



ROMANS: WEEK III

STEVE WATSON | DAILY BIBLE GUIDE | 2016

Previously, in Romans: *We just wrapped up a comparison between the old story of human sin and death and the new human story Jesus inaugurated – a story of rightness and grace.*

Monday, February 29 – Romans 6:1-11

6 What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸ But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Points of Interest:

- 'Should we continue in sin...?' – More rhetorical questions from Paul – he really likes these. It's not clear that any of the Romans would really have thought that they should be the worst people possible, just to cooperate with Jesus in his new spread of grace. But Paul wants to move the discussion to what life looks like when we're accepted by God. What does it look like for grace to abound (6:1) or, as we read yesterday, for grace to have dominion (5:21)? Let's see.
- 'who have been baptized into Christ Jesus' – Paul appeals to a common experience of his readers, being baptized. By explaining what baptism means, he can explain the reality that it represents.
- 'united with him' – In a word, it's connection to Jesus. This isn't a loose-tie distant Facebook friend or LinkedIn professional connection, though. It's mystical union. Marriage might be the best metaphor for this close of a tie, and it's one that Paul uses elsewhere for it.
- 'our old self was crucified with him' – One side of this union is dying with Jesus. Crucifixion wasn't an abstract concept for Romans. It was a brutal and familiar form of state execution. Paul says baptism, union with Jesus, means death – death to an old self that is dominated by sin.

But Paul doesn't just say dominated, he says enslaved. Again, slavery is not a metaphor for the Romans. In the region around Rome, scholars estimate that 1/3 to 2/3 of people were current or former slaves. Paul says that parts of the "old self", without Jesus, were enslaved to sin. Baptism represents the freedom of walking away from that, as it is envisioned as dying with Jesus.

- 'we will also live with him' – The flip side of the death – Jesus and ours – is resurrection. The risen Jesus is done dying for good, literally dying as in heart stopped, no brain waves, etc., and metaphorically dying through sin – anything that is off, and so reduces this new, fully-alive humanity. Paul says that people tied to Jesus get to begin exploring and experiencing this immune-from-death new life.
- 'consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God' – Here's a practical way we're told to start, through a new perception of our identity. In Chapter 4, we heard that God does some considering when he looks at us. Paul says that for Abraham, and for us, God reckons (or considers) faith to be righteousness. Trusting God, not law compliance, is the key to relating best to God. We are now told to do some considering when we think about ourselves. Whatever the actual evidence, consider that our connection and allegiance to sin is done with. And consider that through connection to Jesus, we are every bit as alive as Jesus as well.

I remember an old commercial, in which Gatorade told us all to, "Be Like Mike," as if drinking Gatorade could make us just like the greatest basketball player we had ever seen. Here Paul says with Jesus, it works. We can be like Jesus, without buying anything. In baptism, we die with Jesus, and we live with Jesus. We begin an existence where slavery and compulsion to sin and death end, and union with the life of Jesus begins.

Taking It Home:

For you – Becoming more like Jesus is not a way to more accepted by God. Paul says that has been settled. Living with Jesus is a gift we get because we are accepted by God. Is there any renewal you could use today? Ask Jesus to take any barriers to it into this death, and to unite you with his life for you.

For your city/church – Pray that this whole dying and living with Jesus would be more real experience that theory for many in our church, that folks would look at people in our church and think, "That looks like Jesus." Pray that there would be more leaders in our society that look like Jesus as well.

Previously, in Romans: *Paul is discussing how to live in the new reality of acceptance by God, which he describes as union with Jesus.*

Tuesday, March 1 – Romans 6:12-23

¹²Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

¹⁵What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

¹⁷ But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, ¹⁸ and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

²⁰ When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death.

²² But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Points of Interest:

- 'No longer present your members to sin...' – When I first read this verse in my late teens, with the comment about what to do with one's member, so close to the word passion, I thought, "Oh, my gosh, the Bible is telling me what do with that particular part of my body!" Paul isn't talking about any one particular part of your body, though, but every part of one's body, personality, and mind.
- 'instruments of wickedness, instruments of righteousness' – Instruments here invokes martial imagery. All Romans were familiar with weapons in the service of a soldier. Here Paul says every part of us can be in the service of wickedness, or in the service of righteousness. We can use every aspect of our being to reduce our own and other's humanity, which Paul ties to death. Or we can use all of our being to serve God's new and right agenda of life.
- 'not under law but under grace' – As Paul sticks with the image of slavery, he clarifies just who is in charge for those united with Jesus. Paul has said previously that big efforts toward rule compliance breed hypocrisy, judgment, and exposition of guilt and failure. Grace doesn't only produce the acceptance and standing (what Paul has been calling "justification") that the law can't; this acceptance also provides power and incentive to live differently.
- 'if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves' – This statement reflected the reality of the pervasive slavery of the Roman empire. Get into debt and present yourself to someone as a slave, and you will in fact become slave. On moral or spiritual terms, this is also true, we're told. We become slaves of whoever or whatever we obey. Our first yes toward any obligation or habit may feel freely given, but our 57th yes is likely to be habitual and compulsory.

This perspective on human nature undercuts some modern ideas about human autonomy and liberty. But it is affirmed by sources as diverse as behavioral psychology and Bob Dylan. Psychology highlights the power of repetitive thought and behavior, whatever that thought and behavior is. And Dylan sang a generation ago, "You've gotta serve somebody." None of us are free actors, we all live in the service of someone or something we've said yes to.

- 'I am speaking in human terms' – Maybe Paul's a little sheepish about such an extended use of the metaphor of slavery, given how brutal and shameful it likely was for many of his Roman readers. It's a good reminder to take any biblical metaphor or image not overly literally, but to ask what picture it is painting, what point it is making.

- 'slaves to righteousness for sanctification' – The end of 'slavery to righteousness' is sanctification, becoming the saint that Paul said in his opening greeting all followers of Jesus are. This clearly isn't only referring to private morality but to an ethic and experience of life that reflects the goodness and vitality of Jesus.
- 'The end of those things is death.' – One scholar's take: "They now know that they had willingly participated in the culture of death, which in many ways had reached its apex in Rome's glorifying of its violent history, in the brutal duels and executions in the public theaters and arenas..., and in the vicious policies of military expansion, occupation, and economic exploitation. The gospel of Christ crucified exposes the culture of death and leads to a shaming awareness of universal complicity in its enactment." (Hewett, *Romans*. 95.)

The Romans in the house churches were now ashamed of their old ties to a culture of death. I wonder what ties to 21st century culture of death we are leaving behind, or need to leave behind.

- 'The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.' – Bam, a short conclusion. Everything that is off in us that we've been so tied to pays us with death. Everything good God gives us is a gift – it's not part of any system of good deeds, religious or otherwise. And what the gift gives us is the life of Jesus, in our lives. Master Jesus gives his "slaves" freedom and life.

Taking It Home:

For you – When in your life have you most felt connected to or in the service of a culture of death? If that is 100% in the past, thank God for freedom and life. If some tie remains, invite Jesus to lead you into full disconnection from that and full experience of his leadership and life.

For your 6 – With the line "instruments of wickedness or righteousness", I think about the experience of feeling like a tool. If any of your 6 find themselves, perhaps at work, stuck in the service of someone or something they don't want to follow, pray they'd have the freedom to be in the service of something good and true and beautiful instead.

Previously, in Romans: *Since sin kills us, Jesus went and killed it. Or he was killed by it. Or he buried it with him when he died. Actually, all of the above. So now we get to live with Jesus. If we want to. Or as our friend Red from The Shawshank Redemption says, "Get busy living, or get busy dying."*

Wednesday, March 2 – Romans 7:1-12

7 Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only during that person's lifetime? ² Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. ³ Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress.

⁴ In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. ⁵ While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in

our members to bear fruit for death. ⁶ But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

⁷ What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” ⁸ But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. ⁹ I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived ¹⁰ and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. ¹¹ For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. ¹² So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

Points of Interest:

- ‘brothers and sisters’ – I really wish Paul had written in English, in concise sentences, in the kind of snappy modern prose I like, or even in lush but not too-abstract poetry. I wish that my sacred texts used the metaphors and imagery of my culture and era and corner of the world. Then I’d get everything that Paul had to say without so much work and educated guessing. Except that I don’t entirely wish this. Part of the delight of Bible reading is listening in on someone else’s conversation. It reminds me that I am not the center of the universe. My concerns, my language, my century are just one mark on the big map of human history. By seeing my life as part of God’s big story, I get to find my place in a long game that I only partially understand. So digging around in these scriptures grounds me and teaches me, and it also humbles me – not only because I can’t be 100% sure about exactly what Paul means and how it applies to me, but because even when I’m relatively sure, he’s calling out to me and you as brothers and sisters across language and time and so much else, linking us to a family of God that is deep in history and wide in scope, and includes us and our little lives as well.

I had to say this some time, and since today isn’t the most riveting passage for me, well, here it is.

- ‘the law’ – Paul has spoken about the law now and then throughout Romans, and not on the most positive of terms. He criticizes its frequent use as a source of pride or boasting. He says working the law won’t give us acceptance from God. And he calls it a post-Abrahamic addition to the superior law of faith. Before he pushes on, Paul apparently has a few more things to clear up to his mixed Jewish and Gentile audience about the Hebraic law that we’ll hear later has become a source of tension and division in their house churches, or between their house churches.
- ‘you died to the law... so that you may belong to another’ – Paul’s pretty clever here. The whole woman remarrying after her husband dies thing wasn’t just a picture of one law or rule – the marriage to the first husband – expiring. It was a set-up for a marriage metaphor for union with Jesus. Accepting first century marriage patterns of male domination for a minute (I know... not cool, but it was the case then, so bear with me for a minute....) Accepting that, we see that Jesus followers used to be bound to the Law, including its primary effect of exposing people’s shortcomings (4:15), but that hit-man Jesus has effected the death of this marriage to Law. Now we can be married to Jesus and give God the happy children of good and fruitful results in our lives.
- ‘so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit’ – Mixing metaphors quickly from marriage to slavery, we get this take on human dependence. Our lives are

always in the service of something or someone, either that which produces captivity and death at its worst, or the Spirit, which leads to new life.

- 'if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.' – The big question in this speech that continues through the rest of Chapter 7, is who and when is the "I"? Is this Paul talking in the present? Or Paul back before his connection to Jesus, when he too lived by the law's guidance? The switch to the past tense here is a good indication that Paul's taking us back to his law-following days.
- 'You shall not covet.' – To illustrate what happens with the law, Paul quotes the tenth commandment, which prohibits the desire of your neighbor's stuff.
- 'the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.' – Those law-following days weren't all that great, I guess. The law itself might have been a good set-up in every way, but even the most devoted law-follower such as Paul twisted it into something of death. The case study of covetousness doesn't seem accidental. Zeal for law adherence became its own kind of ladder for status, a way of coveting honor and the approval of God and people. For Paul, twenty years earlier, this zeal had led him to at least indirect involvement in the actual killings of early Jesus followers. This must have been a vivid picture for Paul of how complying with any standards, even those that it seems God has, in order to win the approval of God or others, only yields bad results.

We'll continue with bad religion, Part II tomorrow. But for now Paul says it's not God's fault, it's the thing in us that's always looking for ways to prove ourselves in comparison to others, so we'll even use God and religion – maybe especially use God and religion – to divide people and people groups into inferior and superior and keep ourselves on the superior side of our ledgers.

Taking It Home:

For you – Have you experienced religion that is focused on compliance, status, comparison, or honor more than new life in the Spirit? Is that still true in any way for you? Ask Jesus to make any expression of your spiritual life – including reading this Bible guide and your whole 40 Days of Faith – a source of life for you that makes you more generous, not more smug – toward your friends and your world.

For your city/church – Perhaps your city has come to associate Jesus-related religious expression as dead, narrow or enslaving. If so, pray that Jesus will put to death those experiences and associations and give people freedom to taste the Spirit's life.

Previously, in Romans: *Paul is halfway through an expose of bad religion, particularly a form of law adherence that in his experience, only leads to status comparison, arguments, and death.*

Thursday, March 3 – Romans 7:13-25

¹³ Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. ¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³ but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

Points of Interest:

- 'sin, working death in me through what is good' – Destructive sin and at-least-then-beautiful words of God teamed up to steer Paul and us all toward a common but negative human impulse – using religion for status driven self-justification.
- 'I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin' – Some traditions have taken the change to the present tense to mean that Paul is talking about his present experience now as a follower of Jesus, that despite all his experience with Jesus, he's frustrated by how compulsive his misbehavior is. One prominent fourth century theologian (maybe the first to think this way) was Augustine of Hippo, who long before Freud, read the Bible through his shame over his youthful problems with sexual self-control and womanizing. Much later, German reformer Martin Luther would read the text this way as well.

To many of us this doesn't make sense of everything Paul's just said in Romans, that the follower of Jesus has been rescued from sin and death by Jesus and is now exploring that new experience of union with Jesus' new life. Instead, increasing numbers of Bible readers see this section as a "speech-in-character", a common device in ancient rhetoric of dramatizing the experience of other people in the first person. Under these terms, Paul has moved from talking about his own experience, and all Jewish people's past experience with the law, and is now focused on the legalists who are still trying to use the Hebrew law to justify themselves and rank-order other churchgoers.

- 'I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.' – Even if it's not where Paul was going, this paragraph continues to provide tremendous empathy for those of us who find our willpower too weak to control our impulses. This is part of the experience of sin, to be divided and to continually move in the direction that doesn't serve us.
- 'For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self.' – Perhaps my own first-person experience can illustrate. As a university student around age 20, I was relatively new to enthusiastic faith in Jesus and in an intensely devout season of life. I thought it was important to God's law for me that I

didn't drink or have sex, two activities that occupied a fair amount of the free time of many of my peers. So I finished college as a tee-totaling virgin. That "law" wasn't a problem. In itself, this served my studies, my development, and my future self as well. Go young me! But there was "another law at work, making me captive." This law of mine led to smugness, confidence that I was better than my peers. That judgment, brought about from my sin, separated me from them. It also meant that my religious focus was more trained on what I was not up to than on experiencing life from Jesus. I was becoming a more critical, less flexible, less empathetic person. I was growing cockier and narrower in my thinking about life in general, and my life in particular. And none of that was leading to life. This is my version of sin creating a base camp inside of religious law, and leading to death. It's possible to think you're a slave to God, and even have that be partly true, but actually be a slave to what's off in us, to sin.

- 'thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord' – Jesus as Caesar, Jesus as Master, Jesus as Boss – however we want to contextualize Paul's political phrase for Jesus being in charge – leads somewhere else. In Romans 8, we'll get to spend four days exploring that beautiful territory.

Taking It Home:

For you – Have you had your own experience of religion that leads you away from God? Or have you seen this in others and been wary of too much God or Jesus as a result? Either way, thank Jesus that his plan for your life is not smugness or hypocrisy. Invite Jesus to consume your whole mind, your whole attitude, and your whole life with devotion, grace, and connection to Jesus that yield life, for you and others.

For your 6 – Perhaps some of your 6 have had their own taste of bad religion, either through personal experience or through witnessing it in others. Pray that these experiences wouldn't steer them away from the love and kindness and power of Jesus.

Previously, in Romans: *Paul has led us on a tour of bad religion in his own past experience and in unnamed others. Now he'll take us on a tour through some of the upsides of life with Jesus in a still-broken world.*

Friday, March 4 – Romans 8:1-8

8 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³For 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, ⁴so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For 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, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Points of Interest:

- 'no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' – Upside #1 to life united with Jesus is no condemnation. Paul doesn't say *some* condemnation or *less* condemnation, but *no* condemnation. How much of our lives, religious or otherwise, have been driven by a fear of ultimate rejection? Clearly, with a law-driven religion, this is very much in the mix. There are levels of adherence that will clear the bar for acceptance, or not. Jesus has a different law, and it begins with unconditional, unchanging acceptance.
- 'the law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus has set you free...' – Upside #2 is freedom from the way sin and death occupy God's law and produce bad fruit in us, whether that be outright rebellion or legalistic smugness. The Spirit leads us into security of God's acceptance, and into the hope and power and courage required for life.
- 'he condemned sin in the flesh' – Upside #3 is God killing off our problems, not us. We've already seen that we're free from the risk of God's condemnation. Strictly speaking, God also did not reject and punish Jesus in our place. Rather, when Jesus died, God buried with him in the grave the dominating power of sin.
- 'so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us' – Upside #4 is that God's original and just aims for our lives can take place. One way people have understood this is in terms of a substitute that does for God what we can't do. We'll continue to be failures on God's terms, but when God looks at us, he will see Jesus – the one we're connected to now – and be happy. I find this less than satisfying. Another way people have understood this is that God's original desire for humanity – to have people that trust God, that experience life from God, that follow God's leadership into increasing joy and love and peace and kindness and wisdom – will start to happen in people that are connected to Jesus, and following the Spirit.
- 'to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace' – Upside #5 is just this, life and peace. We've spent too much time as a species at war with ourselves, resistant to God, and at war with one another. Neither first century Romans nor 21st century Americans need a lot of convincing regarding the downsides of this. To be with Jesus is to have God leading us into life and peace, with God for sure, but with ourselves and one another as well.

Taking It Home:

For you – Ask yourself, ask God, what in your life is driven by fear of rejection, or by a lack of experience of unconditional love? How's that going for you? Ask Jesus to set you free from this, and to give you life and peace from knowing how much God loves you.

For your city/church – Ask God for connection to Jesus and leading by the Spirit for every person and organization in your city that is bent toward hostility and conflict and driven by fear. Pray that the peace and life of Jesus will reign in your city.

Previously, in Romans: *Paul has begun exploring just how good life in Jesus, with the Spirit of God, can be, even in our current state of vulnerability.*

Saturday, March 5 – Romans 8:9-17

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ 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.

¹² So then, brothers and sisters, 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 children of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Points of Interest:

- ‘you are not in the flesh’ – For a moment, we’ve got to wonder if Paul’s pushing for an alternate reality spiritual mind game, imagining a new, disembodied existence. Let’s see if it’s something else, though, by examining what Paul says about being “in the flesh” vs. “in the Spirit.”
- ‘you are in the Spirit’ – Firstly, this is more about identity than behavior or day to day living. And the Spirit of God doesn’t dwell in *some* of Paul’s Roman Jesus-following readers, but in all of them – maybe all of them individually, and certain all of them collectively.
- ‘will give life to your mortal bodies’ – For a moment, Paul sounded like Plato and other Greek philosophers, who taught that the body is a decaying mess of trouble, but the human spirit is immortal and beautiful and worthy of cultivation. Paul says that being united with Jesus in new life, though, means life in our dying bodies. This could be a promise of resurrection after death, a hope Paul certainly believed in and taught. But given where Paul goes in the second paragraph, it also seems like a present-day reality worth exploring. A more alive experience inside our own bodies is ours to have in this life.
- ‘we are debtors, not to the flesh’ – We owe it to Jesus, or maybe we owe it to ourselves, to not pay into death-dealing ways of living, even if they are intuitive to us. In the American Christian tradition, tinged strongly by Calvinist Puritanism, many of us will tend to jump right to private moral choices when we hear this. And fair enough as part of the picture – to owe it to ourselves to not become, or go on as, porn consumers and drug addicts feels like moving towards life in our bodies. But this is by no means all, or even most, of what Paul is focused on. To be caught up in society’s competitiveness, status contests, violence, and race or class or nationality-based exclusion and violence would be equally relevant here, as death-soaked ways of the flesh that Jesus frees us from.
- ‘you have received a spirit of adoption’ – A huge part of life in the Spirit over life in the flesh is to be accepted and loved, and so to live without fear. When it comes to Spirit vs. flesh, Paul is still riffing

on his opening assurance of no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. The primary benefit of the Spirit is being God's children and God's heirs.

- 'Abba, Father' – It's a sweet little beat that Paul leaves the Aramaic word for Dad here, untranslated. This is what Paul would have called his dad as a kid, even what Jesus would have called Mary's husband Joseph, when Jesus was young. It's not just what we all get to call the God of the Universe, but the kind of relationship that God wants to have with us.
- 'if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we also may be glorified with him' – Rome under the first century Caesars was not an easy environment to be a follower of Jesus. Under Nero, that was about to become much more true. Paul says, as do all the New Testament writers by the way, that it's worth it. Being God's kid, with Jesus as big brother, leads to a life-filled present and a glorious future, so hold onto the family name, even when it's hard, for whatever reason.

Taking It Home:

For you – Whatever it was you called your dad as a kid, try starting a conversation with God with that name. If you didn't have a dad, or if that was a lousy relationship, use the name you wish you would have had. Keep in mind that this parent-God chooses to adopt you and wants you to be in this relationship without fear. See where this conversation goes; try letting it linger.

For your 6 – Simply ask that God would be this same kind of parent to each of them.

Previously, in Romans: *Paul's exploring the beautiful life in the Spirit that all Jesus followers have access to, one that's low on fear and death and high on connection and love and life.*

Sunday, March 6 – Romans 8:18-25

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Points of Interest:

- 'the sufferings of the present time' – This beautiful life isn't without pain. Paul had a friend, for instance, who had been expelled from Rome when Emperor Claudius deported Jews from the city in 49 A.D. (Acts 18:2 tells that story.) So persecution, of Jews and of Jesus followers, may be in view here. Paul's line of "suffering with Christ" is verse 17 might support this too. This line also might reflect Paul's sympathy with the Roman underclass, who represented the majority of the city and the house church members. Rome's propaganda proclaimed a golden age of peace and prosperity, but that wasn't so for most people. And beyond these details, there's an affirmation that suffering – physical and emotional – is a significant part of the human experience.

- 'the glory about to be revealed to us' – It's as if Paul tells them to think of the worst suffering they know and without being at all glib about it, says that it can't compare with the glory God is about to show us. Paul has already said that our human destiny, if we're united with Jesus, is to be united in his resurrection life and to share in his glory. (5:2) This glory might include everything from the first deep resurrection breath we take in after death to the glow on our faces as we celebrate God's presence and love together at our next worship gathering.
- 'the creation waits with eager longing' – What a cool image! Paul pictures the whole created order chained in a prison cell, just waiting for the children of God to release it and be restored to its beauty and freedom. Trees, rocks, ocean waves, endangered species – all creation – is decaying and waiting for God's restoration to glory. God's children – acting in freedom and glory – will take the lead in making this so. Paul's cosmic vision of the earth's suffering and renewal gets to the most beautiful vision of ecological renewal centuries before anyone might have expected it!
- 'the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now' – Paul moves from prison to childbirth. I have never seen anything quite so scary, intense, earthy, beautiful, and powerful as my wife in labor with our three children. This mix of pain and expectation and hope characterizes all creation as it waits to be restored by Jesus to its full glory. I hear a nod to the Adam and Eve story from Romans 5. The first children of God set in motion decay and bondage – their own and that of all creation. That's an old story that continues in each generation. God's new adopted family he's pulling together in Jesus will turn all that around.
- 'we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly' – Life in the Spirit has not instantly removed all human vulnerability. To groan with suffering, or to groan with hope not yet fulfilled is a deeply honest human impulse, even for the child of God.
- 'we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies' – Just like state adoptions these days, God's adoption process apparently takes a while. Yesterday we heard about all the benefits we have as adopted children of God, and today we're reminded that the court's still working on things. We feel that in the suffering of our bodies, which our new family hasn't yet healed.
- 'if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience' – We could read this as an admonishment to patience, which it probably is. "Keep hope alive!" Paul tells us. Jesus will complete your renewal and that of all of creation. But I also read this today as an affirmation of whatever patience and hope are already there, however small. Jesus understands our pain and doubt, and appreciates that faith is requiring a lot of hope and patience.

Taking It Home:

For you – Lots of extraordinary imagery in this short passage. Choose one image – creation waiting for freedom, creation groaning in labor, our own groaning, our wait for our adoption to be finalized – and meditate upon it. Let your imagination ponder it for a few minutes, and talk to God about whatever comes of that.

For your earth – Identify one way that creation is in bondage and decay, some way you're aware of the world as it was not meant to be. Be as local or global as you wish, but be specific. Pray that God will equip some of his children to bring this to renewal and change this situation to glory.