

11. God's Spirit in God's children (8:1–39)

Romans 8 is without doubt one of the best-known, best-loved chapters of the Bible. If in Romans 7 Paul has been preoccupied with the place of the law, in Romans 8 his preoccupation is with the work of the Spirit. In chapter 7 the law and its synonyms were mentioned some thirty-one times, but the Holy Spirit only once (6), whereas in the first twenty-seven verses of chapter 8 he is referred to nineteen times by name. The essential contrast which Paul paints is between the weakness of the law and the power of the Spirit. For ever against indwelling sin, which is the reason the law is unable to help us in our moral struggle (7:17, 20), Paul now sets the indwelling Spirit, who is both our liberator now from 'the law of sin and death' (8:2) and the guarantee of resurrection and eternal glory in the end (8:11, 17, 23). Thus the Christian life is essentially life in the Spirit, that is to say, a life which is animated, sustained, directed and enriched by the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit true Christian discipleship would be inconceivable, indeed impossible.

In handling the topic of the Holy Spirit, however, the apostle relates it to his other overarching theme in this chapter, namely the absolute security of the children of God. According to Charles Hodge, 'the whole chapter is a series of arguments, most beautifully arranged, in support of this one point'.¹ And Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones agrees with him. 'I make bold to assert that the great theme of chapter 8 is not sanctification ... The great theme is the security of the Christian.'² At the same time, the two topics are intimately related. For possession of the Spirit is the hallmark of those who truly belong to Christ (9); his inner witness assures us that we are God's children and therefore his heirs (15–17); and his presence in us is the firstfruits of our inheritance, pledging the final harvest (23).

The chapter divides itself naturally into three sections. The first depicts the varied ministry of God's Spirit in liberating, indwelling, sanctifying, leading, witnessing to and finally resurrecting the children of God (1–17). The second treats the future glory of God's children, portrayed as a final freedom in which the whole creation will share (18–27). And thirdly Paul emphasizes the steadfastness of God's love, as he works in all things for the good of those who love him and promises that nothing will ever be allowed to separate us from his love (28–39). The apostle's perspective stretches our mind, as he ranges from eternity to eternity. He begins with 'no condemnation' (1) and ends with 'no separation' (39), in both cases for those who are 'in Christ Jesus'.