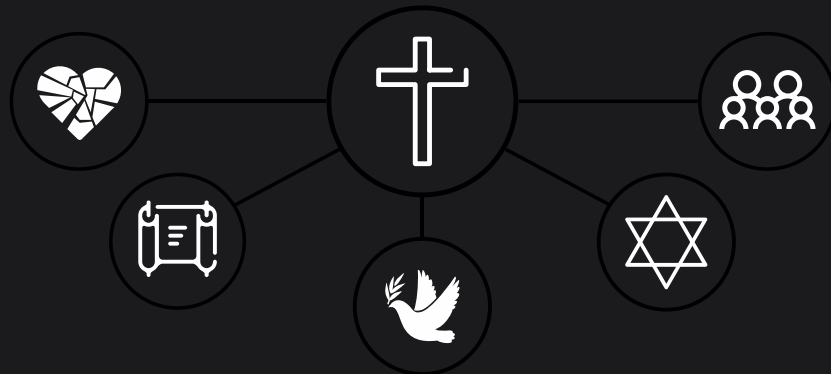




# ROMANS AND THE FUTURE GOSPEL

ROMANS 1-7



**Title:** Romans and the Future Gospel

**Text:** Romans 8:12-17

**Date:** March 18, 2023

**Main Idea:** The Spirit dwells in believers and acts in their lives by killing off sinful ways and reminding our spirits of our eternal status with God.

## Personal Study Guide

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READ ROMANS 8:12-17

## Highlight – What stands out?

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**For this lesson, it would be helpful to read Romans 8:1-17 because verses 12-17 are continuing the thought of what Paul talks about in the first 11 verses of Romans 8. Repetitive reading of Romans 8 will help drive the truths of this massive chapter home!**

1. What stands out to you in this passage? What new concepts or ideas does Paul bring up? What old ideas from Romans 1-8:11 does he build on?
  
2. There are multiple contrasting ideas in these verses. Let's break them down:
  - What two ways to live does Paul contrast in verses 12-13? What is the fruit of these paths?
  
  - What two relationships does Paul contrast in verses 14-15? What is the result of both?
  
3. Look up the following words in a dictionary. What do they mean?
  - Debtor:
  
  - Adoption:
  
  - Slavery:
  
  - Heir:

## Explain – What does this mean?

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1. Remember part of Paul's audience were 1st century Jews. Read: Deuteronomy 30:15,19. (God speaking to Israelites about to enter the promised land) What was the difference in mindsets of the original audiences for both the Old Testament text and the Romans text? Why is this important?
2. What role does the Spirit play in confirming our status as God's children? And what status is that?
3. What is the difference between slavery and adoption? List all the ways they are different.
4. Why is adoption such a better place to be?
5. If you have the Spirit dwelling inside of you, what are you not obligated to do any longer?
6. Go back your definitions from the Highlight section. How do these definitions help you understand what Paul is saying in these verses?
7. Look at verse 17. What is the means by which we know we are an heir?

## **Apply – How does this change me?**

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1. In verse 13 Paul calls us to 'put to death the deeds of the body' by the Spirit, how are we to carry this command out?
2. What is the benefit of having the Holy Spirit testify with our Spirit about our salvation status? How have you experienced this in your own life?
3. Look back at verse 15. How would a Spirit of slavery lead someone to fall back into fear? How does knowing you're adopted by God through Christ help you fight that fear?
4. In verse 17, Paul says that we are "fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may be glorified with him." Why is suffering the pathway? Where else do you see this in scripture that suffering must come first? Where do you see in your own life that suffering came first?

## **Respond – What's my next step?**

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1. What sin or sin habit do you need to put to death this week? How can our class pray for you? How can we help you stay accountable to 'putting to death' your sin?

2. As you fight that sin, how does knowing you are an heir with Christ, and an adopted son, change how you think about your standing before him and the sin you are fighting?
3. The encouragement of verse 17 is that we are glorified with him. How does that encourage you in your own suffering? How are you tempted to fight the suffering in your own life, and how does that impact the benefits you receive as an heir?

## Commentary: Taken from John Stott's Commentary on Romans

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**Note to Group Leaders: You also have your F.F. Bruce Commentary on Romans you were given on Team Night. You can use that one, in addition to this one, to help you grasp the text. Reach out to Courtney Reissig if you need one or haven't received yours.**

We come now to the second consequence of the dwelling in us of God or Christ through the Spirit. The first was life; the second is a debt or obligation. *Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation* (12), or literally 'we are debtors' (AV, RSV). What is this debt? It is not now to share the gospel with the world (as in 1:14), but to live a righteous life. We have no obligation *to the sinful nature (sarx) to live according to it* (12). It has no claim on us. We owe it nothing. Our obligation is rather (this is inferred, since Paul does not complete the expected antithesis) to the Spirit, to live according to his desires and dictates.

Paul's argument seems to be this: if the indwelling Spirit has given us life, which he has (*your spirit is alive*, 10), we cannot possibly live according to the flesh, since that way lies death. How can we possess life and court death simultaneously? Such an inconsistency between who we are and how we behave is unthinkable, even ludicrous. No, we are in debt to the indwelling Spirit of life to live out our God-given life and to put to death everything which threatens it or is incompatible with it.

Verse 13 sets the option before us as a solemn life-and-death alternative, which is made the more impressive by Paul's renewed resort to direct address. *For if you live according to the sinful nature* (which he has just declared in verse 12 not to be a Christian obligation), *you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live* (13). That is, there is a kind of life which leads to death, and there is a kind of death which leads to life. Verse

13 thus becomes a very significant verse on the neglected topic of 'mortification' (the process of putting to death the body's misdeeds). It clarifies at least three truths about it.

First, what is mortification? Mortification is neither masochism (taking pleasure in self-inflicted pain), nor asceticism (resenting and rejecting the fact that we have bodies and natural bodily appetites). It is rather a clear-sighted recognition of evil as evil, leading to such a decisive and radical repudiation of it that no imagery can do it justice except 'putting to death'. In fact, the verb Paul uses normally means to 'kill someone, hand someone over to be killed, especially of the death sentence and its execution' (BAGD on *thanatoō*). Elsewhere the apostle has called it a crucifixion of our fallen nature, with all its passions and desires.<sup>41</sup> And this teaching is Paul's elaboration of Jesus' own summons: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.' Since the Romans compelled a condemned criminal to carry his cross to the site of crucifixion, to carry our cross is symbolic of following Jesus to the place of execution. And what we are to *put to death* there, Paul explains, is *the misdeeds of the body*, that is, every use of our body (our eyes, ears, mouth, hands or feet) which serves ourselves instead of God and other people. Some scholars, doubtless anxious to avoid the dualism which regards the body itself as evil, suggest that by *sōma* (the body) Paul really means *sarx* (the flesh, or sinful nature), and one or two manuscripts do contain this word. Thus Charles Cranfield renders the phrase 'the activities and schemings of the sinful flesh, of human self-centredness and self-assertion'. But it seems better to retain *sōma*, to bear in mind that the word for *misdeeds* is actually neutral (*praxeis*, deeds or actions), and to allow the context to determine whether they are good or (as here) evil.

Secondly, how does mortification take place? We note at once that it is something that we have to do. It is not a question of dying or of being put to death, but of putting to death. In the work of mortification we are not passive, waiting for it to be done to us or for us. On the contrary, we are responsible for putting evil to death. True, Paul immediately adds that we can *put to death the misdeeds of the body only by the Spirit*, by his agency and power. For only he can give us the desire, determination and discipline to reject evil. Nevertheless, it is we who must take the initiative to act. Negatively, we must totally repudiate everything we know to be wrong, and not even 'think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature' (13:14). This is not an unhealthy form of repression, pretending that evil does not exist in us and refusing to face it. It is the opposite. We have to 'pull it out, look at it, denounce it, hate it for what it is; then you have really dealt with it'. Or, as Jesus graphically expressed it, we must gouge out our offending eye and cut off our offending hand or foot.<sup>45</sup> That is, if temptation comes to us through what we see, handle or visit, then we must be ruthless in not looking, not touching, not going, and so in controlling the very approaches of sin. Positively, we are to set our minds on the things the Spirit desires (5), set our hearts on things above, and occupy our

thoughts with what is noble, right, pure and lovely.<sup>47</sup> In this way 'mortification' (putting evil to death) and 'aspiration' (hungering and thirsting for what is good) are counterparts. Both verbs (verse 5, 'set their minds', and verse 13, 'put to death') are in the present tense, for they describe attitudes and activities which should be continuous, involving taking up the cross every day and setting our minds on the things of the Spirit every day.

Thirdly, why should we practise mortification? It sounds an unpleasant, uncongenial, austere and even painful business. It runs counter to our natural tendency to soft and lazy self-indulgence. If we are to engage in it, we shall need strong motives. One is, as we have seen, that *we have an obligation* (12) to the indwelling Spirit of life. Another, on which Paul now insists, is that the death of mortification is the only road to life. Verse 13 contains the most marvellous promise, which is expressed in the single Greek verb *zēsesthe, you will live*. Paul is not now contradicting himself. Having called eternal life a free and undeserved gift (6:23), he is not now making it a reward for self-denial. Nor by 'life' does he seem to be referring to the life of the world to come. He seems to be alluding to the life of God's children, who are led by his Spirit and assured of his fatherly love, to which he comes in the next verses (14ff.). This rich, abundant, satisfying life, he is saying, can be enjoyed only by those who put their misdeeds to death. Even the pain of mortification is worth while if it opens the door to fulness of life.

This is one of several ways in which the radical principle of 'life through death' lies at the heart of the gospel. According to Romans 6 it is only by dying with Christ to sin, its penalty thereby paid, that we rise to a new life of forgiveness and freedom. According to Romans 8 it is only by putting our evil deeds to death that we experience the full life of God's children. So we need to redefine both life and death. What the world calls life (a desirable self-indulgence) leads to alienation from God which in reality is death, whereas the putting to death of all perceived evil within us, which the world sees as an undesirable self-abnegation, is in reality the way to authentic life.

#### *d. The witness of the Spirit (14–17)*

What is immediately noteworthy about this paragraph is that in each of its four verses God's people are designated his *children* or *sons* (which of course includes 'daughters'), and that in each this privileged status is related to the work of the Holy Spirit. Only in verse 16 is it specifically said that the Spirit *testifies ... that we are God's children*. Yet the whole paragraph concerns the witness he bears us, that is, the assurance he gives us. The question is: precisely how is the Spirit's witness borne? Paul assembles four pieces of evidence. First, the Spirit leads us into holiness (verse 14 being linked to verse 13 by the conjunction *because*). Secondly, in our relationship to God he replaces fear with freedom (15a). Thirdly, in our prayers he prompts us to call God 'Father' (15b–16). Fourthly, he is the firstfruits of our heavenly inheritance (17, 23). Thus

radical holiness, fearless freedom, filial prayerfulness and the hope of glory are four characteristics of the children of God who are indwelt and led by the Spirit of God. It is by these evidences that he witnesses to us that we are God's children.

First, the Spirit leads us into holiness (14). It is somewhat artificial to begin a new sub-section at verse 14, as we have done, since the topic is still the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Yet verse 14 clarifies verse 13 (*because*) by changing the imagery. Those who through the Spirit put the body's misdeeds to death (13b) are now called *those who are led by the Spirit* (14a), while those who have entered into fulness of life (13c) are now called *sons of God* (14b). Both clarifications are important.

To begin with, the kind of 'leading' by the Spirit which is the characteristic experience of God's children is evidently more specific than it sounds. For it consists of, or at least includes as one of its most substantial features, the prompting and strengthening which enable them to put to death the body's misdeeds. 'The daily, hourly putting to death of the schemings and enterprises of the sinful flesh by means of the Spirit is a matter of being led, directed, impelled, controlled by the Spirit.'

Other commentators describe God's children as 'driven' by the Spirit. For example, Godet writes that there is here 'something like a notion of holy violence; the Spirit drags the man [sc. the person] where the flesh would fain not go'. Professor Käsemann also speaks of being 'driven by the Spirit', and interprets it of charismatic 'enthusiasts' who are 'carried away' by the Spirit.<sup>51</sup> Professor Dunn follows him, claiming that 'the most natural sense' is that 'of being constrained by a compelling force, of surrendering to an overmastering compulsion'. Yet the verb *agō*, although indeed it has different shades of meaning, does not, either necessarily or normally, imply the use of force.

The interpretation of this verb, however, is not just a semantic question. Dr Lloyd-Jones rightly enters a theological caveat at this point, relating to the nature and operation of the Holy Spirit. 'There is no violence in Christianity ...', he writes. 'What the Spirit does is to enlighten and persuade.' Because he is a gentle, sensitive Spirit, he can easily be 'grieved'.<sup>55</sup> 'The Holy Spirit never browbeats us ... The impulse can be very strong, but there is no "driving", there is no compulsion.'

Next, if to be 'led by the Spirit of God' (14a) is an elaboration of to 'put to death the misdeeds of the body' by the agency of the Spirit (13b), then the statement that you *are sons of God* (14b) elaborates the promise 'you will live' (13c). The new, rich, full life, which is enjoyed by those who put their misdeeds to death, is precisely the experience of being God's children. It is evident then that the popular notion of 'the universal fatherhood of God' is not true. To be sure, all human beings are God's 'offspring' by creation, but we become his reconciled 'children' only by adoption or new birth.<sup>58</sup> Just as it is only those who are indwelt by the Spirit who belong to Christ (9), so it is only those who are led by the Spirit who are the sons and daughters of God (14). As such we are



granted a specially close, personal, loving relationship with our heavenly Father, immediate and bold access to him in prayer, membership of his worldwide family, and nomination as his heirs, to which Paul will come in verse 17. He now enlarges on some of these privileges.

Secondly, the Spirit replaces fear with freedom in our relationship to God (15). This Paul attributes to the nature of the Spirit we received (an aorist, alluding to our conversion): *For you did not receive a spirit (or probably 'the Spirit') that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship (or 'of adoption', AV, REB).* F. F. Bruce reminds us that we must interpret the implications of our adoption in terms not of our contemporary culture but of the Greco-Roman culture of Paul's day. He writes: 'The term "adoption" may have a somewhat artificial sound in our ears; but in the Roman world of the first century AD an adopted son was a son deliberately chosen by his adoptive father to perpetuate his name and inherit his estate; he was no whit [sc. not in the smallest degree] inferior in status to a son born in the ordinary course of nature, and might well enjoy the father's affection more fully and reproduce the father's character more worthily.'

Both here in verse 15 and in Galatians 4:1ff. Paul uses the imagery of slavery and freedom with which to contrast the two eras, the old age and the new, and so our pre- and post-conversion situation. The slavery of the old age led to fear, especially of God as our judge; the freedom of the new age gives us boldness to approach God as our Father. So everything has changed. True, we are still slaves of Christ (1:1), of God (6:22) and of righteousness (6:18f.), but these slaveries, far from being incompatible with freedom, are its essence. Freedom, not fear, now rules our lives.

The punctuation of the end of verse 15 and of verse 16 is disputed. Paul enunciates three truths, namely that we *received the Spirit of sonship* (15a), that we *cry, 'Abba, Father'* (15b), and that *the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children* (16). The uncertainty is how these three truths relate to one another, and in particular whether our 'Abba, Father' cry should be attached to the clause preceding or following it. If the former is right, then we 'received ... a Spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry "Abba! Father!"' (REB). If the latter is correct, however, then the sentence reads: 'When we cry "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God' (RSV). The difference is not great. In the first rendering the 'Abba, Father' cry is the result of our receiving the Spirit of adoption; in the second it is the explanation of the Spirit's inward witness. Either way, the gift of the Spirit, the cry and the witness belong together. But on balance I prefer the second interpretation, since then Paul is seen to move on from our relationship and attitude to God in general (not slavery but sonship, not fear but freedom) to the particular expression of it when we pray, from the nature of the Spirit we received to the witness of the Spirit in our prayers.

Thirdly, the Spirit prompts us in our prayers to call God 'Father'. The preservation side by side of the Aramaic (*abba*) and Greek (*patēr*) words for

'father', which some commentators since Augustine have seen as a symbol of the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles in God's family, seems to go back to Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane, when he is recorded as having prayed 'Abba, Father'. Joachim Jeremias' researches into the prayer literature of ancient Judaism convinced him that Jesus' use of this colloquial and familiar term of address to God was unique. 'Abba was an everyday word, a homely family-word. No Jew would have dared to address God in this manner. Jesus did it always, in all his prayers which are handed down to us, with one single exception, the cry from the cross.'

Although some scholars, both Jewish and Christian, are now suggesting that Jeremias' case was overstated and needs to be modified, his main thesis stands. Further, Jesus told his disciples to pray 'Our Father', and thus authorized them to use in their address to God the very same intimate term which he used. 'He empowers them to speak to their Heavenly Father literally as the small child speaks to his father, in the same confident and childlike manner.'<sup>63</sup> Jewish usage shows how this Father-child relationship to God far surpasses any possibilities of intimacy assumed in Judaism, introducing indeed something which is wholly new.'

Some maintain that the Greek verb for *we cry* (*krazō*) is such a strong one that it expresses a loud, spontaneous, emotional ejaculation. Certainly it was used many times in the gospels for the shouts of demons when confronted by Jesus, and it can be translated 'cry out, scream, shriek' (BAGD). But it can equally well be rendered 'call' or 'cry', and so refer either to a liturgical acclamation in public worship or to a calling upon God in private devotion. In this case 'Paul finds the particularity of *krazein*, not in enthusiasm or ecstasy, but in childlike and joyous assurance as contrasted with the attitude of the servant'.

In such prayers to the Father we experience the inward witness of the Holy Spirit. For 'when we cry, "Abba! Father!" ' taking on our lips the very words which Jesus used, 'it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God' (15b-16, RSV). The words are ours, but the witness is his. How is his witness borne, then, and what is implied by the prefix *syn* in the verb *symmartyreō*? Normally *syn* is translated 'together with', in which case there would be two witnesses here, the Holy Spirit confirming and endorsing our own spirit's consciousness of God's fatherhood. So NEB: 'In that cry the Spirit of God joins with our spirit in testifying that we are God's children.' This would be readily understandable, since the Old Testament required two witnesses to establish a testimony.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, is it really possible in experience to distinguish between the Holy Spirit and our human spirit? More important, would not these two witnesses be inappropriately matched? Surely 'we cannot stand alongside the Holy Spirit and give testimony'? For 'what standing has our spirit in *this* matter? Of itself it surely has no right at all to testify to our being sons of God'. In this case the prefix *syn* is simply intensive, and Paul

meant that the Holy Spirit bears a strong inward witness to our spirit that we are God's children.

It is natural to associate this experience with what Paul has written earlier about a similar inward ministry of the Holy Spirit. According to 5:5 God through the Holy Spirit 'has poured out his love into our hearts'. According to 8:16 the Holy Spirit 'affirms to our spirit that we are God's children' (REB). Each verse gives us an example of the Holy Spirit's ministry of inward assurance, as he convinces us of the reality of God's love on the one hand and of God's fatherhood on the other. Indeed, it would be hard to separate these, since God's love has been conspicuously lavished upon us in making us his children.<sup>70</sup> Although we have no liberty to circumscribe God's activity in any way, it seems from Christian biographies that God gives these experiences to his people chiefly when they pray, whether in public or in private.

Fourthly, the Spirit is the firstfruits of our inheritance (17, 23). Paul cannot leave this topic of our being God's children without pointing out its implication for the future. *Now if we are children, then we are heirs as well—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ* (17a). At first sight this seems to refer to that heavenly inheritance, which 'can never perish, spoil or fade', which God is keeping in heaven for us.<sup>72</sup> It is possible, however, that the inheritance Paul has in mind is not something God intends to bestow on us but God himself. Indeed, 'it is difficult to suppress the richer and deeper thought that God himself is the inheritance of his children'.

This notion was not unfamiliar to Israel in Old Testament days. The Levites, for example, knew that they had been given no inheritance among their brothers because the Lord himself was their inheritance. And godly individual Israelites could confidently affirm that God was their portion. For example, 'Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever'.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the day is coming when God will be 'all in all', or 'everything to every one' (RSV). As for the further astonishing statement that God's heirs are also co-heirs with Christ, we recall how Jesus himself had prayed that his own might be with him, and might see his glory and share his love. And although it is still future, our inheritance is certain, since the Holy Spirit is himself its firstfruit (23), guaranteeing that the harvest will follow in due course. Thus the same indwelling Spirit who assures us that we are God's children also assures us that we are his heirs.

There is a qualification, however: *if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory* (17a). Scripture lays a strong emphasis on the principle that suffering is the path to glory. It was so for the Messiah ('did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?'). It is so for the messianic community also (5:2f.). Peter teaches this as clearly as Paul: 'Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.' For the essence of discipleship is union

with Christ, and this means identification with him in both his sufferings and his glory.

I do not feel able to leave these verses without alluding to an interpretation of them to which Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones has given currency. He devoted four chapters to the expression 'you received the Spirit of adoption' (15) and eight more to 'the witness of the Spirit' (16). Following Thomas Goodwin and other Puritans, he understood the former as 'a very special form or type of assurance', more emotional than intellectual, given subsequent to conversion though not essential for salvation, and conveying a profound feeling of security in our Father's love. Similarly, he interpreted the witness of the Spirit (which he identified with the 'baptism' and the 'sealing' of the Spirit) as a distinctive and overwhelming experience which confers 'an absolute assurance'.<sup>83</sup> 'This is the highest form of assurance possible; there is nothing beyond it. It is the acme, the zenith of assurance and certainty of salvation.' Although 'it is wrong to standardize the experience',<sup>85</sup> since it comes with many variations of intensity and duration, yet it is a direct and sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, unpredictable, uncontrollable and unforgettable. It brings a heightened love for God, an unspeakable joy, and an uninhibited boldness in witness. Dr Lloyd-Jones went on to defend his thesis by appealing to an impressive array of historical testimonies. Despite the diversity of their ecclesiastical backgrounds, they manifest 'a strange and curious unanimity'.

I have no wish whatever to call in question the authenticity of the experiences described. Nor do I doubt that many Christian people continue to be granted similar profound encounters with God today. Nor is there any problem in affirming that the ministry of the Spirit of adoption (15) and the inner witness of the Spirit (16) are designed to bring us assurance. My anxiety is whether the biblical texts have been rightly interpreted. I have the uneasy feeling that it is the experiences which have determined the exposition. For the natural reading of Romans 8:14–17 is surely that *all* believers are 'led by the Spirit' (14), have 'received a Spirit of adoption' (15, REB), and cry 'Abba, Father' as the Spirit himself bears witness to them that they are God's children (16) and therefore also his heirs (17). There is no indication in these four verses that a special, distinctive or overwhelming experience is in mind, which needs to be sought by all although it is given only to some. On the contrary, the whole paragraph appears to be descriptive of what is, or should be, common to all believers. Though doubtless in differing degrees of intensity, all who have the Spirit's indwelling (9) are given the Spirit's witness too (15–16).

Looking back now over the first half of Romans 8, we have seen something of the multiple ministries of the Holy Spirit. He has liberated us from the bondage of the law (2), while at the same time he empowers us to fulfil its just requirement (4). We now live each day according to the Spirit and set our minds on his desires (5). He lives in us (9), gives life to our spirits (10), and will one day give life to our bodies too (11). His indwelling obliges us to live his way (12), and his power enables us to put to death our body's misdeeds (13). He leads

us as God's children (14) and bears witness to our spirit that this is what we are (15–16). He himself is also the foretaste of our inheritance in glory (17, 23). It is his indwelling which makes the fundamental difference between Romans 7 and Romans 8.<sup>1</sup>

## **Additional Resources:**

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**Video:** [This video from The Gospel Project is short](#), but helps explain adoption and the gospel. It could be helpful especially for a Student class.

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<sup>1</sup> John R. W. Stott, [The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 227–236.