

Contrast 5) of Death & Life

Romans 8:11-19 • 2020-03-29 • Lenten Epistle Series: Contrast



The tide between life and death can ebb drastically. I was recently reminded of that truth when I saw a program about a river in the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa. For much of the Kalahari is desolate and parched. Few creatures can survive there. But there is a river called the Okavango. Every year the river overflows across the flat desert to create a vast flooded delta which is covered in water and new life. Suddenly all the creatures in the region can spread out over the vast green in the desert. There are giraffes, elephants, African buffalo, zebras, hippos, and all types of creatures that live in the water and walk on the delta. It was fascinating to see all these creatures that depended on the river delta. But there were more creatures in the mix. The Okavango delta contains the highest concentration of carnivores in Africa. There are lions, leopards, cheetahs, hyenas, African wild dogs, many birds of prey, and African crocodiles. The program I watched had a central theme about the Okavango delta. All the creatures are in a struggle between life and death. Wherever the river spreads out there is life. When it retreats, there was death. Everything depends on the water flow. No creature was exempt from danger on the Okavango delta. The program showed hippos threatening lions, lions threatening leopards, buffalo killing lions, leopards killing crocodiles, and even giraffes killing giraffes in a duel. Every creature was on the brink of life and death. When the water recedes, they all cram and scramble for it. And when the water flows, they all literally jumped for joy with the life it brought. It all depended on the flow of the river over the desolate desert each year.

Is there anything in our lives like that river which makes a world of difference between life and death? Today we continue our series looking at contrasts in the letters of Paul. In Romans 8 we see an incredible source of life in this dreary world. For us life and death doesn't depend on a river, but on the Spirit. And those who have the Spirit of God have received an amazing source of comfort and life amidst death and fear.

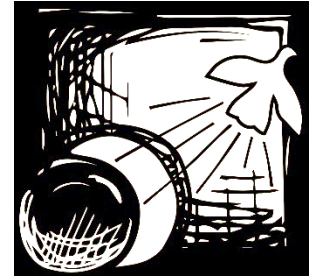
Paul reminds us of an incredibly comforting truth. We have the Spirit of God in us. And he gives us new life. *"If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will also make your mortal bodies alive through his Spirit, who is dwelling in you."* Jesus, God's Son, came to this world to give his life on behalf of every sinner. On the cross he suffered the death we deserve for our sins. He was crucified and placed in the tomb. But God the Father raised his Son back to life by the working of the Holy Spirit. In his raising Jesus to life he has assured every believer that the victory is ours! Jesus is alive and we no longer are under sins' curse. This same Spirit of God who raised Jesus now lives in every believer! You are a temple of the Holy Spirit. And that indwelling Spirit gives life to you!

There are two ways in which the Spirit makes us alive. First off, notice how Paul doesn't say that the Spirit *will* dwell in you. He says, "the Spirit *is* dwelling in you." The Holy Spirit is already at work in you right now to create new life in your body. Recall last week how we talked about the way the sinful flesh is apart from the working of the Spirit. Our sinful flesh is like the dry desert, unable to produce life or sustain it. It is only filled with thorns, parched earth, and death. Just as a desert without water is dead or dying and cannot long sustain life, we are unable to live in a way that produces any good fruits. We are spiritually like a waterless, lifeless desert. And if we live in harmony with our sinful flesh, namely it's godless desires, we will die. We will be living according to the body that has earned the price of death and hell for us. But we have received the Spirit of God and have been freed from such a dead way of life. *"We do not owe it to the sinful flesh to live in harmony with it. For if you live in harmony with the sinful flesh, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the actions of the body, you will live."* Jesus spoke the same when he said, "Remain in me. Apart from me you can do nothing. Remain in me and you will bear much fruit." The Spirit of God produces new life in every believer.

And it isn't even really us working this new life. The power comes from the Spirit of God. "By the Spirit" the believer puts to death the actions of the sinful flesh. Our worry, anxiety, destructive habits, anger, discord, selfish desires, sexual immorality, and all the works of the flesh are put to death by the Spirit's working. That new life doesn't mean you will try to do better or sin less often. It means, "putting to death the (sinful) actions of the body." The Spirit works in us to see sin for what it really is and to hate it. The believer not only hates sin but puts it to death.

Do you struggle with sin? By the Spirit of God, you have a new life to put it aside and put it that sin to death. The Spirit leads you to take that sin to the cross, and it is crucified and buried with Christ. Sin doesn't control you. Sin cannot harm you. It is dead to you. Think of a sin which has reared its ugly head recently in your life. Do you struggle with the love of money and sometimes end up putting your trust in it instead of in God? Do you worry instead of trusting in God above all things? Have you at times found yourself struggling with anger or selfishness? Does it seem like gossip can just escape your mouth before you can stop it? That's the spirit of slavery which we are born into. But now think of the Spirit who raised Jesus to life and who puts that sinful action of the body to death. We can now say along with Paul and every believer, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." It is new life that comes by the Spirit's working in us. The Spirit gives life to our bodies!

Our new life by the Spirit is one of freedom and without fear. Once, when we had only the dry desert of sinful flesh, we lived in fear. We were slaves to sin and doomed to live in the fear of death. We lived under the control of sin's power. We were outside of the family of God as his enemies. But now *"those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery so that you are afraid again, but you received the Spirit of adoption."* In baptism you received the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. And with the Spirit you became a child of God, adopted into his family. The Spirit has brought you from fear to faith. You do not need to fear being left outside of God's family. You have a new status as his own.



That new life is expressed with the new confidence of faith. We have such close relationship with God that we now call out "Abba, Daddy!" It's not just your voice saying, "I'm God's child." The Holy Spirit who dwells in you also calls out, "This one is a child of God, adopted into the family." *"The Spirit himself joins our spirit in testifying that we are God's children."*

With the Spirit of God, we have received an amazing source of comfort and life amidst death and fear. We have received the Spirit who gives us new life with fruit, freedom from fear, faith in forgiveness of sins, and assurance of our new status as children of God. The Holy Spirit has brought us to be filled with new life where there was once only death.

Our new life from the Spirit also includes a future hope. You might think that if we have the Spirit of God dwelling in us then we would appear a little more glorious. We might even at times wish that Paul wrote something more like, "If the Spirit of God lives in you than you live the good life right now." But he didn't write that because right now we are still in the flesh. We still must daily by the Spirit put to death the actions of the flesh. And our flesh endures trials, suffering, and pain. The Christian right now can appear to be at a loss. Even if we are living by the Spirit and producing fruit, we still don't appear like children of God ought to appear. Our bodies are weak, limited, and struggle with the curse of sin. I've seen many Christians on their death bed appearing all but glorious. Their bodies are weak. Their minds are numb. And they need someone to help them through even the simplest routines. It might not appear all that glorious on the surface. But Paul reminds us that despite our present appearance we remain heirs of God and heirs with Christ. We suffer now as those who follow Christ. But we will be glorified along with Christ.

When that glorification happens, we will experience the greatest contrast in all of Scripture. Because Christ the Son of God suffered and died for sinners, we are now co-heirs with Christ. It didn't seem all that glorious when Christ suffered. But his suffering for us ended in the greatest glory. He was raised back to life with a new and glorified body. That glory is also ours. It is such a great glory that awaits us that Paul says it isn't worthy to be on the same scale of comparison with our present sufferings. No matter how lowly we now appear the Spirit of God dwells within. And the body of each believer will be shown for what it really is: the body of a child of God and heir of eternal life.

We don't know when that day will come, but all creation waits in eager expectation for it. When the rains finally do fall on a dry desert land, it reveals something that all of life was longing after. The grass sprouts, the streams flow, the trees bloom. In place of dryness and death is life renewed. Our life now is like the dry land in the desert waiting for the flooding rains and spilling river. We know it's coming. We eagerly await it. The whole creation is eagerly awaiting God's command for the new creation to begin. When that day comes God will reveal who we really are as his children. The same Spirit who raised Christ and who now dwells within us will give us new life. Our bodies will be glorious bodies, never again to face fear, weakness, sickness, or death. We will appear glorious and made new. That's something worth waiting for in eager expectation!

Join with creation in waiting with eager longing for that day. Live each day facing whatever troubles and struggles lie before you with expectation for that coming day of glory. The devil wants us to be blind to this bright contrast in Scripture. He wants us to see every believer as no different from the rest of their surroundings. He wants us to believe that there is nothing special about those who have received the Spirit of God and that they will end up like the dirt which they are buried in. But God wants us to see more. He wants us to see the redemption paid by Christ Jesus who purchased us from the dust. He wants us to see his Son who suffered in our place. He wants us to see how he has given us his Son! He wants us to see that in each of us is his Spirit. He wants us to see our relationship as an adopted son, a loved child, an heir of the glorious kingdom along with Christ. He wants us to see how he has given us the Spirit. And he wants us to understand that no matter what our present sufferings, there is an incomparably glorious life awaiting us.

On the Okavango delta the animals all seem to know and understand the dry spell will come to an end. They all seem to live preparing for the flooding waters. It changes their flight patterns, migration patterns, and every daily habit. They know that as bad as it might get during a dry spell, something amazing is coming. When it rains and the river flows, they know they have a whole different and glorious type of life. That's what it is like for us who have the Spirit. We have received a Spirit that has given us adoption to God's family, a position as a child of God, and an heir of eternal life. That Spirit gives new life now and new life into eternity. It's a strong contrast isn't it? Without God's Spirit we would live in slavery and fear. We would be facing death and everlasting shame outside the family of God. With the Spirit live in freedom and without fear. We live in eager expectation of the glory that will be revealed to us as the children of God.