



MAIN COMMENTARIES ON 'ROMANS'

Chapter 8

In Romans 8:1 the Holy Apostle Paul presents the conclusion to his key points in Romans chapter seven. St. Paul writes that Christians have died to the Law and been raised from the dead to union in Christ (Romans 7:4); St. Paul therefore thanks God that Jesus saves us from our bodies of death (7:25). Because we have been saved by Christ, St. Paul can conclude, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). St. Gennadios, bishop of Constantinople in the fifth century, proclaims, "Look how great Christ's grace is in that He has set us free from condemnation!"

St. Paul points out the effect that being in Christ Jesus has on the life of the Christian: Christians "do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:1; some older manuscripts do not contain the second half of verse one). This is explained in verses two through thirteen.

Christians are free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2). This doesn't mean that we no longer have the inclination to sin: Romans chapter seven clearly tells you that each person struggles with sinful passions. Instead, this means that you no longer are inevitably controlled by sin, and you are no longer necessarily subject to the penalty of eternal separation from God. Death, St. Gregory Palamas writes in the fourteenth century, is "for the soul to be unharnessed from divine grace and to be yoked to sin." In contrast to being under this law of sin and death, St. Gennadios says we have been "set free from sin and the death which it causes."

How have we been set free from the law of sin and death? Through the "Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:2). St. John Chrysostom explains that "'the Spirit of life' is just a way of saying 'the Spirit,'" in other words, the Holy Spirit. The main point of Romans chapter eight is that Christ and the Holy Spirit both work to transform Christians. The Law is incapable of saving humans because we are too weak to fully observe it; Jesus, however, became human and therefore was able to condemn sin in the flesh and breaks sin's inexorable hold on us (8:3). The writer of Hebrews expands on this:

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one...Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Hebrews 2:10-11, 14-15)

Christ's work is vital for us. St. Paul writes, "The law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Romans 7:12); the requirements of the Law are therefore righteousness and need to be fulfilled (8:4). Because we humans cannot fulfill the Law, however, we needed Christ to become human and therefore "fulfill in us" the requirements of the Law (8:4).

St. Paul earlier talked about serving God with his mind, but sin with his flesh (Romans 7:23, 25); he now talks about the way in which the mind can be used to serve either God or sin. Those who reject God, and instead serve their selfish desires, become consumed with these desires: they think only about their passions, dedicate their lives to satisfying their passions, and eventually are destroyed by them (8:5, 6, 7). Christians, however, who live according to the Spirit, dedicate our lives to growing in relationship with God, and therefore grow in “life and peace” as we are united to Christ (8:5-6). A note from the Orthodox Study Bible explains this point:

The ‘mind’ here is far more than intellectual capacity. It is the highest knowing faculty of the soul (Gr. nous), the spirit behind all we think and do...To be carnally minded (v. 6) means to choose to have one’s whole existence, body and soul, captivated by sin. This is a turning against God and His righteousness, an enmity (v. 7) with God rather than peace with Him...To be spiritually minded means to choose to be liberated by the Holy Spirit, so that one’s whole nature becomes spiritual, body and soul.

Christians can experience life and peace because we *are* in the Spirit, and the Spirit of God dwells in each of us (Romans 8:9). The word “in” (in Greek, *en*) has two meanings, both of which are relevant to understanding St. Paul’s point. The first meaning is that the Spirit is in each individual Christian; the second meaning is that the Spirit dwells in - or among - Christians as a group in the Church. The Holy Spirit therefore enters the heart of each Christian in Holy Baptism (Acts 2:33), and is sealed in the Mystery of chrismation. Jesus similarly tells His followers, “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

Fr. Lawrence Farley notes that St. Paul makes this point, not to give a detailed theological statement, but instead to refer to the personal experience of his readers in the church in Rome. They had experience the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in their church “through the fervency of their worship, through their prophecy, and through their knowledge of healings and exorcisms;” St. Paul is reminding them of this as evidence of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

After reading Romans chapter seven, and the first nine verses of chapter eight, you might have a question: “If Christ has rescued me from the law of sin and death, and I now live according to the Spirit, why do I still struggle with passions? Does this mean that I’m not *really* a Christian?” St. Paul addresses this point in Romans 8:10: if Christ is in you, then even though the body is dead because of sin, you are alive in God because of the Spirit. Thus, Christians will still struggle with passions because our bodies are not yet perfect; the fact that you *do* struggle to overcome sin and grow in your relationship with God, rather than simply live to fulfill your passions, is evidence that you are really alive in God. Blessed Augustine helps us to understand this point: “Paul calls the body dead because it is mortal. Furthermore, it is because of this mortality that the lack of earthly things troubles the soul and arouses certain desires, to which the man who serves the law of God in his mind does not submit and sin.”

As a Christian, the Holy Spirit gives you life. As you cooperate with God (see the article on salvation) you will “put to death the deeds of the body” (Romans 8:13). St. Paul expands on this point in Romans 6:11-13:

Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as

instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

Romans 8:14-17 is one of the most beautiful and hope-promoting parts of the Epistle. Some readers might be afraid after reading all the conditional statements in verses 9-13: *if* the Spirit of God dwells in you; *if* Christ is in you; *if* you live by the Spirit. It would be easy for some people to read this and be afraid that God is looking down on them, angrily watching each mistake and concluding that they are not serving Him well enough. St. Paul puts this fear to rest with a simple statement: “You did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear” (8:15). Instead of being fearful slaves of God, we should experience peace (remember Romans 8:6) because we are the children of God (8:14-15). While we previously rebelled against Him, He has now adopted us (8:15); we can therefore address Him as “Abba, Father” (“Abba” is a term of endearment, similar to calling Him “Daddy”). Think about this for a moment: the sovereign God has brought us into a familial relationship with Him that is so close and personal that we can address Him as “Father.” This should add a new and deeper meaning to your privilege of saying, “Our Father,” in the Lord’s Prayer!

It is easy for St. Paul to claim that we are adopted; how can we know that this is the case? Because “the Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16). St. John Chrysostom explains this important statement:

What is that, ‘Spirit beareth witness with spirit?’ The Comforter, he means, with that Gift, which is given unto us. For it is not of the Gift alone that it is the voice, but of the Comforter also who gave the Gift, He Himself having taught us through the Gift so to speak. But when the ‘Spirit beareth witness’ what farther place for doubtfulness? For if it were a man, or angel, or archangel, or any other such power that promised this, then there might be reason in some doubting. But when it is the Highest Essence that bestoweth this Gift, and ‘beareth witness’ by the very words He bade us use in prayer, who would doubt any more of our dignity?

Because we are children of God, we are also “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17). St. John of Damascus, a Christian in the seventh and eighth centuries, writes that we are “heirs of (Christ’s) incorruption and blessing and glory.” Christ is the “heir of all things” (Hebrews 1:2); St. Paul can therefore tell you, “All things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come - all are yours. And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).

Contrary to the belief of some modern Christians, being a joint heir with Christ does not necessarily mean that our lives will be easy and trouble-free: Christians are called to “suffer with (Christ), that we may also be glorified together” (Romans 8:17). We are not immune from suffering; in fact, Jesus Himself predicted,

If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these

things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me. (John 15:18-21)

This suffering, even though it may be intense, nonetheless pales in comparison with the glory which shall be revealed in us as Christ's joint heirs (Romans 8:18). We humans are not the only ones who wait for this revelation of glory: all "creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God" (8:19). Humanity was appointed by God as stewards over His creation; when Adam fell into the bondage of corruption and death, creation was subjected to this same fall (8:20-21). Creation therefore "groans and labors" waiting for the revelation of glory.

What is this "revealing of the sons of God" for which creation - and we ourselves - waits with such painful anticipation (Romans 8:23)? We wait for the redemption of the body, when death will be fully conquered and our bodies - now corruptible and mortal - will be perfected. This will be the revealing of Christians as the children of God because, while people can now refuse to believe that we are joint heirs with Christ (it is easy for them to believe this when Christians stumble, grow sick, and die, just as they do), when our bodies are redeemed and perfected there will be no doubt as to our status in God. St. Cyril of Alexandria describes this revelation: "For when the sons of God, who have lived a righteous life, have been transformed into glory from dishonor and from what is corruptible into what is incorruptible, then the creation too will be transformed into something better."

St. Paul notes that our hope in this transformation cannot now be proved by anything we can see, but we persevere in waiting (Romans 8:25). St. Cyril of Alexandria tells you, "We believe that our bodies also will overcome corruption and death. For the time being this is a hope, because it is not yet present, but it is a future certainty."

At the same time, as you saw above, St. Paul is also referring to his readers' experience: even though they cannot now see this transformation, they know that their hope is not groundless in part because of the transformation they have already experienced through their relationship with God. St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage in the third century, explains, "Patient waiting is necessary that we may fulfill what we have begun to be, through God's help, that we may obtain what we hope for and believe."

Because the Holy Spirit dwells in us, He helps us as we wait for our redemption. St. Paul notes that we often do not know the things for which we should pray - and he notes that we *ought* to know them - but the Spirit prays for us (Romans 8:26). Blessed Augustine teaches about the Spirit's intercession:

'We do not know how to pray as we ought' for two reasons. First, it is not yet clear what future we are hoping for or where we are heading, and second, many things in this life seem positive but are in fact negative, and vice versa. Tribulation, for example, when it comes to a servant of God in order to test or correct him may seem futile to those who have less understanding...But God often helps us through tribulation, and prosperity, which may be negative if it traps the soul with delight and the love of this life, is sought after in vain. The Spirit sighs by making us sigh, arousing in us by his love a desire for the future life.

It may at first seem strange to read that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us "with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Romans 8:26). This does not mean that the Holy Spirit simply moans with misery; as

Blessed Augustine says, “The Holy Spirit, who intercedes with God on behalf of the saints, does not groan as if he were in need and experiencing distress. Rather he moves us to pray when we groan, and thus he is said to do what we do when he moves us.”

St. Paul goes on to tell us that God, Who searches the hearts of humanity (see Jeremiah 17:10), knows the mind of the Spirit (Romans 8:27). This is a reference to being spiritually minded (8:6): the mind of the Spirit, Fr. Lawrence Farley says, indicates “the attitude and mindset of the believer, as he focuses upon spiritual things. It is this mind and attitude that the Spirit instills in him. By His help given to the believer in his weakness, the Spirit prays in him, generating His own mindset and zeal, which groans to God.” This work of the Spirit is according to the will of God (8:28).

In the last few verses St. Paul has mentioned two things that Christians either do not see or know: we do not see the reason for our hope in redemption (Romans 8:25), and we often do not know the things for which we should pray (8:27). In verse 28 he adds a third thing we do not see: how God uses our present suffering for our future good. He says, “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.”

Laurie Polich, a Protestant youth worker, makes this easy to understand:

Taken separately, our sufferings feel unwanted and unnecessary... We wonder why God allows them. But we need those things to become all God is making us to be. Because it is our present sufferings that will bring forth the glory that will one day be revealed.

All things work together for good. That’s what Paul says in verse 28. The ‘all things’ that work together are individually not that great. Sometimes they’re awful. They can even make us groan. But when they’re put together, all our sufferings will eventually form our best self. And that’s our hope - that God is going to use our pain to achieve our glory.

While suffering can sometimes make us question God’s goodness - and even the existence of God - St. Paul reminds us that God is always present in our suffering, and ultimately will use these problems to perfect us. This is God’s purpose: to conform us to the image of the Son (Romans 8:29).

St. Paul now steps back to look at the process of God’s calling and saving work through the ages. Those whom God “foreknew” (from the Greek *proginosko*, meaning to know in advance) have been “predestined” (from the Greek *proorizo*, to determine or decide in advance) to be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). These Christians, predestined to be conformed to Christ’s image, are justified and ultimately glorified (8:30).

This passage is extremely controversial in non-Orthodox Christianity (particularly Protestantism). Some Christians, particularly those in the traditions established by the early Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin – who themselves followed an unfortunate misinterpretation of St. Paul’s teaching by Blessed Augustine - understand this passage to mean that God chooses a specific number of certain individuals to be saved, and directly acts on each chosen individual to change his or her will from rebellion against Him to worship of Him. According to this understanding of predestination, the rest of

humanity is not specially chosen and changed by God, and therefore remains in rebellion and is condemned.

This, however, is not the belief of the Orthodox Church. The Church has consistently taught that the biblical teachings about predestination refer to Christians as a group. We therefore know St. Paul is teaching that God foreknew which individuals would become Christians, and predestined that all Christians would have the glory of being conformed to the image of Christ. The difference between the Orthodox understanding of predestination and the Reformed Protestant understanding is that Orthodox Christians know that, while God predestined Christians as a *group* to salvation, He did not predestine any specific *individuals*. Each individual has both the right and ability to choose whether or not to become a Christian, and therefore can choose to accept or reject the glory to which the group of Christians is predestined.

Theodoret, a fifth century bishop of Cyr in Syria, explains Romans 8:29-30:

Those whose intention God foreknew he predestined from the beginning. Those who are predestined, he called, and those who were called, he justified by baptism. Those who were justified, he glorified, calling them children...Let no one say that God's foreknowledge was the unilateral cause of all things. For it was not foreknowledge which justified people, but God knew what would happen to them, because he is God.

St. Cyril of Alexandria similarly teaches,

(God) calls everyone to himself, and no one is lacking in the grace of his calling, for when he says everyone he excludes nobody. But those whom he long ago foresaw would come into being he predestined to participate in the future blessings and called them to receive justification by faith in him and not to sin again.

When we think of everything St. Paul teaches in Romans chapter eight, it becomes easy to understand what Fr. Lawrence Farley describes as the "jubilant climax" in verse 31: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" If the Father did not even spare His Son, but instead delivered Him up to suffering and death to save us, how can we doubt that He will glorify us (Romans 8:32)? Who can bring a charge of falsity or foolishness against Christians (8:33)? Who can condemn us (8:34)? We know their opinions will ultimately be shown to be foolish, because we know that God justifies us, and Christ intercedes for us (8:33, 34). We can proclaim the stirring cry from Isaiah 8:9-10 as used in Great Compline: "God is with us, understand, O ye nations, and submit yourselves: for God is with us. Hear ye unto the ends of the earth, for God is with us."

It does not matter what we suffer, it does not matter how terrible our circumstances may be: God will always be with us, and will always love us. Look at the things Christians can endure, secure in the knowledge that they cannot separate us from the love of Christ: tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword (Romans 8:35). In fact, St. Paul even expands this thought: "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, Nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39).