

## **Romans 8:1-11**

### **Alive In The Spirit**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When public gatherings were stopped, including us gathering as church, my first thought went to how the people of God can keep hearing the Word of God. While we couldn't gather together to sing and to pray and to receive from the Lord's table, we could still hear and read God's Word for us. And this is really important. We are people of the Word. And as we heard in the Isaiah reading, when God's Word is sent out it always produces fruit. "It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it", says the Lord. The technical term for this is 'performative'. God's Word does what it says. And the classic example is Genesis 1:3, "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light".

So, when the Word says in Romans chapter 8, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus", this is true. If you are 'in Christ', you are no longer condemned. Now this only makes sense if we're aware of the seriousness of our sin and the reality of God's judgment. Declaring that you are no longer condemned wouldn't mean much to anyone who imagined that sin wasn't that serious, or that God doesn't really care all that much about it

But to spell it out to those who might not get it, St Paul gives us multiple contrasting statements. Each one starts with a 'because' or a 'for', indicating it's an explanation of the first statement. There is no condemnation, because the law of the Spirit of life has set you free from law of sin and death. There is no condemnation, because God has acted in his Son and his Spirit to condemn sin and provide life. There is no condemnation, because there are two types of human beings and you are of the type that is alive in the Spirit. There is no condemnation, because these two types are heading, respectively, for death and life. This is really Paul showing us the classic ultimate contrast between good and evil, between light and darkness, between life and death.

Humanity's problem is that there is condemnation for all humanity because of Adam's trespass. We see this back in Romans chapter five. But this problem is solved by being 'in Christ Jesus.' And this is part of how St Paul describes our baptism. Baptism unites us with Jesus' death and resurrection. "The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus"

(Romans 6:10-11, NIV)

So this life 'in Christ' is one where we are no longer counted as God's enemies, but our new enemy is sin. And we are guaranteed much pain and heartache if we try to take on this enemy alone, without God's help. And so, we are to daily die to sin and live to Christ, setting our minds on things above, learning to think according to God's ways. Even if some days the best we have to offer is a humble heart that says, "Lord, this is the only life I have to give; use it in some way to bring the good news of your kingdom".

But the good news of the Gospel for us is that not only are we called to be "in the Spirit," but also the gracious gift of God to us is that the Spirit of God dwells in us. The paradox of Christian faith is that gift and demand go hand in hand. What God demands of us is what God has already given to us, namely, that we abide in the Spirit who indeed abides within us. There is no such thing as a Spiritless Christian. Christians live in a new realm, for the Spirit dwells in them. St Paul says, "You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit." (Romans 8:9, NIV)

Now on a surface level that sounds a bit odd. I'm fairly sure you are physically sitting there as you read this. You are flesh. But remember the contrast Paul is making here is between death and life, between evil and good, between sin and righteousness. We shouldn't take the word 'flesh' itself as a negative, as if we are Buddhists who want to reach Nirvana and leave the physical self behind. But when placed against the Spirit, the flesh represents our sinful self, our desires that are not aligned with the will of God. Like every other God-given thing we have, it's only when it's used according to the will of God that it gives glory to God. And everything else is sin, leading to death.

Remember, of course, that Christ himself was fully human; he had and was a human body. But he did not misuse his body by sinning and therefore he was, by Paul's usage in this passage, never flesh. "He was only in the likeness of sinful flesh", St Paul writes, but never sinful himself. And this is one part of how he was able to be a sin offering, thus removing from us the condemnation. He took the guilt of our sin upon himself, upon his body on the cross, and gave us freedom and life.

Now we also know that the Christian's physical body will still die because of sin's effects, unless it so happens that Jesus returns before you die. But the promise for those who are 'in Christ', the promise for those who have life in the Spirit, is that he will raise us as he did Jesus. And this reminds us of another powerful example of the performative nature of the Word of God.

Recall the story of Lazarus, and his two sisters Mary and Martha, who lived in the town of Bethany. A message is sent to Jesus that Lazarus is sick, and instead of hurrying to his side, Jesus waits. And when he and the disciples finally come to Bethany, they find that Lazarus had died, and had already been in the tomb for four days. And Jesus, who is the Word made flesh, declares to those around him, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." (John 11:25-26, NIV)

Now these are comforting words when faced with death, knowing that all who die in Christ will live eternally with him. But on this occasion Jesus didn't leave it there. He spoke to Lazarus. He spoke to a man lying dead in a tomb. And he simply said, "Lazarus, come out." Jesus, the incarnate Word, the Word made flesh, spoke to flesh that had suffered death, and the result was life. Lazarus walked out of the tomb, alive and well.

This is what the Spirit of life does. This is what the life-giving Word of God does. And this is the great joy that St Paul is expressing here in Romans chapter eight. He gets a bit wordy and seems to repeat himself a dozen times, but the good news of gospel shines through. You have life. Life in the Spirit. Life in Christ. Life in the Word of God. So live. Live according to the Spirit, setting your minds on the things of God. Live in the freedom of Christ, knowing there is now no condemnation. Live in praise of God, eternally giving thanks because of this good news:

The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you. (Romans 8:11, NLT)

Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.