood to be mutually exclusive realities. Paul insisted that God in Christ condemned sin in the flesh, and it is on the basis of this conquest that the Spirit indwells the justified sinner. Moreover, because the Spirit’s work is to effectually perfect the life of Christ in such sinners, the presence of the Spirit means the end of sin’s dominion.
- The second inference proceeds out of the first, namely that it is impossible for the Christian – whose new life in Christ is determined by the Spirit’s power and leading – to continue in subjection to the flesh as formerly. Those who are “according to the Spirit” can no longer be dominated by sin as are those who are “according to the flesh.”
- The third is similarly an extension of the second, and that is that the Spirit’s triumph over the power of the flesh is ultimate. That is to say, His work cannot fail to achieve its intended end; according to the will of the Father and Son, He will bring every believer to the final perfection that is full Christ-likeness.