

Unit 2

THE GOD WHO CHANGES US

Epistles

Memory Verses

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

—GALATIANS 5:22-26

Writer

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Once Slaves, Now Children

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God delivers us from slavery to sin and death, and He gives us life through the Spirit.

The Pixar movie *Up* opens with a powerful flashback sequence that sets up the story. In a few relatively short scenes, we see the backstory of the curmudgeonly widower Carl in tear-jerking detail. It is a masterful montage, in many ways encapsulating the heart of the entire story, and many moviegoers have hailed this flashback scene as a masterpiece of cinematic storytelling in its own right. It is, essentially, a great movie *within* a great movie.

Romans 8 is “a movie within a movie,” the masterpiece within the masterpiece. In just a few short minutes, this chapter takes us into the great, panoramic sweep of how God’s story of redemption has so completely and utterly changed us—from suffering to celebration, from bondage to freedom, from death to resurrection. If you were to choose any chapter of Scripture to know inside and out, you’d be hard pressed to find one more rich in the gospel than Romans 8.



How might you sum up the way the gospel of Jesus changes us (ex. “once slaves, now children”)?

With this session, we will begin a unit examining how God changes us in Christ. Up first, we will explore Romans 8 and touch on some of the highlights of this high point of Scripture. We will see that Christians have undergone a radical transformation from being slaves of sin and fear to becoming children of God who can live with full assurance and hopeful anticipation that God is making all things new.

1. From Slaves to Sons (Rom. 8:12-17)

¹² *So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.*
¹³ *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.* ¹⁴ *For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.* ¹⁵ *For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”* ¹⁶ *The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,* ¹⁷ *and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*



How should Christians think about sin and sinning in light of this passage?

If we are in Christ, we are no longer slaves to the flesh. We have been freed by Christ, and the Spirit enables us to put to death the works of the flesh that linger in us. As Christians, we still *can* sin, but the gospel changes us so that we don't *have* to. The chains of the flesh have been broken and shattered.

Because of this, we are also no longer slaves to something else—fear. In Christ, there is no reason to fear rejection by God. Our ongoing struggle with the flesh will not end in us being separated from God one day. Why? Because the Spirit of adoption has replaced the spirit of slavery. We are now God's sons and daughters.

In Paul's day, like ours, adoption brought you fully into a new family, as if you had been born into it. Through adoption, a child was granted full rights as any other child in the family, and all of the previous relationships, obligations, and debts were ended. In essence, adoption gave a person a brand new permanent identity. That is why Paul placed adoption in opposition to being a slave to the flesh. They both cannot be true of us.



Voices from Church History

“If a slave is to be made free, and called a son of God, and brought from death into life, it can only be accomplished by Him who shares our nature and delivers it from slavery.”¹

—Basil of Caesarea
(circa 329–379)

At salvation, the Holy Spirit has awakened our hearts to receive Christ and begun to dwell in us to establish Christ's lordship in our lives. From that moment on, we don't relate to God as slaves or servants, trying to work off a debt for the rest of our lives. No longer are we burdened by the reality that there is nothing we can do to make up for our eternal debt, nor are we plagued with fear that we haven't done enough. Instead, we relate to God as a loving Father. We are not debtors to Him because Christ has paid the debt for us. And by His virtue, we become heirs alongside Him.

This not only changes the way we see God and our standing before Him, but it also changes the way we live as Christians. It doesn't mean there isn't work for us to do; it just means that the work we do, we do freely and joyfully, knowing that our sonship is irrevocable. We can neither pay back what has already been satisfied nor lose what has already been divinely given. We don't live as slaves with an uncertain future but as sons and daughters with an assured inheritance.

But the gospel goes even deeper than that.



Why might Christians be tempted to think of their relationship with God in terms of “payback”?



How should the assurance of our adoption into God's family through faith in Christ impact how we see ourselves and live?

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

75. Adoption

Adoption into God's family is one the positive benefits of justification. Not only are we pardoned from the judgment against us through justification, but we also experience a change of identity—we become children of God (John 1:12; Gal. 4:5). Through adoption our relationship with God, which was once lost through the fall, is now restored, resulting in the benefits of being an heir of God and a coheir with Christ (Rom. 8:16-17).

2. From Groaning to Glory (Rom. 8:18-30)

When Paul stated that we are coheirs with Christ as adopted children, he was quick to qualify that not everything we are entitled to share with Christ is pleasant. We share in Christ's sufferings now as we wait for the day when we will be glorified with Him and everything will be right again. This world is not as it should be. There is a better world in store, but it won't come through returning to a time in the past when people lived "better." Instead, we look forward to a time in the future when God will re-create everything and make all as it should be once more.



¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in

the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

One of the interesting things in this passage full of interesting things is that the groanings of creation, while painful, are not the kind of groanings we'd associate with the throes of death. Yes, something is giving way, something is changing, but it is not giving way to death. Instead, the world is being renewed and will be remade, particularly at Christ's second coming when He consummates His kingdom and ushers in the new heavens and the new earth. So the world is not groaning in death but groaning in birth!



How does it encourage you to know that Jesus is making all things new?



How should God's plan for the world impact how we treat it now?

Paul wrote about God's plan to restore fallen creation—to a state even better than the unfallen yet unglorified days of Eden, if you can believe that—and he connected men and women, the crown of God's creation, to that restoration as well. One day this broken world will be set free from its bondage to corruption into the blessed and capable hands of God's glorified children (v. 21).

But until then, we are groaning just as creation is. We groan in suffering. We groan in hardship. We groan from injustice. We groan from our sin. We groan in temptation. We groan simply from getting older and more frail. But just as there is a new earth coming, there are new bodies for God's children coming too. If we have been made joint-heirs with Christ, it is because we have died with Him and live with Him. And though we expect to die someday, we know we will be resurrected because Christ's resurrection is the firstfruits and we have received the Spirit as the firstfruits of this promise's fulfillment.

The gospel assures us that we will not groan forever. He who has called us is faithful. He doesn't just author our faith, but He perfects it as well (Heb. 12:2). He has justified us and He will also glorify us (Rom. 8:30). This is how thoroughly transformative the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is—all who trust in Him are guaranteed the kind of life that makes death itself, in a way, a non-factor.



How does Romans 8:28 give us hope as we deal with the groanings of this life?



Voices from the Church

“Most of the time, we scratched our heads and wondered how the matted mesh of threads in Romans 8:28 could possibly be woven together for our good. On earth, the underside of the tapestry was tangled and unclear; but in heaven, we will stand amazed to see the topside of the tapestry and how God beautifully embroidered each circumstance into a pattern for our good and His glory.”²

—Joni Eareckson Tada

3. From Death to Life (Rom. 8:31-39)

³¹ *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?*
³² *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*³³ *Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies.*³⁴ *Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.*³⁵ *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?*³⁶ *As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

³⁷ *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*³⁸ *For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,*³⁹ *nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

As Paul reflected over what the Holy Spirit prompted him to write in the previous verses, he was overcome with joyful confidence. Yes, we still struggle with the flesh. Yes, we will experience suffering and pain. But God is faithful and His grace is unshakable. We can live with full assurance of our relationship with God as we patiently await future glory because there is no one and no thing that can undo what God has done.

Paul portrayed a courtroom drama unfolding to drive home the reason for his confidence. We are pictured in the defendant's seat, and God Himself is the judge behind the bench. The first question Paul asks is who will bring an accusation against us to the Judge. The answer is no one because God is the One who justifies defendants, and no charge can be brought against His own.

The entire courtroom should be dismissed in that moment because without an accusation, there is no case to move forward. But Paul continued the drama to add layers to the impossibility of a conviction.

The next question, then, is who can reach a guilty verdict and condemn? Again the answer is no one because Jesus has already paid that sentence through His death, and having been raised from the dead, He now intercedes for us on our behalf.

The final question is who can carry out a guilty sentence and separate us from the love of Christ. Once again, the answer is no one and no thing. Even if an accusation could be brought, even if a guilty verdict could be rendered, there is no way we can be separated from God's love.

These are the implications of the indicatives of the gospel. In other words, if all that Paul has claimed to be promised to us in the good news of Christ's death and resurrection for sinners is *true*, then the result should be nothing short of death-defying, fear-quenching, world-transforming confidence. "If God is for us, who can be against us?"



Voices from Church History

"If God be for us, who is the Judge of all and whose omnipotence calls into being all things, no one can be against us, since everything that He has created must be subject to the Creator. So also the converse is true! If God be against us no one can be for us."³

—Martin Luther (1483-1546)



How has the gospel of God's unstoppable love helped you through a time of anxiety or doubt?

The key to living through anything we experience in life is to keep our gaze fixed on what is in store. Focusing on eternal life, then, frames our quality of life right now. We are not dead men and women walking. We are beloved children of God waiting for the full consummation of God's irrevocable promises made to us in the gospel.

This is our motivation to live on purpose for the gospel and through the power of the gospel. This is the joyful news we have to share. And this is the cause for us patiently to endure suffering and life's hardships, not with a plastic grin but with genuine peace, joy, and confidence that this world with its struggles is fleeting and temporary.

 How should the Christian's view of death be markedly different from the unbeliever's view of death?

 What are some ways our lives can be marked by worship in light of the implications of the gospel?

Conclusion

The love of God is the highest, deepest, greatest, and most glorious reality a human being could ever experience. It is stronger than our flesh. It is greater than our suffering. It is more eternal than death. And it is more powerful than sin. The love of God is the apex of the human experience, and it is ours by faith, unlimited in the deep fountain of Christ's atoning work. What a glorious gospel that has been given to us! And what a glorious gospel that has been entrusted to us to share with the world around us!

CHRIST CONNECTION: God's people are in the process of being conformed to the image of His Son. We have been adopted into His family, no longer slaves to sin but children of God who call Him "Father." Because of Christ's work on the cross, we are welcomed into God's family and are now coheirs with Christ, eagerly awaiting the glorious future He has promised.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to rely on the Spirit's power to put to death the deeds of the body and to follow His commands as His children.

1. What steps will you take to put to death your sinful desires and actions by the power of the Holy Spirit?

2. In what circumstances of groaning in your life do you need to rely on the promise of Romans 8:28?

3. How can your group/church encourage one another to live on mission using the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ?

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