

Living and Dying as God's Children

Romans 8:11-19 (NIV)

¹¹ And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you. ¹² Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ¹⁵ The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba, Father.*” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. ¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

Wash your hands for 20 seconds. Use hand sanitizer. Practice social distancing. Don’t travel; it’s safer if you stay at home. Do these things because people are dying from this coronavirus. It is a pandemic. We are trying to flatten that curve so that less people get it, so that less people die from it. Mortality, our mortality, is definitely on our minds right now.

This is nothing new for God; he has no problem bringing our mortality to light. In the verse just previous to where we picked up in Romans chapter 8, the Lord told us through the Apostle Paul, “Your body is subject to death because of sin.” People of every generation have had mortality on their minds because ever since Adam and Eve sinned, all have sinned. Every single one of us come into this world as sinners. And so we are all subject to death. Sometimes, though, thoughts on our mortality are more pronounced and more prominent than at other times, like it is right now.

It was also on the minds of the Roman Christians. Paul wrote to them: “If you live according to the flesh, you will die...” (verse 13a) What is this living according to the flesh? Paul’s talking about what we typically call the sinful nature. Living according to the flesh is embracing the sinful nature that all of us are born with, a nature that focuses on pleasing ourselves. This sinful nature does not want to follow God’s Word, nor can it even do so. So, everything turns inward. Life becomes living for right here and right now, that the only point of living is to take care of this flesh. How can I please myself? How can I take care of myself first above anyone else?

The temptation to live according to the flesh is always there, but it’s even more pronounced right now. When you go into the stores and you see a new stock of items that they were out of last week, your first impulse is to stock up – stock up so that you can take care of yourself because someone else might take this before you do and it might not be there next week. Yes, we do have to take care of ourselves. Yes, we have to plan and be responsible for our health and well-being. But we also have to be mindful about everyone else around us. I’m forced to ask myself when I grab that extra jar of peanut butter that I don’t really need for the next two weeks, am I depriving someone else from it? Am I willing to let someone else have this and instead rely on God to give me my daily bread, (and in this case, I mean my bi-weekly peanut butter) the next time I go grocery shopping? The temptation is to be selfish right now, not selfless to my neighbor during a pandemic.

Paul says that this living according to the flesh, this self-centeredness, leads only to death. Why? Because selfishness does not put a stopper on death. The wages of sin is death. Selfishness is a sin. So, no matter how many groceries we stock up on, no matter how good of care we take of our bodies, no matter how much social distancing we do, no matter how many seconds we wash our hands or how many times we sanitize them, we are going to die – unless Jesus returns first and the world ends.

Wow. Thanks, pastor. That’s cheery. I know, but the point is that we are mortal. We know that we cannot stop death coming to us because we are all sinful. God does not bring this up through Paul writing to the Roman Christians so that they all become pessimistic, hopeless sad sacks who resign themselves to dying. No, God brings this up because he has a solution to our mortality, which comes into clearer focus the closer we get to Good Friday and Easter.

Yes, you and I will die because of sin – unless Jesus returns and brings Judgment Day before that. But God promises life. “And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.” (verse 11) This whole church season of Lent is a time for us to march once again with Jesus to his death on the cross, but the journey doesn’t end there. If it did, I would expect you all to just live for yourselves, to live according to your flesh, totally selfish and self-serving. But we know what happens after three days from the cross: God raised Jesus from the dead! God the Father raised God the Son as proof positive that he has accepted his life in payment for our sins.

What's more is that God raised Jesus to preview for us what will happen after we die. It's just as Jesus said to Martha in our Gospel reading: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." (John 11:25-26) Yes, we will die, but that's just our mortal body. Our soul, our spirit, lives on with God; it never dies. And then when Christ returns on that Last Day, our physical body will be raised back to life and made never to die. Why? Because God the Father and God the Holy Spirit raised God the Son's body back to life to live forever. That same Spirit that did that dwells in us will conquer and defeat death for us!

How do we know that? It's because God has made you his child. God adopted you to be one of his own. He did this for you when you were washed and made clean by the holy waters of baptism. There he put his name on you. There he washed away all your sins – past, present, and future. There he clothed you with Jesus' perfection. There he made you new. Your baptismal certificate, that is your adoption paper from God. He has forgiven your sins and remembers them no more. This was done for you when you heard what Jesus did for you – how he kept God's law perfectly for you, never once living selfishly, never once living according to sinful flesh. You know that Jesus died on the cross to take away your sins. You know that he rose again from the dead as a powerful declaration that because he was raised from the dead we know that our sins are paid for and that we too will get to live with Jesus in heaven. Because of this, we get to call God, "Abba, Father." That is our relationship with him. We now enjoy the same relationship with God the Father as Jesus himself does because the Holy Spirit has made us children of God, adopted us into his family.

Because you have been made a child of God by the work of the Holy Spirit, you are no longer bound to living according to the flesh, to live selfishly. We belong to God, not our sinful nature. He has freed us from sin's shackles so that we are free to live for God, free to live selflessly. We live by the Spirit. Since we do, we put to death the misdeeds of the body. We look at the situation and the world around us and not just focus inwardly but outwardly. What can I do to serve others? What can I do to help them? I may not be able to give them a hug right now, but maybe I can buy them groceries and drop them off at their house. Maybe I can send encouraging letters, texts, emails, or Facebook posts with my favorite Bible verses that are getting me through these times. Maybe I can set aside purposeful time for a phone call or a video call and bring a little joy amidst this time of social distancing and staying at home. Maybe I can simply check in on other people. I can always pray for them. In a time of a pandemic, we focus outward instead of inward because we are God's children. This is what we do. This is living by the Spirit of God, living by what he has made us. I see and hear so many of you doing this as you ask, "What can I do to help?" You are living as God's children. Continue to do so.

As children of God, we also have God's promise that he will be with us always to the very end of the age. So, even if this mortal body dies, we never die alone. God says that he never leaves us nor forsakes us. That means he walks even through death with us. As Paul writes later in his letter to the Roman Christians, "For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone." (Romans 14:7)

And on top of that, we have something else that is so very marvelous to look forward to. Paul wrote, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." (verse 17) We have that inheritance from God right now. Because Jesus was raised from the dead and his mortal body was made immortal in his resurrection, we look forward to the same glory. We look forward to the day when there are no more viruses, when there is no more death. That same power of God that rendered death null and void to raise Jesus from the dead will also render death null and void for us when he raises us in glory on the day he returns, the Last Day.

While we are looking ahead to this future glory, we have a sure and certain hope, an eager expectation of the future - not a bleak one of a dystopian society. Because Christ has been raised from the dead and because God the Holy Spirit has made us his children, we say along with Paul, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." (verse 18) This is our future because we are children of God. This is our hope. This is our life. Share this hope and life during these times serving others as we live according to Spirit. Amen.