

Chapter 8

Verses 1–8 **Life in the Spirit and the true purpose of the Instruction**

In this section, I'm trying to summarise parts of my argument up to this point and then show how the work of Jesus and the transforming work of God's Spirit resolve the issue, the great dilemma, set out in the previous part of the argument. Humans need to be rescued. They were created to live Life but have chosen to live in a different way. This different way of living has consequences which, among other things, involves the prospect of being found to be in the wrong when God acts as judge. The Instruction, though great in many ways, and having Life as its goal, was, in the end, not fit for purpose because it was prone to being corrupted by Sin. In the end it left us all conflicted. The good news is that God has acted through King Jesus to resolve the crisis.

The Instruction, when corrupted by Sin, split into two. One part is God's Instruction and one part Sin's. The former relates to the Spirit and the latter to the flesh. One part works on the inner person and the other impacts things that are outward.

1. The first verse summarises one of the main points I have made so far. I return to the courtroom image. If you belong to King Jesus, then you need have no fear about the outcome of God's judgement. He is going to find in your favour. I will show over the next part of the argument how the work of God in those who follow King Jesus will enable them to orient themselves to live in God's way and will start them off on a journey of becoming the person they were created to be.

2. The way it works in terms of the Instruction is this; remember that both the Instruction and the person under it were conflicted. There's a good side to the Instruction and bad side. One impacts the inner and one the outer. I argue that the former belongs to the Spirit and the latter to the flesh, that is the part of a person that is prone to living in ways contrary to God's original purpose. The idea is that God's action in King Jesus has done something about this; the good bit of the Instruction, the bit that belongs to the Spirit, sets you free, through King Jesus, from the bad bit of the Instruction, the bit that belongs to sin and death. In other words, because of Jesus, the bit that helps the right way to be human defeats the aspects that relate to the wrong ways of being human. God, acting through King Jesus, has ensured that the good part of the Instruction liberates you from the bad part.

3. The Instruction as a whole was not fit for purpose because of its relationship with the flesh – I explained in the previous chapter how the Instruction, with its focus on the flesh, the outward and Sin-prone part of a person, enabled Sin to get a foothold. As a result, the Instruction could not achieve the goal of bringing Life. So, God chose to accomplish his goal in another way – he sent his Son as a human. King Jesus was truly human – he had human flesh. It was there, in his flesh, that Sin faced judgement and was condemned. Human flesh was Sin's stronghold, the place where it could get a grip – but not in the case of King Jesus! The idea here is that Sin faced judgement in the flesh of God's Son.

4. And the purpose of this was that we might fulfil the true purpose of the Instruction, which is to say, we might be human in the way God intended us to be. We can accomplish this because we no longer live in line with the part of ourselves that is prone to go wrong but instead, we live in line with the Spirit of God.

5. Let me try to spell this out. Some people live in line with the parts of themselves prone to Sin; that's the focus of their inner being, their minds are concentrated there. On the other hand, other people live in line with God's Spirit and the focus of their inner selves is on the things that matter to the Spirit.

6. Those in the former category end up being human in the wrong way and the outcome, as I have insisted throughout, is Death. Meanwhile, those in the latter category are learning to be human in the right way, and the result of that is Life and peace.

7. The former group end up in opposition to God, they do not submit to the good part of the Instruction. Indeed, they couldn't do it even if they wanted to.

8. As a result, they cannot live in the way God intended for humans and therefore cannot serve God's purposes or please him.

At the start of the letter, I argued that all of humanity are in the same boat. And it's sinking. The divisions people think are important, like the one between Jews and non-Jews, don't matter in the way lots of people thought. Everyone has failed to live in the way God intended. God had given the Instruction as part of the project to resolve this. Its goal was to restore humans to the way of living God had intended, that is, to offer them Life and peace with God. Parts of it were focussed on the outer aspects of people and this meant it had a flaw; it could be exploited by the power called Sin. The Instruction has two dimensions. There is the corrupted part and the good, inward part. Humans needed God to deal with the issue of Sin among those with the Instruction as much as among those who had never known the Instruction. This would enable the true purpose of the Instruction, Life, to be restored. I have then argued that God, through King Jesus, has intervened to accomplish this. There are now, thanks to King Jesus, two groups of people – and it's a distinction that does matter. There are those who continue as before and those who respond to God's intervention. The former group continue down the path to Death while the latter are on the journey to the Life God originally planned for humanity.

Verses 9–17 The Spirit means we are part of God's people

9. I now assure the Roman followers of Jesus that since God's Spirit is in them, they are living in line with the Spirit and not with the flesh. One of the things that characterises the people of God is the possession of the Spirit of King Jesus.

10. Indeed, those who are indwelled by King Jesus may have bodies which are heading for death because of sin, nevertheless, the Spirit brings them Life because God is faithful and committed to his original intentions for humans and for creation.

11. This is the promise for those who are indwelled by the Spirit of the God who raised King Jesus from the dead; this same God, through this same Spirit at work in you, will give Life to your body. In other words, the consequences of Sin will be undone. This is not a promise that the present bodies of Jesus-followers will live forever, so much as that they will, like the body of King Jesus, experience resurrection.

12. So, those who follow Jesus are not owned by the part of us that is prone to Sin. We owe it nothing and we have no obligations to it. We have no reason to live in accordance with it.

13. Indeed, those who do live that way are, as we have seen, on the path to Death. However, one of the things that the Spirit does is enable us to kill off all that kind of stuff, the wrong things we do with our bodies, so that we can now live in the way that God always intended.

14. The people of God are those who are led by the Spirit. These are God's sons and daughters. Because they are God's sons and daughters, they are the ones that will inherit from God. They will inherit all God's promises.

15. Let me make this clear in case any of the language I used before put things in doubt. I am aware that I used an illustration from slavery, and I want to correct any misunderstanding this may have caused. Son and daughter language – and ideas about inheriting promises – takes us much closer to the true situation. We are indeed part of God's household, but not as God's slaves but as those who have a share in it. Do you remember the story Jesus told about the two sons and one goes back and asks to be a slave and the Father embraces him as a son – that's the idea here. And so, the heart of the Jesus-follower says 'Father'. The work of the Spirit is categorically not to make us slaves so that we need to be afraid of a taskmaster. The work of the Spirit is to adopt us as the sons and daughters of God. That is why we can cry 'Abba'. We all know that King Jesus was the Son of God and called God 'Father'. We are adopted as sons and daughters of God, and this means we can have a relationship with God that is modelled on that of King Jesus. We too can call God 'Father'.

16. In fact, when we do this, it is the work of God's Spirit within us letting us know in our inmost being that we really are God's beloved sons and daughters. This is God's own testimony and so it can be utterly trusted.

17. And just to be clear, if we are God's sons and daughters, then we are God's heirs. We share that status with King Jesus. We are the ones who inherit God's promises. We are the ones in whom all the ancient promises are being fulfilled. We demonstrate this in several ways but one of the key ones, one I intend to explore next, is that we suffer. We suffer because suffering marked the path of King Jesus, and we are identified with him. If we do then we will also share in his glory, his present status, for, as we have seen, the things he has gained, the things originally promised to all humanity, will be gained by those who belong to him.

Look at it this way. In the very beginning God set out his intention for humankind. Humans were to fill the earth and have dominion over it. My abbreviated way of talking about this is to say that humans were to experience Life. I'll explain why. When God gave humans the first commandment, the consequence of disobedience was Death. So, if we had been human as God planned the result would have been Life. However, as we chose other ways, our experience has been Death. I believe the original promises are repeated elsewhere in the Bible. If you read Psalm 8 it tells you what humans were intended to be – crowned with glory. The obedience of King Jesus means he has received this promise. He has ended up in the place humans would have reached had they never disobeyed. And those who follow him are put back on track to get there too. However, we are not there yet. The whole of creation will have to go on a difficult journey to arrive at the place where it was always intended to end up. And the Jesus-followers are the vanguard. Our presence gives hope to the rest.

Some of you will be working with translations of my words that refer only to sons and not to sons and daughters. Others may have versions that refer to children. If I used words like son or sonship it was not because I had any intention to exclude women. It was because under Roman law it was generally only the sons that had the right to inherit. I was using words because of the legal context not because I thought anyone was excluded or mattered more than anyone else. King Jesus is God's Son and therefore his heir. This means that he is the one who receives all that God promises. Those who belong to King Jesus are his brothers and sisters. This means they are co-heirs with him.

Verses 18–30 The redemption of the cosmos

18. So yes, the suffering is real. There is no getting away from it. Nevertheless, you cannot compare it to the glory that is coming when humans and the creation are as God intended them to be. King Jesus is already there and he's like a forerunner for the rest of us.

19. The whole of creation is involved in this. This salvation that God has brought through King Jesus is not just for humans. It's for everything. And it's all looking forward to it. It knows what has happened to King Jesus and it knows that his followers are the vanguard. Therefore, it's all waiting, longing, yearning for us, the children of God, to be made known.

20. Let me remind you of creation's story. The first humans were appointed as the representatives of the whole of creation. So, when the first humans disobeyed, their action inevitably impacted everything. God responded to their disobedience and one of the outcomes was that the universe descended into apparent futility. It lost its sense of purpose. This was something that God did but it was never intended to be the final word on the subject.

21. There was hope! Even as God acted as he did, he did not give up on his original goals and purposes for creation and so he promised that he would act to restore things and put them back on track. Creation will be set free from the trap it's in. It will share in the freedom of the glory of God's children, who are those who will be human as God intended, and will therefore treat creation as God intended.

22. Let me try another illustration. It's as though the whole of creation is suffering in childbirth. I use this analogy because it suggests a suffering that is creative, a suffering which is arduous but where, if all goes well, the mother declares it to have been worthwhile because of the new life that has been brought to birth.

23. And we are part of creation and long for our true role within it. We are indwelt by the Spirit. We have received the first fruits, the down payment on God's promises. We groan because of our sufferings and because of our longing that things should be restored to the way God intended. Creation groans as we all long for the renewed creation to be born. We will receive our inheritance, our bodies will be redeemed, and we will be human in the way God intended.

24. This is the point of salvation. We have the hope of getting back to where God originally intended that we should get to. Hope, by its very nature, is for things that cannot yet be seen because they lie in the future. You would hardly call it hope if its focus was on something that had already happened!

25. So, we hope for things that have yet to happen, that remain in the future, as yet unseen. And we wait patiently.

What I am trying to get at is this. God's project is salvation. That means restoring humanity and the rest of creation to the condition that God originally intended they should reach. King Jesus has started the last stage of the process by which this will be accomplished. The whole of creation is emerging from its long nightmare and is yearning for its own renewal. The followers of Jesus are part of the vanguard of this process. For now, our experience is one of suffering, but we hope for all that God has promised and we wait for it to come to pass.

26. Part of the role of the followers of Jesus in this process is to be praying. Sometimes, praying for things like this is difficult. How would we know how to pray for a renewed world to come into being? It is something so extraordinary, so far beyond anything any of have ever known, that we can hardly picture it, let alone put it into words. We are weak and yet the Spirit helps us. Our longings are inchoate, half-formed, but the Spirit helps us. The Spirit within us intercedes alongside us and our yearnings emerge as sighs that express the inexpressible.

27. And these prayers are heard by God. He knows human hearts and he knows what the Spirit desires. He knows that the Spirit is pleading on behalf of the followers of Jesus and doing so in ways that conform to God's own purposes and will. In other words, in our prayers led by the Spirit we long for and pray for the things for which God longs.

28. This is the basis on which we know that everything in the whole of creation is actually working towards the same good purpose, for the sake of those who love God and who are called to live out his original purpose for all of humanity. This thought is not really a promise about every individual thing that happens to every individual so much as a promise about the overall direction and purpose of the whole creation.

29. This is what God always intended for humanity. He knew beforehand and chose those who would play this part; to be human in the way that Jesus is now human. On this basis, he would be the older brother of a whole host of brothers and sisters.

30. The whole process is about the work of God. He chose those who would take part and then he called them. These are the ones he vindicates, whom he treats as though they were living in the way God intended and who are learning to do just that. These are the ones who will know glory. I know I've put all of these in what seems to be a past tense but I'm trying to get across the idea that this is something that God is doing and so can be treated as already done. Another way to look at this is to say that everything God needed to do has already been done in God's action through King Jesus. Everything else is just allowing the process he has begun to come to its conclusion.

This section acknowledges that suffering is part of the present human experience. However, it insists that the suffering has a purpose. It is part of the process by which the whole of the cosmos will be renewed. The followers of Jesus are the vanguard of this process because God's Spirit is at work in them.

Verses 31–39 God is unstoppable

I think most of this speaks for itself. I am moving towards the end of this section of the argument, and I want to assure the readers of the outcome for them of all the things I've been discussing. The point is that there is nothing to fear for God has acted. I return to the law court image and make it clear that those who follow Jesus have nothing to fear when judgement is announced. Any suffering they experience now cannot prevent the future verdict from being in their favour. It's worth saying that Psalm 110:1, which I, along with all those who followed Jesus at that time, believed was fulfilled by King Jesus, influenced my ideas at this point. Psalm 8 is also there in the background.

31. I am going to try to sum up the consequences of my argument up to this point. God has kept faith with his purposes for creation. He is on our side. Who is going to line up against him?

32. Here the argument is that God has gone beyond the usual standard by which commitment is measured. The story of Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice Isaac was usually understood as demonstrating Abraham's commitment to God. In the text he is praised because he does not withhold his son, and, as a result, the promise of blessing for the whole world is repeated. Yet in the end, God allowed Abraham to withhold his son and to offer a ram instead. Now, though, God has gone a step further than Abraham. In the background is the idea that Isaac was not necessarily willingly obedient to being a sacrificial victim, but that King Jesus freely chose to be obedient even though it meant his death. The commitment of God and the obedience of King Jesus go far beyond even the devotion of Abraham. If God's already given us such a gift, we can be sure we'll inherit everything he has to give.

33. Going back to the law court imagery that is such an important part of my argument, I point out that there is nobody who can bring a charge against us. The verdict of the court is known in advance. God has already announced our vindication.

34. And if God has announced that we will be vindicated, who is possibly going to say the opposite? At this point I introduce a well-known traditional theological teaching associated with primitive Jewish Christianity. It is thoroughly explored by Prisca and Aquila in the sermon I mentioned near the beginning. King Jesus has died, is risen, and is now seated at the right hand of God where he is our advocate. He speaks on our behalf. The argument is based on our understanding that Psalm 110 is fulfilled by King Jesus.

35. In this section, I try to imagine what could get in the way of our vindication by God and I fail to come up with anything. Psalm 8 suggests that King Jesus will have dominion over everything; it will all be under his feet. Psalm 110 suggests that he's already at God's right hand and that all his enemies will end up at his feet. So, there is nothing that can get in the way. I list lots of the things that many of us fear, but they're all covered by the promises of the psalms. None of them can get in the way of the love of King Jesus for us.

36. At this point I slip in a reminder that our present context is one of suffering. The writer of Psalm 44 knew this. He speaks of the experience of the people of God. However, if you read on in the Psalm you hear the writer praying to God that God would rescue his people. At last, God has done just this. For now, our experience is one of persecution, but this is not the final word.

37. Rather, we overcome all these things – and then some – because of King Jesus and his love for us.

38. Here I list all the things that are already, or that will be, placed under the feet of King Jesus. Those who follow him have nothing to fear from any of them.

39. And the same goes for the things in this verse too. There truly is nothing that can get between us and God, given all he has done for us through King Jesus.

This is the end of a major section of my argument, and I think it is worth repeating the outline of what I have tried to establish. When God created the world, he had a particular goal in mind for both the creation as a whole and for the humans within it. Sadly, human disobedience prevented this goal from being achieved. Human disobedience resulted in Death, and this affected them as well as the rest of the things that God had made. This affected every type of human, whether they knew the Instruction or not. Nevertheless, God is not one to give up on something to which he is committed. He is faithful in all his purposes. He therefore found a way to put both humans and the creation back on track. God did this through King Jesus. Those who follow Jesus no longer face Death but are offered Life. They are the vanguard of the renewal of the whole creation. They are the ones who are learning to be human in the way that God originally intended, and the result will be that they will enjoy the Life that God had planned for all humanity. Nothing can get in the way of God.

Now, you can imagine that all this leaves some significant questions left to be explored. Even if I have satisfied you about the Instruction, you may still have some serious questions about the people to whom that Instruction was committed. What is the role in God's purposes of the physical descendants of Abraham, particularly those who bear the Instruction, the group that we might call historical Israel or Israel by descent? What part do they play in God's continuing purposes? Those are the issues that dominate the next stage of the argument.

If you've followed the argument so far then you might be able to anticipate some of what I'm going to say. If the law is divided and this leads to a divided self then perhaps Israel itself is divided and can be spoken of in two different ways.