

Does God's Spirit Really Dwell in Us?

Thomas Robinson, *Body & Spirit in a Difficult World 4*, May 24, 2020

Romans 8:5-17 Translation TR

⁵ The reality is that people who live lives determined by "flesh" think in a way that can't see beyond that flesh, but people who live empowered by God's Spirit think in ways open to what only the Spirit can do. ⁶ To limit our human thinking to its enslavement to the flesh is a form of death, but to open our thinking to all that the Spirit is doing is to receive life and peace.

⁷ You see, the self-focused thinking of the flesh is hostile to God being God. It doesn't submit to God's will expressed in the Law; it even makes that impossible. ⁸ People who serve the little gods of our flesh simply can't be the people God created them to be.

⁹ You, however, aren't living a life determined by flesh but one encompassed by Spirit, if, in fact, God's Spirit is dwelling in you.

If a person doesn't have the Messiah's Spirit, they're not part of him. ¹⁰ But if the Anointed King is in you, then even though your body is dying, broken by sin, the presence of God's Spirit is life itself because of God's faithful righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of the God who raised Jesus from the dead is dwelling in you, then he who raised him from the dead as an Anointed King will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who's dwelling within you.

¹² So then, brothers and sisters, the fact that we're physical doesn't mean we have some obligation to keep our lives limited to flesh. ¹³ For if you're living limited by flesh and its little gods, you're rejecting the true God, the source of life, and you're going to die.

But if you join the Spirit in condemning to death sin itself with all the destructive practices that it makes part of our bodily experience, you're going to come alive.

¹⁴ It's those who are led through the wilderness by God's Spirit that are God's sons and daughters. ¹⁵ You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to be trapped again by fear. Rather you received a Spirit that marks you as God's own children, a Spirit that allows us to cry out, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ The Spirit himself is bearing testimony along with our spirit that we're God's children!

¹⁷ But notice, if we're children, then we're also heirs! We're heirs of God as our Father and fellow heirs with Christ the Anointed King. But that also means we take on suffering just as he did in order that we may also share with him in his glory.

John 14:22-27 Translation TR

²² Then Judas (not Iscariot) asked, "Lord, why has it come about that you're going to show yourself to us and not to the world?"

²³ Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, they'll hold on to my message, and my Father will love them, and we'll come to them and make our dwelling place (*moné*) with them.

²⁴ A person who doesn't love me isn't holding on to my words. Remember, the message that you're hearing is not just mine; it belongs to the Father who sent me.

²⁵ I've told you all this while I'm still staying among you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit – the Father's going to send him in my name, and he's going to teach you everything and remind you of everything I've told you.

²⁷ Peace I leave with you! It's my own peace I'm giving you. I'm not giving it to you like the world does. Don't let your heart be troubled. Don't be afraid!

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 Translation TR

⁴ Various gifts of grace exist, but the same Spirit, ⁵ and various ministries exist, but the same Lord; ⁶ and varieties of activities exist but the same God is the one activating all of them in everyone.

⁷ This process of manifesting the Spirit is being given to each one for the common good. ⁸ To one, a message of wisdom is given through the Spirit, but to another, a message of knowledge by the same Spirit, ⁹ to another, faithfulness by the same Spirit, to another, gracious gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ and to another, various powers at work, and to another, a prophecy, and to another, times of discerning spirits, to another, kinds of tongues, and to another, interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ But one and the same Spirit activates all of these, as he distributes to each person individually just as he chooses.

Galatians 5:22-25 Translation TR

²² By contrast [with the works of the flesh], the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Jesus' Promise that God Never Gives Up

There's a reason that the account of Pentecost in Acts 2 (next week) begins with the signs of the coming of the Holy Spirit in power on the group of 120 disciples, with the sign of tongues that all could understand in their own language and with the scripture from Joel 2 that points to the God pouring out the Spirit on all flesh, all kinds of people, high and low, female and male.

It wasn't that the Holy Spirit (HS) hadn't been present and working in the world and among the disciples. Jesus in Jn 20 explicitly breathed the HS on his disciples.

It was that the disciples and the world needed a sign – a whole series of signs – that a new time was breaking in.

This was the beginning of the unfolding of God's Kingdom as Jesus had announced it from the beginning of his ministry – still different from what all expected – a time in which the resurrected Jesus has, as he said, “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Mt 28).

a time when Jesus' “incarnation” continues – he is still one of us humans – but now in that resurrection-life physicality that can move between the kind of physical existence that we know and that of the realm of God.

Jesus knew that all this would be very hard for even his closest disciples to understand, to trust, to live – with joy and power.

We Humans live in the limits of “flesh”: We see the world from one point of view, in one time and culture, within one flow of experiences. We have a powerful, built-in tendency to trust our own particular perceptions and experiences.

God is always hard for us to grasp, because we can't directly see and touch God.

It's fundamentally hard for us in physical flesh to really trust an unseen God, and so we tend to substitute some human-size god to give meaning to life.

Various culturally diverse manifestations of Power, Money and Sex/pleasure are the classic favorites for our little human-sized gods.

That's why the incarnation is so important. God accommodates us, helps us in our weakness. But goes far beyond just giving us a boost. God comes among us in a person who breaks all the expectations of a human manifestation of God.

He enters our weakness and suffering and temptation, takes our injustice and betrayal, all the way to the cross.

All of this is focused in an event – the Good News – in the few days of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and resurrection.

But, as I said, Jesus knew that taking this all in, living it in everyday life would be a real challenge.

Not that the life itself would be hard, but that we're surrounded by so much that tells us that Self-Power-Money-Pleasure-etc. are the real powers that give meaning to life.

In the last evening that Jesus spent with his disciples, John narrates how Jesus spoke to them about what was coming (Jn 13-17, 5 chapters). One of the things he repeatedly emphasized was that they would not be left alone, on their own.

What he was doing was God's work and God would never give up on them or give them up to struggle alone.

Jesus repeated talked about the fact that he would send the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete (*parakletos*), the Advocate, who would be with them.

For example in John 14:22-27

²² Then Judas (not Iscariot) asked, "Lord, why has it come about that you're going to show yourself to us and not to the world?"

²³ Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, they'll hold on to my message (*logos*), and my Father will love them, and we'll come to them and make our dwelling place (*moné*) with them. ²⁴ A person who doesn't love me isn't holding on to my words. Remember, the message that you're hearing is not just mine; it belongs to the Father who sent me.

²⁵ I've told you all this while I'm still staying among you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit – the Father's going to send him in my name, and he's going to teach you everything and remind you of everything I've told you.

²⁷ Peace I leave with you! It's my own peace I'm giving you. I'm not giving it to you like the world does. Don't let your heart be troubled. Don't be afraid!

Notice that Jesus talks first about how both He, Jesus, and "my Father" will "come and make our dwelling place" in the disciples. Then he describes what seems to be the same experience as the coming of "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit."

The HS teaches them by reminding them of Jesus. All of this is part of the gift of Peace from Jesus, "my own peace." "Don't let your heart be troubled. Don't be afraid!"

What a wonderful and amazing passage! Notice one little detail. In v 23 Jesus says that Jesus and God the Father, evidently in the Holy Spirit, will make their "dwelling place" with Jesus' followers. They won't be alone or abandoned.

The word translated "dwelling place" here – *moné* – is not common. It is the same word that Jesus uses a few verses earlier Jn 14:2 (the only 2 times it's used in the Bible). There Jesus says

John 14:2-3

² In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

Just think about that. Our traditional imagination is often shaped by the KJV which translates v 2 as "in my Father's house are many mansions." Our imaginations goes straight to "mansions in heaven." But Jesus says that God begins creating those "dwelling places" ("mansions") that Jesus is talking about right here in us, in Jesus' followers, as the God of the Universe in Jesus, in the Holy Spirit, chooses to make his dwelling place, his mansion, his temple in us little humans. What Jesus says is amazing!

A Living God among a Learning People

I want to touch on another aspect of what the NT shows us about the Holy Spirit.

Historically, we along with many other churches, have had a fair skepticism about people who claim special powers of healing or new revelation from the Holy Spirit (especially when it's done for big crowds and on TV).

But sometimes that's led to minimizing the HS, de-personalizing the HS, so that the HS is simply identified with inspired scripture, or is treated like a packaged "gift" that's received but then set on a shelf and never opened.

If there's anything that the NT especially shows about the Spirit, it is his personal, intentional, inter-personal, character.

In our zoom sessions – "Reading Acts" – on Wednesday evening, we've just been dealing with narratives in Acts 8 and are about to do Acts 10. Luke goes out of his way to show that the "gift of the Holy Spirit" that Peter promises on Pentecost, is in reality a personal interaction with our very purposive God.

When Philip goes to the Samaritans in Acts 8, the HS decides not to touch the new believers until apostles from Jerusalem come and lay their Jewish hands on these Samaritans, signifying the unity of believers.

When Peter goes to the Gentile Cornelius in Acts 10, the HS does not wait for these Gentiles to be baptized before he comes on them in a sign of power. The HS knows the Peter himself and the Jewish believers with him need to learn that God wants the Gentiles to share in the event of Jesus' Death and resurrection.

When Paul talks about the HS living and working in lives of believers in assemblies across wide areas of his journeys, he knew that it was God's presence, changing and growing the believers in infinitely varied ways that adapted to and touched individually the life of every believer. Growth as a disciple was never simply receiving good and wise advice and then resolving to practice that good instruction.

There's always lots of good advice around. But the transformation of the mind and heart is not an easy thing.

Paul knew from his own experience and from the lives of others that only God's active involvement in the Holy Spirit brought true life transformation. But he also saw the HS concretely doing that very work.

Sometimes he talked about the "gifts of grace" (*charisma*) that the Spirit could give especially when there was need for special signs, or special empowerment for the challenging work that needed to be done. He emphasized how all the various gifts and signs came from the one God:

1 Corinthians 12:4-11

⁴ Various gifts of grace exist, but the same Spirit, ⁵ and various ministries exist, but the same Lord; ⁶ and varieties of activities exist but the same God is the one activating all of them in everyone.

⁷ This process of manifesting the Spirit is being given to each one for the common good. ⁸ To one, a message of wisdom is given through the Spirit, but to another, a message of knowledge by the same Spirit, ⁹ to another, faithfulness by the same Spirit, to another, gracious gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ and to another, various powers at work, and to another, a prophecy, and to another, times of discerning spirits, to another, kinds of tongues, and to another, interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ But one and the same Spirit activates all of these, as he distributes to each person individually just as he chooses.

This personal, purposive, empowering, teaching, shaping work of the HS is done not by any human control, but is God's own work "*as he distributes to each person individually just as he chooses.*"

God in the Holy Spirit may choose or not choose to give at any time a sign that's particularly perceptible to human beings as a sign of God's work. That's under his control, not ours.

But God is always working in the Holy Spirit within us and among us. Our spiritual growth and spiritual maturity is in welcoming the Spirit, learning through the Spirit, and yielding to the Spirit's transforming power.

So in a famous description, Paul speaks of recognizing the kind of fruit that the Holy Spirit brings forth in the life of a disciple.

Galatians 5:22-25

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Here it's all encapsulated: The 9 fruit of the Spirit that grow from being guided by the Spirit.

Being guided by the Spirit come from the reality of actually being alive by the Spirit, living by the Spirit.

That unique kind of Life is defined by Jesus in his crucifixion and resurrection, which changes our lives as we are crucified with Jesus.

Resurrection Life and Hope among Mortal People

Paul knows that there are a thousand things that keep people from allowing God to bring this life-giving, life-transforming process into their lives. It's just really hard for us little bits of flesh to take in the vast love and grace and humility and beauty of the God of the universe as we know God in Jesus.

Paul often summarizes all of those blockages with the Greek word “*sarx*” traditionally translated “flesh,” but modern translations often give various paraphrases: “sinful nature,” “self,” etc.

The power of those blockages is one of the reasons Paul devotes so much time in his great letter to the Romans, in chapter 8, talking about how much that *sarx*, that flesh, limits our vision to things that are on the scale of our own little actions and blocks us from seeing ourselves within the great love and grace of God.

But God is such a God of love that God comes into our limited imagination and gives us the means to break out into a far larger world of life, hope, experience, inclusion, relationships, relationships that include becoming God’s own children.

What Paul says is extensive, but stay with it. Beginning with Rom 8:5-8

⁵ The reality is that people who live lives determined by “flesh” think in a way that can’t see beyond that flesh, but people who live empowered by God’s Spirit think in ways open to what only the Spirit can do. ⁶ To limit our human thinking to its enslavement to the flesh is a form of death, but to open our thinking to all that the Spirit is doing is to receive life and peace.

⁷ You see, the self-focused thinking of the flesh is hostile to God being God. It doesn’t submit to God’s will expressed in the Law; it even makes that impossible. ⁸ People who serve the little gods of our flesh simply can’t be the people God created them to be.

This is what’s at stake: the breadth and height and depth of our lives. Whether we stay self-enslaved to our own brokenness and sin. Whether we become the full humans God created us to be.

He goes on in Rom 8:9-11 with a very surprising assurance:

⁹ You, however, aren’t living a life determined by flesh but one encompassed by Spirit, if, in fact, God’s Spirit is dwelling in you.

If a person doesn’t have the Messiah’s Spirit, they’re not part of him. ¹⁰ But if the Anointed King is in you, then even though your body is dying, broken by sin, the presence of God’s Spirit is life itself because of God’s faithful righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of the God who raised Jesus from the dead is dwelling in you, then he who raised him from the dead as an Anointed King will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who’s dwelling within you.

This is fundamental. What God has done in Jesus – yes, it gives us guidance and example, but far more! God has joined God’s own self to our little lives – showing that he doesn’t consider them so little. He knows our mortality and our sin and brokenness. But he is faithful to his promises. He knows we can never break the power of death with all of its controlling manifestations in human life. Including of course the very concrete reality of physically dying! But in Jesus, God has done that very thing! Jesus has broken that power and created new resurrection life that death can’t conquer.

And the Holy Spirit, God’s Spirit, God’s Life, who raised Jesus into that new physical, immortal life that can participate in the realm of God – that Spirit is the very Spirit that God gives to dwell in you, in me.

All the old limitations are broken. And it starts now. Yes, I'm still in this flesh all right. No doubt about that.

But I'm also not! We've been given God's astonishing Spirit in a way that we can bear it in our mortal life. It's the meeting of mortality and immortality right here, right now, in us. It is God's kingdom coming "on earth as in heaven."

Too grandiose! You think so? It's both grand beyond imagination and very interwoven with our broken, limited lives. That's what makes it so remarkable.

Paul says in Rom 8:12-17:

¹² So then, brothers and sisters, the fact that we're physical doesn't mean we have some obligation to keep our lives limited to flesh. ¹³ For if you're living limited by flesh and its little gods, you're rejecting the true God, the source of life, and you're going to die.

But if you join the Spirit in condemning to death sin itself with all the destructive practices that it makes part of our bodily experience, you're going to come alive.

¹⁴ It's those who are led through the wilderness by God's Spirit that are God's sons and daughters. ¹⁵ You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to be trapped again by fear. Rather you received a Spirit that marks you as God's own children, a Spirit that allows us to cry out, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ The Spirit himself is bearing testimony along with our spirit that we're God's children!

¹⁷ But notice, if we're children, then we're also heirs! We're heirs of God as our Father and fellow heirs with Christ the Anointed King. But that also means we take on suffering just as he did in order that we may also share with him in his glory.

This is a life that engages the complexities, problems, distortions, deceptions, suffering and injustice of human life. It never explains away the evil but challenges it.

But it also knows that God does not leave us enslaved to that evil now or in the future.

That Resurrection Life from God works in us as a standard of powerful, defining Hope. We experience its reality breaking in now in our own lives, and we live and work toward its full realization in every aspect of life that we can touch.

Does God's Spirit really dwell in us? Absolutely. Jesus tells us so. Our experience tells us so. Our hope is filled with the transforming life that He gives.

By that Spirit we live in the limitless wonder of God's creative love and grace.

When we're closed in by a threatening pandemic, the breadth and height and depth of that gracious love is ever more beautiful.

Jesus says to us and to his disciples as they face fear, loss, and death, (Jn 14:27):

²⁷ Peace I leave with you! It's my own peace I'm giving you. I'm not giving it to you like the world does. Don't let your heart be troubled. Don't be afraid!

Amen.