

## 7:1 BELONGING TO CHRIST

**You are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ.**

*Romans 8:9*

**No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.**

*Matthew 6:24*

Two kingdoms, two loyalties. The kingdom of the flesh, and the kingdom of the Spirit. To which realm do I belong? Am I my own master, or do I serve Christ? Whose agenda am I following?

In *The Lord of the Rings* Gollum offers to lead the hobbits through the marshes. He professes to accept Frodo as his 'master', but his real allegiance is to 'his precious', the Ring which he knows Frodo is concealing, which made him what he is and to which he is enslaved.

Paul is in the middle of a long discourse on flesh and Spirit, and his use of the plural 'you' and the singular 'anyone' shows he is thinking both collectively of the church and individually of each Christian. We may profess to belong to Christ, but if we don't have his Spirit, in reality we are not on his side at all.

So are being 'in the Spirit', 'the Spirit of God living in me' and 'having the Spirit of Christ' all the same thing? They should be, but Paul is challenging us. We may have invited Jesus Christ into our lives as our Lord and Saviour, and thereby have received the Holy Spirit – yet still be withholding full allegiance and secretly maintaining an outpost of the flesh on kingdom territory. God's Spirit longs for our devotion with an intensity resembling human jealousy (James 4:5); he is supremely personal, and he will tolerate no rivals (Exodus 20:5).

*Lord, I have no secrets from you. You know me through and through. Please show me if there is some point at which I am refusing to let you have my full allegiance. Draw me to the cross where you can show me the extent of your love for me. Then give me courage to ask for your Spirit to deal with the matter in question, however costly the solution.*

## 7:2 SHIELDED

**This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.**

*1 Peter 1:4-5*

**The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one.**

*2 Thessalonians 3:3*

When the Romans occupied an area like Celtic Britain, they planted 'colonies' of veteran soldiers in key centres of population to protect them from external enemies, to keep internal peace and discipline and to develop a civilised culture. Remains of these colonies or garrisons can still be seen in cities like Colchester, York and London.

Readers of Peter and Paul's letters would understand language like 'shield' 'protect' 'guard' when applied to God's 'colonising' of our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit. Roman imperialism sometimes erred in its relations with the local people, sparking revolts like Boudicca's; but the Lord Jesus never errs in his love and faithfulness to us. He understands our need for protection from Satan's attacks (John 17:15), for freedom from anxiety (Philippians 4:6-7) and from false teaching (2 Peter 3:17).

In fact Peter refers to a double 'shielding' that is going on even as we read these words. Not only are we being permanently garrisoned until we reach our final deliverance from evil at Christ's return, but our heavenly inheritance is kept under secure guard so that there is no possibility of it fading away or being plundered. Our faith is crucial in this whole enterprise, so it's the purpose of these stirring letters to firm up the little colonies of believers as they face the challenges of being 'in the world but not of it' (John 17:11, 14).

*These words are as relevant now as they were then. My loyalty to Christ is continually under attack from the world, the flesh and the devil. I need courage to stand for him against the prevailing unbelief. So I pray the prayer of the Psalmist: 'Keep me, Lord, as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings. When I awake, I shall be satisfied with seeing your likeness' (Psalm 17:8, 15).*

### 7:3 WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. 'You do not want to leave too, do you?' Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.'

*John 6:66-69*

**Build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.**

*Jude 20-21 NRSV*

We were sailing in a friend's small boat along the rocky Turkish coast, making headway with difficulty into a stiff breeze. Suddenly there came a strong gust of wind and the craft heeled alarmingly while the captain fought with the sails to avoid capsizing. He admitted later that it had been a touch and go situation. 'I expect you sent up a prayer or two!' he remarked. Quite right – we had.

Following Christ won't always be plain sailing. There may come crises when we get caught in crosswinds or cross-currents, or even feel we should abandon ship. Does it make sense to trust Christ, or should we strike out on our own?

After one or two more incidents we reluctantly gave up sailing with our friend of many years. But why would people who knew Jesus give up their loyalty to him? The evidence is there in John's little story. It is also amazing that Jesus' own brothers, of whom Jude was one, found no reason to believe in him during his lifetime (John 7:5).

We too may have times of doubt when the whole thing seems unbelievable. Jude's words should steady us. Our faith is worth building upon. The Holy Spirit hasn't jumped overboard and left us to fend for ourselves. God's love is still as real as ever. And, most crucially, it is Jesus who has 'the words of eternal life.'

*Lord, if it's a question of leaving you, who else is there? Why did I come on board in the first place? Maybe I'm facing tough moments in my life. But I trust you to see me through, if you'll still have me.*

### 7:4 THE SPIRIT OF GRACE

**The promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace.**

*Romans 4:16*

**Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace.**

*Acts 20:32*

**The Spirit of grace.**

*Hebrews 10:29*

Faith, word, Spirit – this is the operating system of 'grace'. Grace is the free, unmerited, unconditional love of God poured out on the whole of mankind through our Lord Jesus Christ. How do we get it? By believing God's word. By receiving Christ as Lord of our lives.

The Spirit makes sure that the process works properly. He communicates Christ to us, enabling us to understand the promise, setting our wills and hearts free, leading us by one way or another to take the free gift of God for ourselves. He is the agent of grace.

This is how love works. Not by contract, but by covenant. A contract depends on both parties carrying out their side of the arrangement; if I fail to do my part, you have no obligation to do your part. A covenant consists of a promise made by one party which is received and agreed by the other party; it does not depend on the correct behaviour of the recipient.

A covenant is riskier than a contract. It guarantees favour to the absolutely undeserving. The parable of the Prodigal Son illustrates the grace of God because the father rejects both his sons' assumption that his acceptance of them depends on their past or future behaviour. He 'comes out' to both of them (Luke 15:20, 28) to explain why his love is total and unconditional.

The cross of Christ is the guarantee of the covenant of grace. All that is required is the signature of acceptance. The thankful 'Yes!' which gains everything, and costs nothing.

*I need reminding about grace. It is so incredible! Time and again I fall into the default mode of thinking that God's love for me depends on some quality of goodness or religiousness in me. Dear Holy Spirit, just keep up your work of reminding me. 'He gives us more grace' (James 4:6). 'Grace upon grace' (John 1:16). Thank you, Lord!*