

Live by the Spirit

There is something in human DNA that wants an answer to the ultimate question of life: “Why?”



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We are industrious about coming up with answers, as is evidenced by the existence of so many religions in our world, countless lectures on university campuses, never-silent talking heads on television, debates by political leaders and insistent philosophers and preachers. We want something solid, a clear pathway to the desired end, a deity that provides THE ANSWER when we connect the dots.

That is not how life works. Predictable answers, discovering the secret code, winning the prize ... life is not a game. The Apostle Paul understands. He knew the relentless pressure to try and deserve God’s love through religious legalism and rituals. Then Christ met Paul on the road to Damascus, when the Savior replaced Paul’s religious pride and consuming hatred for the followers of Jesus with love. In that encounter the Spirit of God began to answer the “why” of Paul’s heart with liberating forgiveness and a new perspective. Paul describes it: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Jesus Christ has set you free from the law of sin and death” (vv. 1-2).

The difference between the Garden of Eden and the coming of Christ into our world is like the human desire to be god, and God in Christ choosing to become one with us (Genesis 3:4-6 and 1 Corinthians 5:21)! Earlier, Paul describes our spiritual condition: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:28). But we are not locked up in this state because Christ gave himself for us on the cross.

There are two ways to view the state of the human heart: 1) through the “Law of sin and death,” or 2) the law of

the Spirit of life” (v. 2). How does God see us? The biblical record punctuates the repeated failures of God’s “chosen” people to trust God and live as his children. That same record reveals God’s relentless pursuit as a loving parent who refuses to give up on his wayward children. The law of God could point out the danger of their willful rebellion and immoralities, but the wayward people had to make their choice.

So, what has God done? Over and over God has reached out to us: “God has done what the Law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh” (v. 8). The picture is not of a God who looks forward to the day when we will pay for our evil ways, but the God who stepped into our world as one of us and erased our guilt from the legal ledgers of heaven as though it never existed!

In dramatic contrast Paul moves from the topic of our sins and need for God’s grace to the new life we have in Christ: “those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit” (v. 5). The New Testament is very clear about our spiritual life. It is only possible by the grace of God through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our life.

We cannot be spiritual by keeping the rules, by joining an organization, by memorizing theological truths, nor by observing certain rituals. The Christian faith is only real as a relationship with God, by understanding God loves you specifically, by living with a sense of God’s Spirit as your companion every day. “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 through his Spirit that dwells in you” (v. 11).

Paul continues to hammer at the idea that “living by the flesh,” or keeping religious rules and rituals, cannot make you a child of God. You must not return to that mindset or legal regimen

Formations

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Scripture: Romans 8:1-17

because it will destroy you.

The way of true spiritual life is to be “led by the Spirit of God” as “children of God.” This intimate language continues: “you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (vv. 16-17). I do not think we can fully understand this gift of God’s love.

A friend and his wife, already parents of two beautiful little girls, decided to adopt a Korean baby. That Korean daughter was growing up in a committed Christian family, accepted joyfully by her two older sisters. Bob knew he and his wife were doing a good job when those three girls were preteens and a family picture was taken. They were all looking at the proofs when Bob asked them all which daughter was the prettiest. Their Korean daughter immediately said “Me!” He knew then that she felt truly loved and accepted as the whole family laughed and embraced.

For all the years Paul had devoted his life as a Pharisee to the rigors of studying the Law and observing the rituals, did he ever have a sense that God loved him? This Paul, who was a brilliant theologian, passionate preacher and tireless missionary, discovered that God loved him and that God loves us all. This is the passion that drove Paul to share Christ with the world. In the eyes of God you are not just a face in the crowds, not just a name in the ledgers of heaven, not just a convert to a philosophy. You are an “heir with Christ our Savior” of God’s love and grace.

Now, with the companionship and guidance of God’s Spirit you are to share God’s love with those around you. In your relationships, actions and words you can help someone else begin to understand God loves them. This is what Paul means when he speaks of us “walking or living according to the Spirit.”