

A Sermon by
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Chinese Christian Church
of New Jersey

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The Spirit-Filled Life, Part II

ROMANS 8:18-39

Last week I emphasized the importance of basing our assurance of salvation on real life-changes made by the Holy Spirit. I did that, because I believe it to be a main point taught in the eighth chapter of ROMANS. "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" because the law of the Spirit of life has now set those who are in Christ free from the law of sin and death. Being set free from the law of sin and death means experiencing power to live a righteous life and it means a mind controlled by the Holy Spirit which is also a mind devoted to God. And being set free from sin and death also means that the man in Christ is forever aware that he is not alone. Because Christ is in him, his spirit is alive and sensitized to do what is right. And the Holy Spirit also causes the man in Christ to realize his identity as an adopted child of God. This realization causes him to relate to God in the same way that the Bible records Jesus as relating to His heavenly father. The man in Christ cries out, "*Abba*, Father". And his cry does not mean, "I can't believe this is happening;" rather, it means "In the light of what is happening, not my will but yours be done."

These are all real life-changes brought about by the Holy Spirit that are experienced by the man or woman in Christ. These experiences by no means nullify the great doctrine of positional righteousness. It would be very correct to say that the person in Christ is no longer condemned, because he is now made just in the sight of God through the blood of Jesus Christ. God no longer sees his sin; God only sees the righteousness of Christ.

To place our hope in the doctrine of positional righteousness is not wrong, because it is a biblically sound doctrine. In fact, without the doctrine of positional righteousness, our assurance of salvation would not be complete. Some people begin to doubt their salvation, because they think that perhaps this whole doctrine is made up. Perhaps Jesus never died on the cross as a sin offering. Perhaps the whole doctrine of positional righteousness is a hoax. I personally have struggled with such doubt. But I counter the doubt by reminding myself that the doctrine is biblically based. And I am certain that the Bible is more reliable than my feelings at any given moment.

It is so important that we understand the relationship between the great doctrines of salvation and the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the person who is saved. The doctrines are extremely important, and (by the way) the doctrine of positional righteousness is not the only doctrine that is related to salvation. For example, there is also the doctrine of predestination. When I hear a person say "I am saved, because God chose me before the foundation of the world to be saved," I personally believe that person is biblically correct in making that statement. And then there is also the doctrine of glorification. It is a precious doctrine that gives the person in Christ hope that he will some day live in an environment without sin and have a body free from decay and corruption.

Let's be careful not to play down any of these great doctrines. We must place our hope in the certainty of these biblically based truths, even if we have to admit that we cannot see the thing in which we are placing our hope. We believe in these doctrines, not

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because we can see them or because we can use science to prove that they are true. We believe these doctrines because we know that the teachings of the Bible are totally trustworthy.

However, when it comes to having assurance about our own salvation, we must go beyond the doctrines. Without letting go of the doctrines, we must experience the Spirit-filled and Spirit-led life. We must be controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Without the kind of changes we talked about last week and will continue to talk about today, a person should doubt his own conviction that he is saved.

If the doctrines alone could give us life, then John the Baptist would have proclaimed, "I baptize you with water, but One is coming after me who will baptize you with doctrines." And Jesus would have said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have doctrines." As far as the individual is concerned, the good news must go beyond the fact that salvation is provided through Jesus Christ. It must relate to me in a way that produces supernatural change in my life.

Last week we looked at several changes produced by the Holy Spirit and experienced by the person in Christ. Today we are going to look at what I believe to be the most vital and personal ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. It all takes place in the context of suffering. The Holy Spirit causes a person in Christ to relate to suffering in an entirely different way from the person who is not in Christ. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the Holy Spirit uses the suffering experienced by the man in Christ to produce a kind of person who is entirely different from the person who is not in Christ. This message is an attempt on my part to expound on the difference.

The first difference I find emphasized in our scripture reading is that the Holy Spirit enables the person in Christ to see suffering in its proper context. I draw this conclusion from the words recorded in ROMANS 8:18-25. In verse 18, the Apostle Paul said, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." As a man in Christ, Paul not only understood the cause of all suffering, but he also understood the general purpose for all suffering. The cause of all suffering is God's judgment against sin and death. The general purpose of all suffering is the glory of God's grace that will be revealed in His creation at the end of the age.

It is dangerous to go beyond the general cause and purpose in our attempts to analyze suffering. After 9/11 some people tried to explain all that suffering by connecting it directly to the laws of our country that permit women to have abortions. It is dangerous to be that specific in our analysis of suffering. But it is healthy and very Biblical to that, in general, the cause of suffering is the curse and the ultimate goal of suffering is the redemption of all creation.

Something has happened in the past, and something will happen in the future. The present suffering we are now experiencing is taking place during an interim period of time. Creation is cursed. It is full of imperfection and corruption and mortality. But the Holy Spirit enables the man in Christ to understand that creation is cursed for man's sake. Only in the context of suffering produced by the curse can the grace of God produce its glorious outcome.

The other day I heard a man say that he cannot believe in a perfect God who would create an imperfect universe. But the man in Christ views the imperfect world not as something permanent. He views it as part of a process that will lead some day to something that is perfect.

But, the Holy Spirit not only enables the man in Christ to see suffering in the framework of this broader consideration; he also enables the man in Christ to feel strong emotion about the present suffering. The Holy Spirit enables the person in Christ to groan inwardly as he waits eagerly for the day when the suffering will end and the glory of God's grace is revealed.

Now anyone can experience agony over the scene of decadence and death we find in our world today. There seems to be a general consensus among all men that something

tragic is taking place in our world. But if you tune into the agony of the person in Christ produced by the Holy Spirit, you will find something very unique about it. It will be very similar to the groaning of a woman giving birth to a child. Instead of cursing the pain she is going through, the cry of her heart will be, "I hope the baby will come soon so that the pain will cease."

A person not filled with the Holy Spirit either becomes bitter or numb toward the suffering he encounters in his own life and in the creation around him. He may lend a helping hand in an attempt to relieve the suffering, but he has trouble putting the suffering in its proper context. And because he has trouble seeing the big picture, his emotions will gravitate toward either anger or despair. In contrast, the emotions of the Spirit-filled person can be best described as impatience. "Lord, how much longer will it be? I can't wait for this suffering to end." This will be the cry of the man in Christ as he encounters suffering. But even as He groans, he will do his utmost best to minister to the suffering he sees.

There is a science-fiction story of a man who receives information that the world will be destroyed in just a couple of days by alien forces. The man who received this information then became very laid back about all the problems of the world, because he figured, "Why waste the time doing anything to improve the situation when it's all soon coming to an end anyway."

But, the man in Christ realizes that he has a personal responsibility to witness in both word and deed right up to the final moment when this world does come to an end.

I love the way this passage of scripture reveals the interplay between doctrine and the work of the Holy Spirit. The hope of future glory is a doctrine. The future glory is something that we cannot see in this present life. But the ability to understand the cause and ultimate purpose of suffering and the ability to groan with anticipation is more than doctrine. It is change produced by the Holy Spirit. You can have the doctrine without the change, but you cannot have the change without the doctrine. Therefore, it is the change that must become the foundation of our assurance.

And, the change brought about in the context of suffering goes on. ROMANS 8:26-27 reveals how our prayer life changes in the context of suffering. Verse 26 proclaims that the "Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness." And then that verse and the following verse reveal more specifically that the Holy Spirit helps us to pray.

Prior to the birth of each one of our children, my wife and I sat through Lamas classes. Because many years passed between the birth of each child, we figured we needed the review. Those who have taken the Lamas training know that the husband is supposed to be the coach. We are supposed to sit by our wives and help them (among other things) to relax and breath properly until the baby is born and the suffering is over. It is very difficult for the mother to be patience and concentrate on what she must do, so we are there to coach and encourage.

That picture may help you understand how the Holy Spirit helps us to pray in the context of suffering. All creation groans as it waits for the day when the suffering will come to an end. The man in Christ also groans as he waits for the same thing. And now, and in the same way, the Holy Spirit groans. His goal is not to eliminate the suffering; rather, His goal is to help us to have patience through the suffering and to concentrate on the work we must do until the suffering is over.

In the Lamas training, the coaches are supposed to help their wives use certain breathing techniques, especially when the pain is the greatest. And if they need help, we are supposed to lead them in breathing. Just as the coach helps his wife to breathe, the Holy Spirit helps us to pray. He helps us to pray in accordance with God's will. "Oh God, I am running out of patience. Help me to endure. And help me to continue to witness for you until the end."

Sometimes the woman experiencing labor pain will lose her concentration and begin to panic and breathe in a way that is not helpful. At those times, the coach must take over and say, “Look at me! This is how you do it.”

Sometimes the sufferings we encounter in life cause us to panic, and our prayers stray away from the will of God. At times our prayers turn into bold and arrogant demands. We demand that our circumstances change, and we won’t stop praying until they do. We give “faith” a new definition and proclaim that faith is persisting in our demands until they are met. Such “power praying” is not Biblical. The Biblical function of prayer is not to convince God to do something He does not want to do. The function of prayer is to fully relate us to what God is already doing and has been doing from eternity. The Holy Spirit helping us in our weakness and enabling us to pray according to God’s will—What better evidence is there than that to convince us that what we have become in Christ is real and is good?

The famous promise recorded in ROMANS 8:28 must be seen in light of everything that has been discussed up to this point. Take the man in Christ with all his beloved doctrines and the Holy Spirit; then add suffering. The result will be a chain reaction of events. The chain reaction will go something like this: First, an understanding that the suffering has a cause and a purpose and the purpose is far greater than the suffering itself. Second, an emotion that corresponds with the understanding, a longing that the purpose be fulfilled as soon as possible, and a desire to cooperate with God in fulfilling the purpose. Third, a realization of one’s own weakness in waiting, causing the man in Christ to turn to the Holy Spirit for help. And now, as the Holy Spirit helps the believer pray in accordance with God’s will, another wonderful change comes about. The man in Christ is filled with the overwhelming confidence that what God wants for him will be accomplished. The “good” promised in verse 28 must be connected to this chain-reaction of events. The good must be the purpose of God to confirm the man in Christ into his likeness. Causing us to become like Jesus is the glory of God’s grace. That is God’s ultimate goal for the believer, and now God is filling the believer with confidence that this good thing will happen.

So the chain-reaction of events produced by the Holy Spirit in the context of suffering ends with confidence. And then, in verses 29-30, we see a shift in the Apostle Paul’s argument. It is a shift from talking about what the Holy Spirit does in the life of the believer to declaring another great doctrine. The doctrine goes like this:

The ultimate purpose of God to glorify the believer that will happen at the end of the age is certain. It is certain that the believer will be conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ. The final outcome is certain, because even before the foundation of the world, and certainly before anyone ever exercised faith, God determined that those He called would be justified and those He justified would be glorified.

“Called, justified, and glorified...” I think it is quite appropriate to call this sequence of events predestination, since that is the word used here. God wants the believer to understand that His final purpose cannot be frustrated. Only God makes every step in the process possible. Even our faith that results in our justification cannot happen without the call of God.

Paul’s purpose of declaring this great doctrine at this point in his argument was not to give his readers a scheme for explaining God’s attributes of omniscience and sovereignty in a way that will be acceptable to everyone. Nor was his purpose to deny man’s part in salvation, which is faith. In the first four chapters of ROMANS, Paul went to great lengths to establish the importance of faith. Paul’s purpose of emphasizing the doctrine of predestination was rather to help the believer understand that God’s ultimate purpose of glory for the believer cannot be thwarted, because it is entirely dependent upon God. Not only the outcome, but even the process that leads to the outcome is controlled by God.

If any step on the road to glory depended on man then there would be reason to question the certainty of getting there. Believing that God is in control of all the events

leading to a man's redemption is of tremendous value for the person who has Holy Spirit produced evidence that he is a part of those events. Unfortunately, there are too many people who claim the doctrine of predestination without having anything in the way of assurance produced by the Holy Spirit. Such people tend to abuse the doctrine by coming to outrageous conclusions. Conclusions such as, 'God's will is going to be done anyway, so why pray?' or 'God has already decided who is going to heaven, so why witness?'

By coming to these ridiculous conclusions, people deny the very changes that God has predestined will come about in the lives of people that He has predestined to be confirmed into the image of Christ. The most fervent witnesses and prayer warriors in church should be those who believe strongly in the doctrine of predestination. The doctrine without the change will do no good. But when the Holy Spirit is at work in a person's life, the doctrine becomes invaluable.

The question and answer sequence found in verses 31-39 must be seen as a celebration of the believer's security. The sequence begins with the question, "What, then, shall we say in response to this?" Remember the context. ROMANS 8 is a beautiful interplay of doctrines related to salvation and real life-changes produced by the Holy Spirit. Together, they form an armor that nothing can penetrate. No news is better than the good news of the gospel.

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" This saying became the battle cry in the story of the church facing all sorts of circumstances that could undermine its confidence. Opposition is implied in verse 31. Accusation and guilt are the mentioned in verses 33-34. And all sorts of life-threatening attacks are talked about in verses 35-39. And what has God given to us to counter all these things? He has given to us the hope of being clothed in the righteousness of Christ and the hope of a final purpose and the hope that God has always been and is still in control of everything. And, in addition to these great doctrinal truths, God has given us the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The man who is clothed in Christ, committed to God's purpose, assured that His purpose cannot be frustrated and controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit—this man cannot be destroyed. He can't even be threatened.

For us, words like persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword are symbolic representations of our own "present sufferings". But for the people who first received Paul's letter these words were far more than symbolic. Their testimonies are now recorded in history books. Many went to their death like sheep to be slaughtered. But they went full of confidence and hope. God's grace had done its job. His purpose in their lives had been fulfilled. They had been conformed into the likeness of their Savior, and they were content.

ROMANS 8 is a detailed explanation of a theme introduced in ROMANS 5:2-5. There, the Apostle Paul was introducing some of the benefits of salvation. At the end of verse 2 he talked about the glory of God. He said "we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." Then, in verse 3, we read on. "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given to us." Isn't that a summary of what we just read in ROMANS 8? You begin with hope in doctrinal truth based on the certainty of God's Word. You add to that suffering and the Holy Spirit. You end up with real life-changes and a hope that is stronger than what you started with, a hope that cannot be defeated and cannot be threatened.