

Flesh and Spirit - Resurrection

Ezekiel 37: 1-14
Psalm 130
John 11:1-45

Romans 8:6-11

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law - indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

There is so much to this passage, so much theology. Paul's letter to the Romans, and in particular Romans 5-8, have been called the greatest piece of theological writing ever known. The way Paul sets out his theology, shows his incredible mind at work. This is not the space to go into the deep theology of Romans 8, but to say Paul is not just talking about living for God or living against God. This is not just about the so-called old nature and new nature. He is also talking about the resurrection of all people, the future hope that we can all look forward to. He is actually saying that we will have new bodies, resurrection bodies, like Jesus had after he was raised from death at the first Easter. This is what I think Paul means when he says that 'though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness'. He says that our mortal bodies will receive life also.

This is part of the whole theology of Paul, and it goes against probably everything about the issue of life after death that most of us have been taught since we were in Sunday School. The idea that, if you're 'in Christ' you go to heaven when you die, is actually a Hellenistic, a Greek idea and not a biblical one at all. What Paul is talking about here, is what you could call 'life after life after death'. It is heaven and earth coming together. Heaven is coming here and that is what Paul is saying and that idea runs throughout much of the New Testament.

Having said all that, that's not what I want to focus on in this message, except that it's important that I think it is said, because much of what we have been taught about eternal life is at best only partly biblical and true. For anyone who is more academically inclined and wants to follow that up, then I would recommend reading people like NT Wright and Rikki Watts.

When we see the world in this way, that salvation is about the coming together of heaven and earth, we will have a whole new worldview, a whole new outlook on the way we see life and its purpose. We don't just have the approach that I was taught that this is not our home and we're just passing through. For most of us who grew up in the church this is probably something that we were never taught. We were always taught that if you're a Christian, when you die you go to heaven, and that was it. You'd be there with God forever. That's certainly what I used to believe. And if that's what you've been brought up with, it's not biblical when you have a look at it.

When we look at a passage like this one in Romans and see what God was actually saying to us through Paul, it can give us a love for people, an anger at the injustices we see in the world around us, and it can enhance our love of the creation. This world is our home, but it's fallen and broken. A quick look at the daily news will show you that.

God made this world and he loves it. He said it was good when he made it. My love of nature and of animals comes from this worldview. I just love nature and animals and it breaks my heart when I hear of animals being tortured and threatened with extinction because of humanity's greed and addiction to having more and more stuff. Nell and I recently went to the Sustainable Living Festival and spoke to a group of people who are working to save orangutans from extinction because there are only so many of them left due to the cutting down of forests where they live. This is all stuff that is important to God and must be important to us. This is the social element of the gospel.

So when Paul says in this passage that 'he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies...through his Spirit that dwells in you', he is talking about how God is now working and will work in history. God's kingdom has come in Jesus and we have his Spirit in us now, and we will one day have new bodies, in a day when there will be no more death, and no more tears and no more suffering.

It's crucial to understand this about Paul's letter to the Romans. Remember who Paul was. He was a Jew, a Pharisee of the highest order. He says of himself in Philippians that if anyone has reason to have confidence in the flesh it was him. He was steeped in the law, a Pharisee, one of those who Jesus often had harsh words for. Paul also says that as far as the law goes he was blameless. He then goes on to say that whatever gains he had from that he considers loss for the sake of Christ. His whole worldview, his whole mindset changed when he encountered Jesus. The most zealous Pharisee you could imagine was the one who God used to show the new way of living by the Spirit. Paul, as the strictest Jew, learnt what it meant to go from living by Law to living by grace.

Through his encounter with Jesus, Paul's view of the world was completely transformed. He saw that living by the law could never give him what he really wanted in life, it could never give him the life that he was after. In fact, it exposed his wrongdoing. You know when someone tells a child not to do something, often they will do that very thing, or at least will want to, just to see what it is like.

So what does this living by the Spirit mean? Well for Paul it meant the power to live as he ought. It meant the recognition that living by the law, trying to follow all these commands, his weaknesses were constantly exposed. He could never live up to the demands of the law that he grew up with. And remember that this is the Jewish Law that Paul is specifically referring to, but it also applies to us in the sense of trying to follow rules for living and constantly coming up short.

It was through the letting in of the Spirit in his life that gave Paul the strength to live the life he wanted to live. Why else did he say this in Romans 7 that the things he wants to do, he doesn't do, and the things he doesn't want to do he keeps on doing. 'The Message' version of this passage describes it perfectly. It describes my life perfectly. Do you ever feel like that? If you don't you're a better person than I am, but I suspect this is something that we all struggle with. Do you ever have those nagging thoughts that you wouldn't even tell your closest friend? The things that make you feel shame and make you sometimes feel like you're the only person in the world who would think such a thing and if anyone ever knew it they wouldn't want a bar of you? As I'm saying this there are probably examples going off in your own head of times when you're just like that. Nell and I often get emails with all sorts of photos and sayings. One of them recently was a series of wise sayings and one of them was 'everyone seems normal until you get to know them'. We all have our faults. We all need something higher. And that's where Paul has found out and is telling us that it is the Spirit of God dwelling in us who gives us that life.

I know I've said this a few times in the past but all of this just shows again that we cannot do life on our own. We might know what we want to do but we're simply too weak to do it, and so we so often give in. But Paul is talking about allowing something bigger, something outside of ourselves, run our life. This is living in the Spirit. The Spirit is Jesus' alter ego if you like. If you don't like who you are and want to be a better person, invite the Spirit into your life and you will become more like Jesus. Then look at Jesus' life in the gospels and see how you can follow him. Living a life where you are content no matter what hits you in life is possible. Paul experienced it, and Jesus spoke of us having the joy that was in him. It's something that is there despite our circumstances. It is not dependent on what happens to us.

But it wasn't just his own sinful broken self that Paul was referring to when he said that law could not save him. As a Jew, and a strict one at that, the law he was referring to was the Jewish law with all its commands. And he was saying - and this is where it relates so deeply to Christians - is that not even the chosen people of God, Israel itself, could keep the law. The same goes for us. Often Christians think of themselves as somehow above everyone else and we are often rightly accused of being just that.

Do you remember a bumper sticker that said 'Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven'? I'm glad I haven't seen it for a while because I cringe when I think of that saying. To me it highlights that we've asked for it when we're accused of being self-righteous. As a friend of mine said once, for many Christians it's like God so loved the world but now that I'm a Christian he hates it. We suddenly become self-righteous and judgmental because we have the answer and those heathen people don't. Not so. This passage shows that not even God's people, in

this case Israel but we should apply it equally to ourselves, can get by without the Spirit of God living in us and guiding us. We are no better just because we are Christian. All we can do is point the way to someone else, to Jesus. As a preacher said once, I'm just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

When people ask how the Bible can possibly be relevant to life in 21st century Australia, this is how it is relevant. We look around at a world gone its own way. 100 years ago, before the onset of the First World War, there was a sense of optimism about humanity. There was a sense of inevitable progress, and a common saying was 'I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul'. Then the war broke out and that put paid to any last vestige of hope that humanity had in its own abilities to make the world right on its own. If people were basically good, how could this happen? And then 20 years later it happened again with World War 2. And on it goes. We live in a world now where technology drives us, where what is technologically possible overrides any sense of ethical problems it might cause, where we do things because we can. And so we have depression at a rate 10 times more than what it was when the Second World War ended. And so we have the problem of 1 in 10 teenagers in Australia binge drinking in any given week, which was highlighted just a couple of weeks ago in a report by the Australian National Council on Drugs. And we look equally at the Christian church where, as well as doing many great deeds for our indigenous people here in Australia, it was also responsible for the most terrible injustices. The church has a terrible history and we have no more excuse for it as anyone else does for their wrongdoing.

Jesus said the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. He knew what human nature was like. He knew how fragile we are. And so He came to bring us his Kingdom. This means both in our internal lives and in the world as a whole. The good news of Jesus affects every single part of life. It affects our inner life, our relationships, our politics, our economics. Everything.

This is the resurrection life. But we cannot do it alone. If history teaches us anything, it teaches us that humanity hasn't got a good track record when left to its own devices. But the resurrection promise of the future has started now and God invites us to be a part of it. His will, on earth as it is in heaven, will be done when we submit to him, when we surrender and let the Spirit do his thing in our lives.

by Nils von Kalm
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