

The Spirit Who Gives Life
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Romans 8:1-17

The British Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tells a personal story of his own near drowning as a young man while on his honeymoon in Italy. Never having learned to swim, he'd waded into the Mediterranean up to his knees, then turned back to return to shore. Sacks says he doesn't quite know what happened, whether there was a drop off somehow in the sea floor. But within a minute he found himself floundering in the water. He writes, "It's difficult to recapture the panic I felt. But it did, at the time, seem like the end...I had already reconciled myself to drowning when someone, seeing me thrashing about, swam over, took hold of me, and brought me to the shore. He deposited me, almost unconscious, at the feet of my wife. I was too shocked to do or say anything. I never found out his name. Somewhere out there is a man to whom I owe my life." "That for me has always been what help is like. You put out a hand, and someone seizes it and lifts you to safety. Self-help would not have worked at all. I was the problem, not the solution. Help, for me, has always been other-help..."

The other-help of God is exactly what Paul is talking about in Romans 7-8. Pulling a flailing, powerless person to the safety of shore is a picture of the "before and after" of the much-needed other-help of Jesus and indwelling Spirit that Paul explores for Jews and Gentiles alike in Romans 7 and 8. And while it's Pentecost Sunday and we're emphasizing the Person of the Spirit, the work of Jesus and the Spirit are so connected in this passage, Paul switches back and forth between them often. You have to see the work of one to see the work of the other.

In Romans 7, Paul describes the desperate need of fallen humanity: Although he wants to do good, evil is right there with him, and he's drowning in it. He voices the experience of futility and self-condemnation inherent in this life apart from Jesus: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"

But *now*, at the beginning of chapter 8, now, Paul says, Jesus has deposited him safely on shore. Now there's no condemnation, because "through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you^[a] free from the law of sin and death. ³ For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh [or sinful nature],^[b] God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.^[c] And so he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." There is a lot going on in those four short verses. Paul does a wordplay on the word "law" in these four short verses, and a couple of the "laws" are really powers. It's important to see what power we've been delivered from and what power we've been given.

The first "law" is the law of the Spirit who gives life. This is the "principle or power" of the Spirit who gives life. The second "law" is the law of sin and death. That is the "principle or power" that leads people away from God, toward death.

The third law, the law that is powerless, is the Mosaic law or Torah. This Law was God's good gift to show his people how to live in ways that honored him. But as an outside standard, it was powerless to break the reign of sin once and for all. But at the cross, Jesus breaks the power of the sinful nature. Like us in every way except for our sin, he came to be for us a sin offering. Paul says Jesus condemns sin in the flesh—that is, he tells the truth about sin as a power hostile to God. At the same time Jesus bore the sentence for sin, breaking its power. The surprising result? The righteous life God's law pointed to might be fully met not just in *Jesus*, the sinless son of God, but in *us*, who no longer live according to the power of the sinful nature but according to the life-giving power of the Spirit, poured out at Pentecost. Wow.

When we were drowning in the power of sin, help came from outside. Jesus extended his hands and lifted us up. But he doesn't just deposit us on shore. He sends his Spirit to teach us how to swim and give us the power to float. The Spirit's work in us is now and future. *Now* the Spirit empowers everyone in Christ to live in ways that please God. *Now* the Spirit governs our minds for life and peace (8:6). *Now* the Spirit helps us "put to death" the actions that belong to our old sinful nature (8:13). *Now* the Spirit assures us that we belong to God, corroborating the internal testimony of our own spirits that we are God's children, bound to him by love and not

through the fear of judgment. The Spirit's living witness *now* also allows us to have guaranteed hope for the future: "If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you." (8:11). "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." (8:17)

The reality of access to the life-giving power of the Spirit to confirm Christ in us is why Pentecost is actually my favorite holy day in the Christian year. Ten days after Jesus' ascension, the crowning gift of God to the world is the Holy Spirit coming into believers. Pentecost starts a new chapter in our relationship with God, an era only dreamed about in the past. And dream they did. 600 years before the time of Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah spoke of this new chapter in God's history with his people—the time we live in today. "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest..." (Jeremiah 31:33-34).

Because of Pentecost, the Spirit of the God who hung the stars and who raised Jesus from the dead makes his home in us and helps us know how to please him, mind to mind and heart to heart. As we think of the visible power of the first Pentecost, though, we can wonder if we do indeed have the Spirit with us. The Spirit's arrival in Acts 2 was dramatic—a visible, powerful presence through wind and tongues of fire and mass conversion. Does that mean that as we're watching for the Spirit in our lives and we don't see remarkable signs that we don't have him? No. The Spirit certainly can act with clear and visible impact to bring people to Christ. But the very same Spirit of Acts 2 operates quietly but no less powerfully in Romans 8, corroborating the internal testimony that assures someone that they belong to God." That's his work too. "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." (v. 16) You, however," Paul writes in verse 9, "are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ." Stated positively, if you have Christ, you have his Spirit too. It is the Spirit himself who empowers our confession of Jesus as Lord.

'Okay, okay,' someone is thinking. 'The Spirit gives life now and forever. We have assurance that we are God's children, which is a sign of the Spirit's presence. That encourages me greatly. But if you could look into my life...If you could see the besetting sins I face and the ways I fall short; if you knew how disappointed I sometimes am with myself... You would know that hearing about living with the power of God's Spirit inside me makes me wonder why I still sin. Because I still fail. I still fall short all the time. Why, if the power of sin has been broken by Jesus, why if the Spirit empowers my life, now, why do I still struggle so much?'

Augustine describes four states of the human condition. At creation, he says, we were able to sin, and not to sin. After the fall, we were stuck, drowning: no longer able not to sin. In Jesus and by the Spirit, grace restores our creational state: We're no longer drowning in the power of sin—we *can* turn away from it, but we're also still able to sin. Only in our glorified state will we enjoy being totally unable to sin. So for now, the Spirit provides the power for us to turn toward God, but he will not overrule us. He will not force us to change. He will help us put to death what no longer belongs to our redeemed nature. And yet we have the ability to choose to receive or reject his help. To paraphrase a memorable phrase from one of my former pastors: God's Spirit does his work in me, but he will not do it without me. Our old habits continue to die hard. If you've ever experienced a power outage or lived through a rewiring project, you know it's human to find yourself trying to flip on a light switch that doesn't have power. And the instant you flip the switch you remember it doesn't do what you wanted it to do.

Automatic patterns are strong. That kind of thing happens in our usual, well-worn ways of living, too. The tendencies and habits that lead us away from God and others are disconnected from the power source of God's Spirit. But they are like the well-traveled path to switches we expect to work. When we're provoked, when we're tired, when we're not at our best we are likely to respond by flipping a switch. It doesn't matter that it's disconnected from the Spirit's indwelling power. We're likely to act in ways that alienate us from God and others. There's access to some kind of power there, but it's likely not to be the kind we most want to tap. But in the Spirit, different switches are available to us. These switches are powered by life. They rely on a close-as-your-breath relationship with God, a relationship hardwired into our new hearts. When we're provoked, we begin to learn that there's a switch we can flip. We call on the Spirit to help us speak with truth and grace.

When we're tired, when we hurt, when we're most vulnerable to believing that God doesn't see or care about us, we can flip a switch. We tune our ears to the Spirit's voice, who testifies with our spirits that we are God's dearly loved children.

Remembering that these new switches WORK is going to take some time. It will take some practice, involve some setbacks. We look forward to a complete victory one day. But now we can wake up every morning and choose to turn the lights on. We wake as children who have inherited the very presence of God himself in our lives. And each day we say, "Good morning, Abba, Father. Before we do anything together today, would you remind me and assure me that I'm yours?" Amen.

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