

ROMANS—WEEK 7

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is the Conversion of Saul by Michelangelo Buonarroti

Paul starts off this section by anguishing over his struggles with sin but moves on to his victory in the Spirit. Paul tells us to walk according to the Spirit, live according to the Spirit, and pray according to the Spirit.

Thus shall all things work together for the good of those who love God.

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Romans, Week 7 — Life in the Spirit
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1 Romans 7:21-25 (ESV)

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Just in case there's anyone left who still believes in the doctrine of instant sanctification, Paul finishes that off with, "*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*"

This is in the present tense in the Greek. There's no way Paul is talking about his former self. He's still trapped inside *this body of death*. His frustration is palpable.

But then Paul suddenly shifts gears and breaks out in praise. *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

He's frustrated. Then he remembers—just like David in Psalm 13

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me. — Psalm 13 (ESV)

Life in Christ is frustrating. It's supposed to be frustrating. When you don't see or don't care about sin, the battle is painless—because there is no battle. Now we hate sin, and the battle hurts.

But that pain does something important—it reminds us of our weakness. Just think about what would happen if it didn't work this way, if our conversion led to total victory over sin. Would we remember how helpless we were before? Or would we forget and see ourselves as the victors?

We'd forget. Our righteousness would be impressive, and we'd be impressed with ourselves. That would be our ruin. So, in a perverse twist, victory would set us up for defeat.

The only way to not lose is to never totally win! Painful as it is, that constant reminder of our weakness is what keeps us strong—by keeping us dependent on God.

But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

2 Romans 8:1-11 (NKJV)

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

Paul is speaking in the present tense when he says, “*And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.*” Paul is speaking in the future tense when he says, “*But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.*” Paul’s point is unmistakable—a Christian’s body is still dead in sin. *Your mortal bodies* will be given life, but that hasn’t happened yet.

OK, but he also said, “*He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.*” How can we “*not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit*” if our bodies are still dead in sin? Similarly, what does Paul mean by, “*those who live according to the Spirit*”?

The word that’s translated as “*according to*” (kata) can be translated as “after” or “with reference to.” This fits with, “*For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.*”

The spirit is the “reference” we *set our minds on*. That’s why we’re so frustrated.

We live *according to* the Spirit, but we stink at it. That is the normal Christian life.

Okay, but here’s the question—what were you warned about when you were evangelized? Were you warned that you might suffer?

Sure, but were you warned that your own failures would drive you nuts? Were you? It’s supposed to hurt.

3 Romans 8:12-17 (NKJV)

Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 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.

The key word here is “led.” *For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.* OK, but what does it mean to be “led” by the Spirit? Are we all led by the Spirit or is this something we should strive for?

Both. All Christians have the Spirit and are led by the Spirit. That’s why Paul can say, to all his readers, *“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 is *by whom we cry out, “Abba Father.”* That’s Spirit led.

But Paul is also exhorting us here. Recall the context. We can’t stop sinning, even though we want to. But now we live according to the Spirit and are thus not under the law. Paul summarizes this in Galatians 5:16-18.

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. (NKJV)

He’s commanding us to walk in the Spirit. But how?

This goes back to the previous passage, where Paul referred to what we “*set our minds on.*” As a practical matter, much of the challenge of walking in the Spirit is figuring out what He wants us to do next. That takes focus.

We need to *set our minds on* the Spirit so that we stay plugged in and don’t miss anything.

People who don’t know Christ think that being a good Christian is all about memorizing a bunch of rules and striving to follow them. That makes some sense. After all, it’s how we teach children to be safe. (Look both ways before crossing the street. Don’t run with scissors.)

But being a good Christian is something else entirely. It’s more like an advanced listening skill. We are to *walk according to the Spirit.* The key to doing that is to *set our minds on* the Spirit.

While there are some obvious rules we should use to test spirits (see 1 John 4:1) our main task isn’t to obey rules but to follow the Spirit’s leading.

4 Romans 8:18-25 (NKJV)

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. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits 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; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, 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. 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? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.

Paul backs up his exhortations in the previous passage with a spectacular view of the end times. Not only do we *eagerly wait for it*, but *the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption*.

So, this is bigger than just us getting into heaven. *For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now*. And this is all part of God's plan. *For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope*.

Wait. *Him who subjected it in hope*? What's that all about?

Genesis Chapter 3.

Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, And you shall eat the herb of the field." — Genesis 3:17b–18 (NKJV)

This plan has been unfolding from the beginning. It's a big plan. That's why *the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us*.

Don't forget how great *the sufferings of this present time* were in Paul's day. Martyrdom was common back then. And Paul isn't just saying that the future glory dwarfs that suffering; he's saying the suffering isn't even *worthy to be compared* to that glory.

This isn't just abstract theology. Paul is setting his readers up for something.

Most modern Christians don't face the kind of trials that the recipients of this letter faced—but some do. The rest of us should be praying for them with the intensity of a thousand suns.

We often honor the servicemen and women who protect our freedoms. We should. This is that on steroids. Our debt to the Christian martyrs who went before us is immeasurable. Praying for the ones of our day is the least we can do.

And it's OK if you find yourself asking God, "Why do you allow their persecution?"

That means your heart's in it.

5 Romans 8:26-30 (NKJV)

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. 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.

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

These two paragraphs are among the most powerful and most quoted in all of scripture. They paint an awesome picture of God's sovereignty and His love.

But it's the connection between them that really makes this passage soar. The purpose laid out in the second paragraph is what drives the first.

We've been taught about how *all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose*. We get that. We understand that things happen beyond our understanding and that we should trust that God knows what He's doing—and that it's all good.

OK then, so how should we pray? We lack the vision to know what we really need. If we want to be compatible with how *all things work together*, is there some way that we should pray?

This passage doesn't tell us to change our prayers; it adds a new one. *The Spirit Himself makes intercession for us* because, *in our weaknesses, ... we do not know what we should pray for*.

And these spirit prayers aren't anything like our prayers. They're *groanings which cannot be uttered*. Just think what that means.

Internal trinity communication, in its own language, can come from inside of us.

Could anything be more exciting? How can we reach that level of maturity and intensity?

It turns out that the secret to spirit led prayer is astonishingly simple. It's right there in the text.

Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for

It's being stuck! We're at our best when we're at a loss for words. As long as we think we know what we should pray, we just keep prattling on.

But *in our weaknesses* we find true connection.

In my experience, the best prayers are all tears and no words.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Do you feel "delivered" or "enslaved"?
2. What were you warned about?
3. How can you tell when a leading is from the Holy Spirit?
4. What's the latest news on the Persecuted Church?
5. Have you ever felt the Holy Spirit praying for you?

Items for prayer: