

The Holy Spirit

Devotional Reading: Ephesians 3:14–21

Background Scripture: John 3:5–8; 14:16–17, 26; 15:26–27; 16:7–15; Acts 2:1–21; 32–33; 2 Corinthians 12:1–13

Today's Scripture: Romans 8:12–17, 26–27

I. Flesh and Spirit

Romans 8:12–14

12 Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. **13** For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

14 For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.

12. The word *therefore* indicates that Paul is concluding a line of thought as he points out the implications of the topic to this point. A quick look back at Romans 8:1–11 reveals that Paul has been demonstrating the absolute incompatibility between the realm of *the flesh* and the realm of the Spirit. We have to decide to which we are indebted.

The word translated “flesh” is one of Paul’s favorites—he uses it over 100 times in his letters, about one-third of those in Romans alone! But Paul doesn’t use this word to refer to the same thing in every context. Furthermore, the term “the body” is virtually synonymous with “the flesh” in many cases, so it’s useful to consider them together.

While the mind can recognize sin and delight in God’s law (Romans 7:22–25), the flesh is unruly, tempted by the sins of the world (7:14, 23). Its desires are oriented

toward the things that God disdains, and one cannot please God while submitting to the flesh (8:7–8). But believers are empowered to resist the flesh’s desires.

13a. Here, we note a shift from the first-person plural “we” of the previous verse to the more pointed second-person plural *you* as Paul states the central reason why not to *live according to the flesh*, fulfilling its desires. It’s because the flesh, as used in this context, stands in opposition to God’s desires (Romans 8:7; Galatians 5:17). Allowing the desires of the flesh to control one’s life leads to death.

Paul is reiterating a point that he makes throughout the letter. Paul is not referring to physical death, but to the outcome of the final judgment, where one’s eternal fate is sealed. The one who lives to gratify the desires of the flesh will pay the highest price.

13b. The alternative to living after the flesh is to *put to death the misdeeds of the body*. Yet Paul does not suggest that his readers can be saved by their own strength, as if salvation were by works. Rather, believers are empowered by the life-giving *Spirit* to resist their temptations and to subdue the desires of their carnal natures. Paul similarly encouraged the Galatians in this regard.

14. The word *for* that begins this verse indicates a reason for or expansion on

something stated previously. In this case, the verse now before us expands on what “you will live” of the previous verse means: to be considered as *the children of God*. Some older translations render this phrase as “sons of God.” It is essential to recognize that Paul is not excluding women here. While this Greek term can be rendered either “sons” or “children,” the force of the male term “sons” evokes common ideas about the rights of male children in the ancient world. In both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts, sons would inherit their fathers’ estates. While some translations choose to use the term “children” here, Paul likely uses this term (rather than another Greek word for “children”) because of its association with inheritance, a point that he will make more explicit in verse 17.

II. God's Children

Romans 8:15–17

15 The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” **16** The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. **17** 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.

15a. Paul explains his statement by linking the experience of the Spirit’s leading to one’s status as a child of God. Paul doesn’t want his readers to conclude that embracing a Spirit-dominated life is just to exchange one negative bondage for another. Thus, Paul emphasizes, as he has before, that believers have been freed from slavery to sin, death, the law, and judgment.

15b. The earlier description of opposites was “the flesh” versus “the Spirit”; now the description of opposites is “the spirit of bondage” versus the Spirit of *adoption*. Adoption was a common and important practice in the ancient world. Infant mortality rates were high, and many children who survived infancy died at young ages from accidents or diseases. Men would often adopt adult males as their heirs to preserve family lines and secure caretakers for their old age. An adopted son would take the father’s family name and would have all the rights of a natural-born child. There is even some evidence that adopted sons had special rights against disownment, so that they were always a part of the family.

The reality of the adopted heirs’ inclusion in God’s family inspires them (us) to *cry, Abba, Father*. Paul here uses an Aramaic term and immediately translates it with the Greek equivalent. While some suggest that *Abba* is a child’s term of endearment, the relevant literature from the time does not support this conclusion. Adults often used this term for their fathers without any childish affection implied. However, this misunderstanding does not diminish the significance of this cry. To call God one’s own father was the kind of honor usually reserved for demigods. Paul proclaims that the one true God has given this honor to human beings as he adopts them into his family.

16. Paul emphasizes the Holy Spirit’s role in testifying to the believer’s new status. This testimony is delivered to the believer’s own *spirit*, but Paul does not explain precisely what he means by this. It is likely that Paul refers back to the cry in Romans 8:15b, above. Some commentators suggest that the expression comes from a baptism ritual, but the evidence for this possibility is weak. It is more likely that Paul refers to the believer’s

inner sense of assurance, a gift from the Holy Spirit within them.

Here, instead of the Greek word for “son,” Paul uses the term for *children*. This is a more comprehensive word that includes both males and females.

17. Paul makes explicit here what he implies in Romans 8:14, above: those who are God’s *children* are his *heirs*. They have become part of God’s family and will receive an inheritance as *co-heirs with Christ*, who is “appointed heir of all things” (Hebrews 1:2). But what exactly are we to inherit? It’s tempting to answer that question quickly by turning to other well-known texts that speak of eternal life. But let’s not be too hasty in doing that. Focus on the phrase *heirs of God*. There is ambiguity in the original language as to what this means exactly. Several passages in Paul’s writings speak of the promises that are ours as heirs, including God’s “promise in Christ Jesus” and “hope of eternal life.” While this remains broad and rather ambiguous, the main thrust is joyful hope.

At the same time, our inheritance comes with a cost: those who desire to *share in Christ’s glory* must also *share in his sufferings*. The suffering that Paul has in mind here is likely the persecutions Jesus faced, which believers will also experience if they live like Jesus. This suffering will result in sharing in glory with Christ. We will experience resurrection, our bodies being transformed like Jesus’ body was. God will free his creation from bondage to death and decay.

III. Helped by the Spirit

Romans 8:26–27

²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he

who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

26. In Romans 8:18–25, Paul describes how the whole cosmos looks forward to God’s renewal of creation and how believers must wait with patient hope for that day.

Arriving now at Romans 8:26, Paul explains how *the Spirit helps us* as we wait. The word translated *weakness* often refers to physical sickness or disease. But here that word seems to speak of human limitations in a broad, general sense. This is a weakness that we cannot overcome in and of ourselves. The prayer task mentioned in Ephesians 6:18 is the challenge; the fact that we don’t even *know what we ought to pray for* is the reality. Both texts note the involvement of the Holy Spirit. The text at hand states that the Spirit makes up for our limitations by making intercession *for us*. That concept refers to someone advocating on behalf of another.

Some interpreters understand *wordless groans* as a reference to the gift of tongues. But Paul says here that it is the Holy Spirit who delivers such groanings, not the human believer. The Spirit communicates with God the Father on behalf of all believers with expressions that humans cannot mimic or understand.

27. Paul emphasizes the unique connection between *the Spirit* and *God* the Father as well as the effectiveness of the Spirit’s advocacy. Interceding *in accordance with the will of God*, the Spirit is not trying to convince the Father of something the Father does not wish to do. On the contrary, the Spirit prays for those things that the Father desires for us. They are aligned in their purpose, and believers can trust that God will answer those prayers.

Involvement Learning

The Holy Spirit

Into the Lesson

Consider a vulnerable population or an endangered animal species. What are some things people do to help, serve, or bring awareness about this population?

Why are advocates helpful to this group?

An advocate is someone who speaks up for someone or something that cannot speak for themselves or struggles to be heard. As we study, consider in what ways the Holy Spirit is an advocate for us.

Key Text

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.
—Romans 8:16

Into the Word

Read Romans 8:12–13. List behaviors and attitudes can be displayed by living in these ways:

“In the Flesh”: _____

“In the Spirit”: _____

Read Romans 8:14–15. How does this passage define what it means to be a child of God?

Read Matthew 7:7–11 and Hebrews 12:7–11. Based on these passages, what is an implication of being called a child of God?

Read Romans 8:16–17. How does this passage explain what it means to be an heir of God?

Read Galatians 3:26–4:7 and Ephesians 1:3–14. Based on these passages, what is an implication of being called an heir of God?

Into Life

List ways that you can live confidently as a believer.

Write a plan to deal with your fears so you can live confidently as God's child.

Thought to Remember

We are God's real children.