The Spirit of Life: A Closer Look

Where we're headed

Romans 8 opens with one of the most freeing sentences in the Bible:

> "Therefore there is now no condemnation at all for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death." (Romans 8:1–2, NASB)

Most of us have read that verse many times. But what exactly is "the law of the Spirit of life"? And why does Paul say it is "in Christ Jesus"?

This guide walks through one way of answering those questions. Here is the big idea in a sentence: **when God raised Jesus from the dead, Jesus received a new kind of life, and that life is now working in everyone who believes on him.** We'll call it "spirit-life," to set it apart from the ordinary "breath-life" every human being has.

A quick note on spelling. You'll see "spirit" in lower case through most of this guide. The original Greek had no capital letters, so capitalizing "Spirit" is a translator's decision, and it can suggest a meaning before we've looked at the text. Bible quotations keep the capitals their translators gave them.

We'll present this view as clearly as we can and leave you to weigh it against Scripture for yourself.

Two kinds of life

To understand "the spirit of life," it helps to start at the beginning, with Adam. Genesis tells us how the first man came to life:

> "And God formed the man of dust of the earth, and breathed upon his face the breath of life, and the man became a living soul." (Genesis 2:7, Brenton's Septuagint)

Before God breathed into him, Adam was just shaped dust. God's breath made him a living being, and that same breath-life has been passed down to every one of his descendants, including you and me.

Paul picks up this verse in 1 Corinthians 15 and sets Jesus beside Adam:

> "So also it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living soul.' The last Adam became a life-giving spirit." (1 Corinthians 15:45, NASB)

Notice the contrast. Adam *received* life; he became a soul that lives. Jesus, "the last Adam," *gives* life; he became a spirit that makes alive. The Greek word Paul uses, *zōopoieō*, literally means "to make alive." Paul uses the same verb a few verses earlier: "as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive" (15:22).

Here is the contrast side by side:

	Breath-life	Spirit-life
Source	God's breath into Adam (Genesis 2:7)	God gave it to raise Jesus from the dead (Romans 8:11; 1 Peter 3:18)
First seen in	Adam, "the first man"	Jesus, "the last Adam"
Its character	Not inherently righteous; "weak" toward what is right	Inherently righteous; never at odds with God
The body it animates	"Natural," perishable, mortal	"Spiritual," imperishable, immortal
Who has it now	Every human being	The risen Christ; believers receive it as a gift and pledge

One honest caution: the Bible's vocabulary doesn't always keep "breath" and "spirit" neatly apart. The Greek Old Testament uses "spirit of life" for ordinary animal life in the flood story (Genesis 6:17; 7:15). So the distinction we're drawing comes from how *Paul* uses these ideas in 1 Corinthians 15, not from the words alone.

What changed when Jesus rose

When Paul says Jesus "became a life-giving spirit," he doesn't mean Jesus became a ghost or an angel. The risen Jesus made that clear himself:

> "See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." (Luke 24:39, NASB)

The disciples thought they were seeing an apparition. Jesus showed them otherwise. He had a real body you could touch, and he even ate fish in front of them (Luke 24:42–43). So what was different? Not the flesh and bones, but **what animated them**. Before his death, breath-life kept his body going, just as it does ours. After his resurrection, spirit-life did.

Peter describes the same change:

> "…having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison." (1 Peter 3:18–19, NASB)

Two small Greek details are worth knowing here:

- **"In the spirit" can also be read "by the spirit."** The Greek allows either. Read as "by the spirit," Peter is telling us *how* Jesus was made alive: by the spirit of life Paul talks about in Romans 8:2. And Peter uses the same "make alive" verb Paul used of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15:45.
- **"In which" can also be read "by which."** So it was by that same spirit of life that Jesus "went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison." The word "went" is the same one Peter uses three verses later of Jesus "having gone into heaven" (v. 22). That suggests this happened after the resurrection.

Before his resurrection, spirit beings came into Jesus' world: demons, the devil in the wilderness, angels who ministered to him. Here, for the first time, he goes into theirs.

Why we need a new body too

Paul's main point in 1 Corinthians 15 isn't only about Jesus. It's about us:

> "…it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body." (1 Corinthians 15:44, NASB)

A "natural body" is one powered by breath-life. A "spiritual body" is one powered by spirit-life. It's still a body, just as Jesus' risen body was. Jesus needed that kind of body to live in the spiritual realm as well as the physical one, and so will we.

Think about what Paul says will happen when Jesus returns:

> "…the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord." (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17, NASB)

Our present bodies aren't built to live permanently with the Lord in that realm. Jesus is "at the right hand of God" (Romans 8:34). If we are going to be with him always, we will need a body like his. Paul says plainly that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 15:50), and then explains what God will do about it:

> "…we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet… For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality." (1 Corinthians 15:51–53, NASB)

Other passages say the same thing:

- "We know that when He appears, we will be like Him." (1 John 3:2)
- "Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly." (1 Corinthians 15:49)
- Jesus "will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory." (Philippians 3:21)

There's a striking example in Revelation 11. Two witnesses are killed, and after three and a half days "the breath of life from God came into them, and they stood on their feet" (v. 11). The Greek word there, *pneuma*, is more often translated "spirit." The text doesn't say outright that they became immortal, but notice what happens next: they are taken up to heaven "in the cloud" (v. 12), just as Jesus was (Acts 1:9) and as believers will be (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Since flesh and blood can't inherit the kingdom, that suggests they were raised with something other than breath-life animating their bodies.

When "the Spirit" points to Christ

Because the risen Jesus is animated by spirit-life, Scripture sometimes refers to him as "the Spirit." That may sound surprising at first, so here are the places that suggest it:

- **Paul says it outright:** "Now the Lord is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:17).
- **Revelation's letters to the churches.** Each of the seven letters is spoken by Jesus ("The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand… says this," Revelation 2:1). Yet each one ends, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). The one speaking is Jesus; the message is called what "the Spirit" says.
- **The one who intercedes.** Romans 8:26–27 says "the Spirit Himself intercedes for us." A few verses later, Paul says Christ Jesus "is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us" (8:34). Paul uses the same Greek verb for both.

To be fair, "spirit" doesn't *always* mean Christ in Romans 8. Verse 11 speaks of "the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead," which can be understood as the spirit that comes from God, the one who raised Jesus (compare 1 Corinthians 2:12, "the spirit which is from God"). But Paul moves easily between "the Spirit of God" and "the Spirit of Christ" (v. 9), and then says, "if Christ is in you" (v. 10), which happens by way of the spirit-gift. There's a close union between God, the risen Christ, and the spirit at work in believers. We'll come back to that.

One more detail that may help: in Greek, *pneuma* ("spirit") is a neuter word, and Paul uses neuter pronouns with it, "the spirit itself" (Romans 8:16, 26). So when an English Bible says "the Spirit Himself," the "Himself" is the translator's choice.

Reading Romans 8:2 one phrase at a time

Now we can come back to our verse. It helps to read it with small pauses:

> *the law of … the spirit of life … in Christ Jesus*

We'll take the middle phrase first, then the end, then the beginning.

"The spirit of life." This is the spirit-life we've been describing: the life that raised Jesus and now animates his body. Romans 8:2 is the only place Paul uses this exact phrase, but it fits everything he says in 1 Corinthians 15 about the "life-giving spirit."

"In Christ Jesus." Some translations attach this phrase to "set you free" ("has set you free in Christ Jesus"). Both are grammatically possible. We read it the way the NASB does: the spirit of life is *in* Christ Jesus. Take that literally. Just as breath-life was in him and animated his body before he died, spirit-life is in him now and animates his body.

"The law of." Why call it a "law"? Not because it's a list of rules, but because it works reliably, the way we speak of the law of gravity. The spirit of life is inherently righteous. It never works against God, and it can only empower what is right. And its final result, the change to an immortal body, is guaranteed. That's what makes it a law.

The next section shows that this "law" was promised long before Paul wrote.

A law written on the heart

The law of Moses was written on tablets of stone. God promised something different through the prophet Jeremiah:

> "'But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' declares the LORD, 'I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.'" (Jeremiah 31:33, NASB)

Ezekiel adds the missing piece: *how* God would write his law on the heart. He would do it by his spirit.

> "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you… I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." (Ezekiel 36:26–27, NASB)

That is practically a description of "the law of the spirit": God's spirit inside a person, moving them to do what is right. And look at what comes right after it in Ezekiel: the valley of dry bones, where God says, "I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life" (Ezekiel 37:14). The same spirit that writes God's law on the heart is the spirit that raises the dead.

The book of Hebrews connects this promise to Jesus. In Hebrews 10, the writer explains that Christ's one offering did what all the repeated sacrifices could not: "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" (v. 14, ESV). Then he quotes Jeremiah's promise to confirm it (vv. 15–17). In other words, the new covenant, with God's laws written on the heart, comes through Christ. The writer even introduces the quotation as the witness of "the Holy Spirit" (v. 15), so the new covenant is linked to the spirit as well as to Christ.

The spirit-gift: what believers have now

The risen Christ doesn't just *have* the spirit of life. As "the last Adam," he *gives* it. We'll call what believers receive "the spirit-gift."

Jesus promised it before he left:

> "…you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses…" (Acts 1:8, NASB)

That promise was fulfilled at Pentecost. Peter explained what the crowd was seeing:

> "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear." (Acts 2:32–33, NASB)

Notice Peter's order: Jesus was raised, then exalted to God's right hand, and then received the promise from the Father and poured it out. The spirit of life raised him (Romans 8:11; 1 Peter 3:18); once exalted, he received the promise in order to share it with those who believe on him.

What does the spirit-gift do for us right now?

- **It is power.** "You will receive power" (Acts 1:8).
- **It is a helper.** Jesus called it "the helper" who would teach the disciples and remind them of what he said (John 14:26).
- **It is a seal and a pledge.** Believers "were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, which is given as a pledge of our inheritance" (Ephesians 1:13–14). A pledge is a down payment. The full payment comes when we are changed and receive bodies like his.
- **It connects us to Christ himself.** "God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:6).

That last point leads to something remarkable. Because every believer has the spirit-gift, every believer is joined to the risen Christ's body. "Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27). Christ is the head (Colossians 1:18), and we are the members, really united with him through the spirit he gives.

Living by the new law day to day

Here's the tension every believer feels. We have the spirit-gift, which is completely righteous. But we still live in breath-life bodies, which are not. Paul calls that side of us "the flesh," and it pulls against what is right.

So what do we do? Paul's answer is about where we set our minds:

> "For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace." (Romans 8:5–6, NASB)

The "spirit" here can be understood as the spirit-gift at work in us, and it may also include Christ himself as "the Spirit." Either way, there's no difference between them when it comes to righteousness. Paul says something similar in Colossians: "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth… When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (Colossians 3:2–4).

Paul puts it simply in Galatians: "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16). And when we do, the result shows:

> "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law." (Galatians 5:22–23, NASB)

Why does this matter so much? Because no written code can cover every situation. What it means to love your neighbor can look very different from one circumstance to the next. Only by walking by the spirit can we know and do what is right in each one. That's why Paul can say he is "not without the law of God but under the law of Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:21), and why James calls it "the perfect law, the law of liberty" (James 1:25).

Pulling it together

Here is the whole picture in a few steps:

1. Adam received **breath-life** from God, and every human being has inherited it.
2. When God raised Jesus, Jesus received **spirit-life**, a new kind of life that animates his real, touchable body and fits him for the spiritual realm.
3. As "the last Adam," Jesus doesn't just have this life; he **gives** it. Believers receive it now as the **spirit-gift**: power, a helper, and a pledge.
4. That spirit is **inherently righteous**. It is God's law written on the heart, promised through Jeremiah and Ezekiel.
5. One day, every believer will be **changed** and receive a body like Christ's, animated by spirit-life, to be with the Lord always.

That is "the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus." It has set us free from the law of sin and death. It works reliably, it never works against God, and its final result is guaranteed.

In the end, the only law that ultimately matters to someone who has believed on Christ is this one. May we live up to it.