

# The Holy Spirit

Devotional Reading: Ephesians 3:14–21

Background Scripture: John 3:5–8; 14:16–17, 26; 15:26–27; 16:7–15;  
Acts 2:1–21, 32–33; 1 Corinthians 12:1–13

Romans 8:12–17, 26–27

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. <sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. <sup>15</sup> 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.” <sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are

God’s children. <sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. <sup>27</sup> And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.



## Key Text

*The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. —Romans 8:16*

# Enduring Beliefs of the Church

## Unit 1: Our God and the Holy Scriptures

Lessons 1–4

### Lesson Aims

1. Describe the Spirit’s work as an “advocate” in the lives of believers.
2. Give reasons to trust the Spirit’s witness about believers’ standing before God.
3. Make a plan to deal with fear in favor of living confidently as God’s Spirit-led children.

### Lesson Outline

#### Introduction

- A. Real Brother
- B. Lesson Context

#### I. Flesh and Spirit (Romans 8:12–14)

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- B. What Leads to Death (v. 13a)
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#### II. God’s Children (Romans 8:15–17)

- A. Not Slaves (v. 15a)
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#### III. Helped by the Spirit (Romans 8:26–27)

- A. To Pray (v. 26)  
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- B. Through Intercession (v. 27)

#### Conclusion

- A. God’s Real Children
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## Introduction

### A. Real Brother

When my friend Chris was 10, his family adopted a 5-year-old boy named Mark. At first, Mark was afraid that his new parents would send him away. He tried to behave perfectly so they would keep him.

A few weeks after becoming part of Chris’s family, Mark broke one of Chris’s toys. Mark started to shake and cry. Chris gave him a big hug and asked why he was trembling. Mark replied, “Because Daddy will be mad that I broke your toy.” Chris assured Mark that their dad wouldn’t be angry. Mark replied, “But you’re the real son.” Chris pulled Mark closer and whispered, “You’re his real son now, too. You’re my real brother.” Chris still remembers the tension in his brother’s arms melt away. The barrier was broken. Mark finally knew that he was part of the family.

### B. Lesson Context

The context for last week’s lesson on Romans 5 applies to this lesson as well, so that information need not be repeated here.

Romans 6–8 is Paul’s rebuttal against false applications of the gospel message he has been preaching. Believers cannot continue in sin because Jesus’ death released them from sin’s dominion. Believers are united with Christ in his death (Romans 6:3–11), which frees them from slavery to sin, death, and the law (6:11; 7:1–6; 8:1–2; Galatians 2:19). They also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). Since God has freed believers from sin’s mastery, they are to see themselves instead as God’s servants (6:12–23). This is crucial because a conflict rages in every believer (7:21–23).

The Holy Spirit lives inside of believers (Romans 8:9–11), and his will stands in opposition to the will of sin (8:5–7; Galatians 5:16–17). There is no neutral ground: one either sides with the Holy Spirit and follows his orders, or one submits again to sin’s desires. Those sinful desires lead only to death (Romans 8:6a; Galatians 5:19–21). But the Spirit guides believers to “life and peace” (Romans 8:6b), and God will raise them from the dead just like Jesus (8:10–11).

The apostle Paul wrote about 25 percent of the New Testament. But nearly half of the New Testament references to the (Holy) Spirit occur in his letters. Clearly, the person and work of the Holy Spirit is a vital doctrine for him—and should be so for us.

## I. Flesh and Spirit

(Romans 8:12–14)

### A. Owe the Flesh (v. 12)

**12. Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it.**

The word *therefore* indicates that Paul is concluding a line of thought as he points out the implications of the topic to this point. A quick look back at Romans 8:1–11 reveals that Paul has been demonstrating the absolute incompatibility between the realm of *the flesh* and the realm of the Spirit. We have to decide which we are indebted to.

The word translated “flesh” is one of Paul’s favorites—he uses it over 100 times in his letters, about one-third of those in Romans alone! But Paul doesn’t use this word to refer to the same thing in every context. Furthermore, the term “the body” is virtually synonymous with “the flesh” in many cases, so it’s useful to consider them together. In six instances, Paul uses the words translated “flesh” and “body” together in the same verse to compare or contrast one with the other in various ways (Romans 8:13 [below]; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Colossians 1:22, 24; 2:11, 23). Here’s a thumbnail sketch of those two terms, plus “world,” categorized in three senses each:

| <u>SENSE: POSITIVE</u>       | <u>NEUTRAL</u>      | <u>NEGATIVE</u> |
|------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| <i>Flesh:</i> Galatians 2:20 | 1 Corinthians 15:39 | Ephesians 2:3   |
| <i>Body:</i> Romans 7:4      | Romans 6:12         | Romans 8:13     |
| <i>World:</i> Romans 1:20    | Romans 1:8          | Colossians 2:20 |

As you can see, we have some careful reading to do to determine how Paul is using “flesh” or “body” in any given text. Considering the seven verses that immediately precede the one we are now reading, the sense is decidedly negative.

Those seven verses of Romans 8:5–11 reflect Paul’s portrayal elsewhere of “flesh” and “Spirit”



Visual for Lesson 4. Display this visual as you ask the discussion question associated with Romans 8:16.

as opposing categories (Galatians 3:3; 4:29; 6:8; etc.). The same opposing categories present themselves in places where “body” is contrasted with “Spirit” (Romans 8:10, 13 [below]).

Another way we speak of “the flesh” in a negative sense is when it is equated with “the world,” when in turn the world is contrasted with the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:12). The listed passages and others reflect a complex reality: even though we have been saved from the sinful principles of this world, we still live in it. And we may encounter the world insisting that we are in debt to it in terms of meeting the various appetites of the flesh.

While the mind can recognize sin and delight in God’s law (Romans 7:22–25), the flesh is unruly, tempted by the sins of the world (7:14, 23). Its desires are oriented toward the things that God disdains, and one cannot please God while submitting to the flesh (8:7–8). But believers are empowered to resist the flesh’s desires. We will see how as we consider additional verses below.

### B. What Leads to Death (v. 13a)

**13a. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die;**

Here, we note a shift from the first-person plural “we” of the previous verse to the more pointed second-person plural *you* as Paul states the central reason why not to *live according to the flesh*, fulfilling its desires. It’s because the flesh, as used in this context, stands in opposition to God’s desires

(Romans 8:7; Galatians 5:17). Allowing the desires of the flesh to control one's life leads to death.

But this is nothing new; Paul here is reiterating a point that he makes throughout the letter. This point is most memorably summarized in Romans 6:23 as “the wages of sin is death” (see also Romans 2:6–8; 6:16, 21; 7:5). Paul is not referring to physical death, but to the outcome of the final judgment, where one's eternal fate is sealed (Acts 17:31; Romans 2:15–16; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10). The one who lives to gratify the desires of the flesh will pay the highest price.

Paul was not alone in affirming the end-time judgment. The Gospels record Jesus teaching about the judgment (Matthew 12:36; 25:31–46; John 12:48). Other New Testament authors refer to it as well (Hebrews 9:27; 2 Peter 3:7; Revelation 20:11–15).

### C. What Leads to Life (v. 13b)

**13b. but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.**

The alternative to living after the flesh is to *put to death the misdeeds of the body*. Yet Paul does not suggest that his readers can be saved by their own strength, as if salvation were by works. Rather, believers are empowered by the life-giving *Spirit* to resist their temptations and to subdue the desires of their carnal natures (Romans 8:4). Paul similarly encouraged the Galatians in this regard (Galatians 5:16–18, 24–25).

Paul draws the death/life and law/Spirit contrasts from the covenant texts of the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 30:15–20, Moses renews the covenant that began at Sinai (Exodus 19–24) and tells the Israelites, “See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction” (Deuteronomy 30:15). Keeping the covenant would bring the people life and prosperity, while break-

ing it would bring them death and disaster. While the Israelites failed to keep the covenant, God promised through Jeremiah that he would make a new covenant with his people. In the new covenant, God would write his laws on their hearts and enable them to obey him (Jeremiah 31:31–34). Paul refers to believers as ministers of this new covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6) and identifies the Holy Spirit as the one who circumcises the hearts of God's people (Romans 2:29). Under this new covenant, believers have the help they need to live in ways that please God (7:6).

#### What Do You Think?

What do you think it looks like to live by the Spirit and not according to the flesh?

#### Digging Deeper

How does Galatians 5:16–18 contribute to your previous response?

### D. What Results (v. 14)

**14. For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.**

The word *for* that begins this verse indicates a reason for or expansion on something stated previously. In this case, the verse now before us expands on what “you will live” of the previous verse means: to be considered as *the children of God*. Some older translations render this phrase as “sons of God.” It is essential to recognize that Paul is not excluding women here. While this Greek term can be rendered either “sons” or “children,” the force of the male term “sons” evokes common ideas about the rights of male children in the ancient world. In both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts, sons would inherit their fathers' estates. While some translations choose to use the term “children” here, Paul likely uses this term (rather than another Greek word for “children”) because of its association with inheritance, a point that he will make more explicit in verse 17.

Another grammatical feature to notice is that while the verse before this one is stated in the active voice (in terms of something the readers must do), the verse now before us is stated in the passive voice (in terms of something the readers

## How to Say It

|             |                             |
|-------------|-----------------------------|
| Abba        | Ab-buh.                     |
| Colossians  | Kuh- <i>losh</i> -unz.      |
| Deuteronomy | Due-ter- <i>ahn</i> -uh-me. |
| Ephesians   | Ee- <i>fee</i> -zhunz.      |
| Galatians   | Guh- <i>lay</i> -shunz.     |

must allow to be done to them). That “something” is to be *led by the Spirit of God* (compare Galatians 4:6; 5:18). Opinions differ on exactly what form this leading takes. But most all agree that the picture is, at the least, that of a Spirit-dominated life.

## II. God’s Children

(Romans 8:15–17)

### A. Not Slaves (v. 15a)

**15a. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again;**

Paul explains his statement by linking the experience of the Spirit’s leading to one’s status as a child of God. Paul doesn’t want his readers to conclude that embracing a Spirit-dominated life is just to exchange one negative bondage for another negative bondage. Thus, Paul emphasizes, as he has before, that believers have been freed from slavery to sin, death, the law, and judgment (Romans 6:6–22; 7:6; 8:2).

But there’s more to the story! This is only a statement of what believers *do not* end up with. The next half-verse finishes the thought by stating what believers *do* receive (compare Hebrews 2:15).

#### What Do You Think?

What is it like to know that you are no longer bound to fear?

#### Digging Deeper

In what ways do you struggle to believe that you are freed from fear?

### B. Adopted (v. 15b)

**15b. rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.”**

The earlier description of opposites was “the flesh” versus “the Spirit”; now the description of opposites is “the spirit of bondage” versus “the Spirit of *adoption*.” Adoption was a common and important practice in the ancient world. Infant mortality rates were high, and many children who survived infancy died at young ages from accidents or diseases. Men would often adopt adult males as their heirs to preserve family lines and

secure caretakers for their old age. An adopted son would take the father’s family name and would have all the rights of a natural-born child. There is even some evidence that adopted sons had special rights against disownment, so that they were always a part of the family.

The reality of the adopted heirs’ inclusion in God’s family inspires them (us) to *cry, Abba, Father*. Paul here uses an Aramaic term and immediately translates it with the Greek equivalent. While some suggest that *Abba* is a child’s term of endearment (like “Daddy”), the relevant literature from the time does not support this conclusion. Adults often used this term for their fathers without any childish affection implied. However, this misunderstanding does not diminish the significance of this cry. To call God one’s own father was the kind of honor usually reserved for demigods. Paul proclaims that the one true God has given this honor to human beings as he adopts them into his family.

### C. Confirmed (v. 16)

**16. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.**

Paul here emphasizes the Spirit’s role in testifying to the believer’s new status (compare 2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13). This testimony is delivered to the believer’s own *spirit*, but Paul does not explain precisely what he means by this. It is likely that Paul refers back to the cry in Romans 8:15b, above. Some commentators suggest that the expression comes from a baptism ritual, but the evidence for this possibility is weak. It is more likely that Paul refers to the believer’s inner sense of assurance, a gift from the Holy *Spirit* within them.

Here, instead of the Greek word for “son” (which he uses in Romans 8:14, above), Paul uses the term for *children*. This is a more comprehensive word that includes both males and females.

#### What Do You Think?

How should our lives look different, knowing we are children of God?

#### Digging Deeper

How does 1 John 3:1–2 contribute to your consideration of this?

## Welcome to the Family

My brother and his wife spent years preparing to adopt children who were in the foster care system in the United States. Finally, they received a call about a sibling group of three children. The soon-to-be parents quickly made plans to visit. Before long, the kids had made the trip across several states to live with their new parents.

Almost a year went by before adoption day finally arrived. Everyone was somewhat nervous with excitement when a judge publicly declared the news: the children were officially adopted! They were no longer “in the system.” They were given new last names and legally welcomed into the family that they were already emotionally part of.

Just as a judge, with authority, “bore testimony” to the official adoption of my nieces and nephew, the Holy Spirit “testifies” to our adoption as children in the family of God. We have a new title as heirs, and we can truly call him “Father.” What promises are now yours because of your adoption into his family? —B. R.

### D. Heirs with Jesus (v. 17)

**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.**

Paul makes explicit here what he implies in Romans 8:14, above: those who are God’s *children* are his *heirs*. They have become part of God’s family and will receive an inheritance as *co-heirs with Christ*, who is “appointed heir of all things” (Hebrews 1:2). But what exactly are we to inherit? It’s tempting to answer that question quickly by turning to other well-known texts that speak of eternal life. But let’s not be too hasty in doing that before we let the verse at hand have its say. In this regard, we focus on the phrase *heirs of God*. There is ambiguity in the original language as to what exactly this means. Several passages throughout Paul’s writings and beyond speak of the promises that are ours as heirs, including God’s “promise in Christ Jesus” and “hope of eternal life” (Ephesians 3:6; Titus 3:4–7; compare James 2:5). While this remains broad and rather ambiguous, the main thrust is joyful hope.

At the same time, our inheritance comes with a cost: those who desire to *share in Christ’s glory* must also *share in his sufferings*. The suffering that Paul has in mind here is likely the persecutions Jesus faced, which believers will also experience if they live like Jesus (Mark 13:13; 2 Corinthians 1:5; Colossians 1:24; 1 Peter 4:12–14; etc.). This suffering will result in sharing in glory with Christ. We will experience resurrection, our bodies being transformed and perfected like Jesus’ body was (Romans 8:11; Philippians 3:21). God will free his creation from bondage to death and decay (Romans 8:18–22).

### What Do You Think?

What does it mean to share in Christ’s sufferings?

### Digging Deeper

How do Philippians 3:1–7 and 1 Peter 4:12–19 inform your understanding of suffering with Christ?

## III. Helped by the Spirit

(Romans 8:26–27)

### A. To Pray (v. 26)

**26. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.**

In Romans 8:18–25, Paul describes how the whole cosmos looks forward to God’s renewal of creation and how believers must wait with patient hope for that day.

Arriving now at Romans 8:26, Paul explains how *the Spirit helps us* as we wait. The word translated *weakness* often refers to physical sickness or disease (Matthew 8:17; Acts 28:9; etc.). But here that word seems to speak of human limitations in a broad, general sense. This is a weakness that we cannot overcome in and of ourselves. The prayer task mentioned in Ephesians 6:18 is the challenge; the fact that we don’t even *know what we ought to pray for* is the reality. Both texts note the involvement of the Holy Spirit. The text at hand states that the Spirit makes up for our limitations by making intercession *for us*. That con-

cept refers to someone advocating on behalf of another.

Some interpreters have understood *wordless groans* as a reference to the gift of tongues (see 1 Corinthians 14:1–19). But Paul says here that it is the Holy Spirit who delivers such groanings, not the human believer. The Spirit communicates with God the Father on behalf of all believers with expressions that humans cannot mimic or understand.

### What Do You Think?

In what ways might your prayers change, recognizing that the Spirit intercedes for you?

### Digging Deeper

What weaknesses or infirmities do you desire the Spirit's help with?

## Advocating for a Friend

In a volunteer role, I have the privilege of teaching English to asylum seekers. My work involves teaching them the basics of English communication so that they may seek jobs, find housing, and obtain additional assistance available to them.

One day, a student stayed after class to ask me about a letter he received from the state. He didn't understand the letter's contents and needed to call the helpline mentioned in the letter. He asked if I would be willing to make the call for him.

I spent several minutes on the phone as an advocate between my student and the state representative. She explained what he needed to know and do; I then broke the information down in terms he could understand.

We might say that we can't speak the language of heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2–4), so the Holy Spirit does it for us as a go-between or intermediary. When you pray, do you acknowledge the Spirit's role in that regard?  
—B. R.

### B. Through Intercession (v. 27)

**27. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.**

Paul emphasizes the unique connection

between *the Spirit* and *God the Father* as well as the effectiveness of the Spirit's advocacy. *Interceding in accordance with the will of God*, the Spirit is not trying to convince the Father of something the Father does not wish to do. On the contrary, the Spirit prays for those things that the Father desires for us. They are thus aligned in their purpose, and believers can trust that God will answer those prayers.

## Conclusion

### A. God's Real Children

Unfortunately, some cultures view adopted children as having a kind of second-class status. While most parents love their adopted children as full members of their families, one can find accounts on social media of parents treating adopted children as inferior to their biological children.

When we have a faulty view of adoption, we can easily miss the radical nature of Paul's claim that God has given us the Spirit of adoption. Believers are not second-class children. Rather, we are fully integrated into God's family, given both his name and his Spirit. God begrudges us nothing; instead, he makes us joint heirs with Christ, promising us a share in his inheritance. Nor does Christ begrudge our inclusion in his family. On the contrary, he joyfully calls us his brothers and sisters and willingly shares his rightful inheritance with us. Adoption into God's family is not a legal fiction but a spiritual reality.

God also shows his love for his adopted children by sending us his Spirit as our advocate. He changes us so that we look more like Jesus, and one day he will resurrect our bodies just like he resurrected Jesus. We are never alone, never inferior or illegitimate children in God's eyes. We are God's real sons and daughters.

### B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for making us your children and giving us your Spirit to intercede for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

We are God's real children!

# Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

## Into the Lesson

Have participants identify a vulnerable population or an endangered animal species. Consider researching ahead of time to find one that might be in your area. Divide participants into small groups. Distribute index cards of the following questions to find out what learners know about advocating for this population: 1—Which organizations or foundations serve this purpose? 2—What are some things people do to help, serve, or bring awareness about this group? 3—Would any of the participants say they are an advocate for this cause? If so, how? 4—Why are advocates helpful to this group?

Bring the groups back together to present their findings in a whole-class discussion.

Lead into Bible study by saying, “An advocate is someone who speaks up for someone or something that cannot speak for themselves or struggles to be heard. As we study, consider in what ways the Holy Spirit is an advocate for us.”

## Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read Romans 8:12–13. Write the following headers on the board: *In the Flesh* and *In the Spirit*. Have participants name behaviors and attitudes that can be displayed by living in either of these ways. For inspiration, recommend that they refer to Galatians 5:19–23. After several items are listed in each column, ask participants to identify ways that these attitudes and behaviors lead to life or death—physically, relationally, and spiritually.

Ask a volunteer to read Romans 8:14–17. Divide the class into two groups: **Children of God Group** and **Heirs of God Group**. Distribute handouts (you create) of the questions below for in-group discussion.

**Children of God Group.** Read Romans 8:14–15. 1—How does this passage define what it means to be a child of God? 2—How do Matthew 7:7–11 and Hebrews 12:7–11 add to this? 3—Based on

these passages, what is an implication of being called a child of God?

**Heirs of God Group.** Read Romans 8:16–17. 1—How does this passage explain what it means to be an heir of God? 2—How do Galatians 3:26–4:7 and Ephesians 1:3–14 add to this? 3—Based on these passages, what is an implication of being called an heir of God?

After calling time, bring the groups back together to share their findings. As a whole class, create a list of why believers can trust the Spirit’s witness about their standing before God.

Ask a volunteer to read Romans 8:26–27. Refer to the definition of *advocate* used earlier in the lesson. Talk about how the Holy Spirit is an advocate for believers. Distribute an index card and envelope to each learner. Give them a minute to write down an area in their lives where they feel weak, inadequate, or helpless. Then encourage them to place the card inside the envelope, seal it, and write the words of these two verses on the envelope. Invite them to put the envelope in a place where it will be seen regularly during the coming week. Encourage them to read the above verses aloud as a reminder to live confidently as a Spirit-led child of God.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Intercessor Inquiry” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated.

## Into Life

Lead a brief brainstorming session by challenging learners to list ways to live confidently as believers. Divide the group into pairs. Challenge pairs to make a plan to deal with their fears so they can live confidently as God’s children.

*Option.* Distribute the “I Am a Child of God” exercise from the activity page. Have learners complete it individually in a couple of minutes before discussing conclusions with a partner.