

“THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT”
Romans 8:1-17

When we celebrate the Day of Pentecost, as we're doing today, it's easy to get the impression that the work of the Holy Spirit is dramatic, enabling specific ministries and affecting particular people: all that talk of miraculous happenings and supernatural abilities. Now, I'm not suggesting for one moment that such special anointings or blessings or fillings (or whatever you want to call it) do not occur nor that the Holy Spirit does not move in dramatic and supernatural ways. (Actually, I'd like to see a bit more of it.) But the New Testament is very clear that the Holy Spirit is active in the life of *every* person who believes in Jesus Christ. In fact, if you look at what Jesus tells his disciples in his teaching about the work of the Holy Spirit (in *John 16:8*), you'll see that the Holy Spirit is at work in people's lives even before they have acknowledged him as Saviour and Lord. Don't let anyone tell you that you don't have the Holy Spirit working in your life – you do, and in the passage we've read this morning (*Romans 8*), Paul tells us a bit about how that happens and what the implications are for us as followers of Jesus Christ.

As many of you will already be aware, this is one of the great passages of the New Testament. Quite apart from the first verse, which is that resounding promise that, if we believe in Jesus Christ, we need no longer fear the condemnation of God for our past sins, this is a passage at the very heart of our belief about God's working in our lives and about the activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. It sums up Paul's thinking on the subject and, I hope, leaves us with a feeling of encouragement and inspiration about the way we live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

We just need to say a couple of things to start with about the terms that Paul uses here (and, indeed, elsewhere) when he is talking about the ways in which our lives are transformed when we take the decision to respond to God's call on our lives. He talks about “*the law*” and “*the sinful nature*” (or, in some versions, “*the flesh*”). Very briefly, “*the law*” refers to the Torah, the Law of Moses which the Jewish people saw as their means of staying in God's good books. The Law which God gave Moses on Mount Sinai – of which the Ten Commandments form a part – was a means of identifying God's people. Those who kept the Law were proper Jews and therefore, so they thought, guaranteed eternal life with God. The trouble was that no-one could perfectly keep the Law. It needed to be done in your own human strength and no-one had that ability. So although they tried very hard – some harder than others – salvation through the Law wasn't really possible.

And the problem was “*the sinful nature*”. The sin which had been committed by the very first human beings had really messed things up for everyone else. The image of God which was present in those first, perfect human beings had been distorted and spoiled in them, and that was carried on down through the generations so that all men and women found themselves sinning more easily than not. As Paul has

already stated in this *Letter to the Romans*, in 3:23, “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” – his image is messed up in all of us.

Here, though, he is saying that the Holy Spirit comes as an alternative to the Law and an antidote to the sinful nature. There is no longer any advantage to the Jew in having the Law, because he cannot truly keep to it – it has to be implemented through the sinful human nature anyway – so both Jews and Gentiles are in need of Jesus Christ. Both the Law and the flesh are, if you like, part of our lives BC, *Before Christ*. But as we accept him and what he has done on our behalf, as we put our trust in him, so we receive his Holy Spirit – God begins to re-infuse us with his image, recreating us, renewing us. And the Holy Spirit works within us in various ways, three of which we’ll explore with the help of Paul’s words in this chapter.

Just one other thing to note about this chapter. It contains no verbs in the imperative. That means there are no commands here, no words telling you to do things. It is a chapter of encouragement rather than exhortation. Paul is here building up his readers, not giving them a list of things they have to do. So I hope we’ll find it an encouragement, too, as we dig into what he has to say.

1. THE HOLY SPIRIT INDICATES THE WAY WE ARE GOING (v6)

When we have the Holy Spirit within us, he makes it clear what we are going away from and what we are moving towards. V6 shows that contrast most clearly, although it’s there in earlier verses too. Those who have the Holy Spirit, who are committed to Jesus Christ, are no longer on the path to death. Of course, we’re all going to die some day, but this is talking about eternal death, about the prospect of an eternity completely cut off from God, about an eternity in hell, if you like. And that is the consequence of the BC life, the life *Before Christ*, the life spent following the sinful nature.

You see, the way that we live our lives has consequences. We can see that in a purely practical way when we look at the things we have to put up with if we do wrong. Our wrong decisions and choices have consequences, often affecting others, always affecting us, even if the effect is simply one of guilt. And the ultimate consequence of a life lived according to the desires of the sinful nature is that of an eternity away from God.

When we begin to accept that Jesus has provided an alternative way of life and an alternative ending to that, when the Holy Spirit begins to work in us, then our direction changes. The Holy Spirit points us away from death towards life and peace. We have that assurance that we are going to spend eternity with

God, renewed and recreated in his image. In his *Letter to the Ephesians*, Paul talks about the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of that, a seal on the bottom of God's covenant with us. Look at *Ephesians 1:13,14*.

The knowledge that we are following the way indicated by the Holy Spirit, the way towards eternal life and away from a lost eternity, should enable us to approach life with a greater sense of assurance and peace and joy – a sense of serenity. And that will be obvious in the lives of those who have put their trust in Jesus Christ. They are no longer anxious about what will happen when this life is over. They are able to live life in all its fullness now (*John 10:10*) as they anticipate the wonderful eternal future with God. They don't need to worry about whether they will make it. Jesus has made it possible and the Holy Spirit within us reminds us of that, indicates for us, when we need it, that we are on the way of life, not of death. The Spirit-filled follower of Jesus is able to live a life of serenity.

2. THE HOLY SPIRIT INSPIRES GOOD WORKS IN US (v5)

The about-face of the road between death and life indicated by the Holy Spirit means a total transformation within us. No longer do we think as we did BC. We begin to cultivate a different set of values and attitudes. Paul talks here about the mindset of the believer in contrast to the mindset of the unbeliever. No longer do we think according to the sinful nature – essentially a selfish mindset – but we begin to think according to the Spirit.

That means a new set of attitudes. Many people think of becoming a Christian is all about changing our behaviour. In some senses it is that, but you cannot change behaviour until you have changed the underlying mindset, the underlying attitudes and values. Those who follow Christ need to think in a different way, to approach life in a different way. Later on in this *Letter to the Romans*, Paul tells his readers that they shouldn't let themselves be influenced by the thinking of the world around but "*be transformed by the renewing of your minds*" (12:2). It's very easy indeed to be influenced by what is happening around us, adopting the attitudes of the surrounding culture. And, protest as might, we are all seduced by advertising and by peer pressure, drawn into particular ways of thinking about our money, our property, our status and so on. The Holy Spirit can help us to resist those blandishments.

And as we do begin to have our attitudes transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit within us, so our behaviour begins to change. Then we can start to fulfil our "*obligation*" (v12) not to live according to the mindset of the sinful nature, the unredeemed nature, the mindset that is so often presented to us by the world around us. There are, as we said, no direct commands in this chapter, but this is an encouragement to us to follow the way in which the Holy Spirit inspires us. "Inspire" literally means to breathe into

something or someone. The Holy Spirit breathes into us a new way of looking at life, a new way of responding to the world, a new way of living out our commitment to Jesus Christ. The obligation we have is to allow that to take root in us and issue forth in our behaviour, so that what we are is obvious to those around. Because of behaviour deeply rooted in attitudes and mindset, and not simply modified by the thought of short-term gain, the Spirit-filled believer lives a life of holiness and integrity.

3. THE HOLY SPIRIT IDENTIFIES US AS GOD'S CHILDREN (vv15-17)

Underlying all this, though, is the amazing truth that we are God's children. The Holy Spirit within us helps us to recognise and enjoy that relationship. Paul describes it as "*the Spirit of sonship*". Just a quick word about the terminology here, terminology that, in an age of equality and linguistic sensitivity, can seem rather gender-biased. Paul is writing in a context which is heavily male-oriented. Only male children really had any rights (and only then when they had attained their majority). Daughters got the short end of the stick, really – if, indeed, they got any end at all. So when Paul talks of sonship and being sons of God, what he is expressing is the glorious truth that even women get the rights of sons. The daughters also participate in the privileges normally reserved for sons. There is, as he says in *Galatians* 3:28, no difference between men and women when it comes to enjoying God's grace. So don't worry too much about the use of masculine language. You're included too, women.

It's by that Spirit of sonship that we can communicate with God as "*Abba, Father*". A lot of rot is talked about the use of "Abba" here and elsewhere, to the extent that we end up seeming like little infants talking to God in baby language. "Abba" can be translated "Daddy", but it is really a term of what we might call intimate respect. There is a sense of reverence in the use of the word that we don't find in the English equivalent – either Daddy or Dad. But there is also a great deal of intimacy in the use of the word, too. It means that, although there is the respect and reverence that we naturally feel for God, there is also the sense that he is always there for us, always ready to listen to us, always prepared to help us. The intimacy of relationship which God had with human beings when he first created us is restored as we allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives. That intimate aspect of God's image in us is re-infused by the Spirit's breath.

Does it ever amaze you? The Creator of the Universe, the awesome God of history, the Ancient of Days, Yahweh the Lord of Hosts, the God who can split atoms and pulverise mountains, who can paint a fiery sunset on the backcloth of the heavens and trace the patterns on the feathers of the humming-bird, who allows world leaders to strut their stuff before the nations and choreographs the dance of the bumble bee

within the hive, who sweeps the ocean floor and wipes the clouds across the skies – you can call that God “Father”.

And there are certain things that follow from that, as well. One of the best of those is that we are “*co-heirs*” with Jesus Christ. Remember, Jesus is the Son of God, the heir to infinite power and glory (as we shall see in a moment). We are to share that with him – male and female, young and old. Do you want to share all that Jesus has?

Well, to start with, we may be a little hesitant, because Paul says here that we shall “*share in his sufferings*”. There will be difficult times and we shall have to continue to cope with the things that come to us because of the weakness and vulnerability of our humanness. That may be the susceptibility to illness and disease that are now part of our human condition. It may be that we are still at the mercy of those who – continuing to follow the desires of the sinful nature – find themselves at enmity with anything of God. Whatever it is, following Jesus is not initially a bed of roses.

But we shall also share in his glory. Now there’s a thought to keep you going! In Paul’s words to the Philippians, “*God has exalted him to the highest place and given him a name which above every name*” (*Philippians 2:9*). We will share that. We are co-heirs with Jesus. We have that to look forward to.

Just another quick aside on the wording here. It seems as if our share of the glory is conditional on our sharing in the sufferings of Jesus. That’s not strictly true and the ways in which this verse is translated sometimes give the wrong impression. It’s not conditional, and what Paul is really saying is that, *despite* the sufferings you have to go through, as Jesus did, you *will* share in his glory eventually. In fact, he goes on, in the words which follow the passage we read this morning to say that “*our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed within us*” (*8:18*).

So the Holy Spirit at work in us as we believe in Jesus Christ and follow his way is constantly reminding us of what we have to look forward to. Paul says “*The Spirit himself testifies with our Spirit that we are God’s children.*” There’s a kind of little voice saying, “Don’t worry. It’s going to be worth it. You’re a child of God. Enjoy it, and don’t forget there’s even better to come.”

Now if you’ve got that going on inside your head and heart, and you’ve got the assurance that you’re going to be with God for all eternity, sharing the glory of Jesus, that’s going to have an effect on just about everything you do and everything that you are. Not only will the Spirit identify to you that you are a child of God, but other people should be able to identify you as someone special, someone in whose life shines the light of Christ, someone in whose life is reflected the love of God, someone in whose life is

demonstrated the serenity and assurance of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit-filled believer lives a life of transparent godliness.

Now, as we've said, we don't have a long list of stuff you've got to do if this is going to happen – all kinds of behaviour to adopt, all kinds of good works you've got to do. Paul is saying that this *is* the case – you **do** have the Holy Spirit within you – so acknowledge his presence, listen for his voice, enjoy his activity within you. And if you do, then life will never be the same again. And if that's the case, other people are going to start to take notice. You're a believer. You're a Spirit-filled believer. Let it show!

"THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE LIFE OF THE BELIEVER"
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This is a passage at the very heart of our belief about God's working in our lives and about the activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. The Holy Spirit comes as an alternative to the Law and an antidote to the sinful nature. As we accept Jesus Christ and what he has done on our behalf, as we put our trust in him, so we receive his Holy Spirit – God begins to re-infuse us with his image, recreating us, renewing us. [This chapter contains no verbs in the imperative. It is a chapter of encouragement rather than exhortation.]

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The knowledge that we are following the way indicated by the Holy Spirit, the way towards eternal life and away from a lost eternity, should enable us to approach life with a greater sense of assurance and peace and joy – a sense of serenity. We are able to live life in all its fullness now (*John 10:10*).

2. THE HOLY SPIRIT INSPIRES GOOD WORKS IN US (v5)

No longer do we think according to the sinful nature – essentially a selfish mindset – but we begin to think according to the Spirit. Those who follow Christ need to think in a different way. (Look at *Romans 12:2*.) The Holy Spirit breathes into us a new way of looking at life, a new way of responding to the world, a new way of living out our commitment to Jesus Christ.

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Paul describes the Holy Spirit as "*the Spirit of sonship*" and it's by that Spirit of sonship that we can communicate with God as "*Abba, Father*". There is a sense of reverence in the use of the word, but also a great deal of intimacy. And there are certain things that follow from that. One of the best of those is that we are "*co-heirs*" with Jesus Christ. We shall "*share in his sufferings*", but we shall also share in his glory. So the Holy Spirit at work in us as we believe in Jesus Christ and follow his way is constantly reminding us of what we have to look forward to. Paul says "*The Spirit himself testifies with our Spirit that we are God's children.*"

Questions for discussion

1. Are you aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life? If so, how do you experience that?
2. How can we begin to transform our attitudes?
3. Paul uses an intimate word to refer to God as Father ("Abba"). Do you sense an intimacy with God? How? In what circumstances?
4. In what ways could we be said to be sharing in Christ's sufferings?
5. Do you ever think about sharing Christ's glory? How do you feel about that?
6. Is there anything particular that has struck you in this week's passage or discussion?