



## the FORGOTTEN GOD

# GOING DEEPER

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

April 10, 2016

## Discussion Guide

### We Change (by the Spirit)

#### Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU RESPOND TO HIM?
- WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DID YOU INVITE GOD INTO THIS CHALLENGE?
- HOW HONEST HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they state they have held back.)

#### Getting Started:

10 minutes

- Would you say that it is possible for people to actually change from the people they are to the people God meant them to be? Could you elaborate?

#### Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Using the notes, discuss the background and context of the term “flesh” as used by

Paul in Romans 8.

- Read Romans 7.18-24 aloud. Pause. Read the text aloud once more.
- What struggles does Paul describe in these verses?
- In what ways, if any, do you see people today wrestling with the same things?
- Do you resonate with what Paul describes? Could you elaborate?
- How do people typically seek to address the struggle Paul describes? Why might people approach it in this way? Would you consider these ways effective? Could you explain?
- Read Romans 8.1-13 aloud. Pause. Read the text aloud once more.
- What solutions does Paul provide to our struggle to live a God-pleasing life? How are these different from other solutions attempted by people?
- Consider your own struggle to live a God-pleasing life. Read Romans 8.1-13 aloud once more, seeking to hear it as God’s word to you. Provide some space for the text to sink in, then read the text, slowly, once more. Listen for words or phrases which

might stick out to you. Consider these as God's personal word to you. Ponder them for a few moments and then share with the group what God has said through Scripture to you.

- Read Romans 8.1-13 once more, listening for the words and phrases which stuck out. Provide some time to respond to God in prayer privately and corporately.

## CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

### FLESH

In the ancient Greek world, the term flesh was used to describe the bodily part of a human which was distinct from his bones, though occasionally the term could be used to refer to the whole physical body. The Greeks understood that flesh was transitory in nature, disappearing when the soul or desire passed away. However, they understood that the real person continued to live on even after the disappearance of the flesh; that is, in the Greek mind, people had flesh but were not flesh.

This distinction between having flesh and being flesh is the main difference between the ancient use of the term and the use of the term in Scripture. In the Old Testament, two terms were used to refer to flesh. Like the ancient Greeks, the Hebrews understood flesh to refer to the material substance of which people and animals were made (Genesis 2.21; Leviticus 13.10-11; Exodus 21.28). Flesh was understood to be weak and frail, depending on a force outside itself for survival, in this case, God's Spirit (Genesis 2.7; Job 10.8-12; Psalm 78.39; 119.73; Isaiah 31.3; 40.6). However, the Hebrews understood that people were more than just creatures who possessed flesh. They were flesh. In the Hebrew mind, flesh referred not just to the skin and sinews of a person's body but to the body as a whole, which included the soul (Leviticus 13.13; 2 Kings 6.30; Psalm 63.1; 84.2). Because people were flesh and not just creatures with flesh, the term came to be associated with the fallen state of people, people's flesh victimized by the onslaught of sin because people themselves were victimized by sin (Genesis 6.3-5).

The authors of the New Testament continue these uses of the term flesh with the Apostle

Paul using the term more than any other author (91 of 147 occurrences). Like the authors of the Old Testament, Paul uses flesh to refer to the physical body (1 Corinthians 6.16; 2 Corinthians 7.1; Galatians 5.13, 16; Ephesians 5.31) and to people/humanity as a whole (Romans 3.20), frail and transitory (1 Corinthians 1.26). However, Paul picked up the Old Testament nuance of the flesh being victimized by sin and provided a nuance not found in the writings of any other author. According to Paul, the flesh (people) was weak providing a gateway for sin (Romans 8.3; 2 Corinthians 12.7). In Paul's mind, the flesh was not just victimized by sin but the very means by which sin had entered the world. Further, flesh had been co-opted by sin so that it was no longer its own but was an instrument of sin (Romans 6.12-14), so deformed that it had become sinful itself (Romans 7.17-20; 8.3). In this light, flesh was the natural condition of people apart from God, and to live in the flesh was to continue to live in such a way that no thought was given to God (Romans 7.5; 8.8-9). Thus, in Paul's argument concerning living by the law of the flesh versus the law of the Spirit in Romans 7-8, Paul is contrasting a manner of living which is self-initiated and self-directed versus a way of life that is Spirit-driven and empowered. The former way is broken, co-opted by sin, incapable of pleasing God, while the latter rests in the person, will, and desire of God himself (Romans 8.5-8).

### THE TEXT

#### ROMANS 7.18-8.4: *A NEW WAY TO LIVE*

In Romans 5-7, Paul lays out three freedoms given to those who follow Christ: freedom from sin and death (Romans 5); freedom from sin and self (Romans 6); and freedom from the Law (Romans 7). In Romans 8, Paul elaborates how the Christ-follower goes about living within the freedom she has been given by Christ. This discussion about living freely is initiated by a discussion of the necessity of living free from the Law (Romans 7). In this discussion, Paul is not saying one might do as she wishes. Rather, in this discussion he notes that a path apart from obedience to the Law of Moses is needed to live an upright and just life, because it is impossible to live a God-pleasing life by obeying the Law of Moses. In this discussion,

Paul states that the Law of Moses is good and spiritual. It shows the right parameters of a life which pleases God. However, the harsh reality of life is that people, on their own, are not capable of keeping the Law of Moses, and thus are not capable of living a life pleasing to God. Therefore, a new way of living a life pleasing to God apart from the Law of Moses is needed.

The need for this new way is seen every time a person knows the good thing he should do but finds himself incapable of doing that thing. When this happens he discovers he is a divided person, having the inner will to do good but the outer inability to do this good. Simply put, he finds that his physical body (flesh) has been enslaved by sin (Romans 7.18-20). At this point, Paul shifts his use of the term "law" from referring to the Law of Moses to a principle guiding how one lives (Romans 7.21). This bifurcated manner of living reveals, to Paul, a principle (law) by which he and others live. By nature, Paul (and others) are incapable of doing good on their own power because his body (flesh—life apart from God) only heads to sin and not the good he desires. This brings Paul to despair. He feels he is a wretched person because on his own he cannot do what he knows he should do. He needs external help (rescue). However, he has hope because he understands this help to be available through the person and work of Jesus. Jesus can deliver him from a divided life, a life where he desires to do good but finds he cannot do it on his own power (flesh).

Because there is hope in Christ, Paul realizes that there is no condemnation from God upon people, like himself, who find themselves incapable of living a life pleasing to God on their own. Christ has given a new way to live this God-pleasing life, a life made possible through the Holy Spirit rather than lived on one's own power (law of sin and death=life lived on one's own power). The Law of Moses was good but powerless to enable people to live a life pleasing to God. This power could only come from people and they did not possess it apart from God (flesh). Therefore, God sent his son to experience a bodily life, but to live in such a way that he kept the Law of Moses (Hebrews 4.14-15). Having lived this God-pleasing life, he then offered it as a sacrifice

thereby defeating the powers of sin and death holding people captive. He did this so people could live a righteous (God-pleasing) life in the present. However, this would be possible only as they sought not to live on their own power (flesh) but by the Spirit. At this point, it might be difficult to see Paul's line of thought as he has shifted from Jesus to the Spirit. However, Paul is dependent on Jesus' promise that the Spirit mediates his person to the believer (John 15.15-20). Therefore, to have the Spirit is to have Jesus. To have Jesus is to have the one who perfectly kept the Law of Moses. To have this one who kept the Law and lived a God-pleasing life is to have the ability to live the same God-pleasing life by allowing Jesus (mediated by the Spirit) to live it through them.

### **ROMANS 8.5-13: ON MY OWN OR BY THE SPIRIT**

To this point, Paul has laid out two differing approaches to living a God-pleasing life. A person can seek to live this life on their own strength, apart from God, something Paul refers to as the flesh. Or, they can live this life by allowing the Spirit to impart the life of Christ in such a way that Christ's life becomes the life of the believer as they go about their everyday life. We are tempted to choose the former, in part because of our sinful bent to live a self-directed life. However, Paul notes that it is impossible to live a God-pleasing life on one's own.

To live on one's own is to have one's inner compass (mind) set on passions bent to things not God-oriented but person oriented (flesh). Simply put, to live in a self-directed manner leads one to be self-focused rather than God-focused. However, to allow the Spirit to lead provides an inner compass fixed on God's desires. Further, when a person is living apart from God (flesh), he discovers that his inner compass is pointed to death, those things which move away from God, while a person guided by the Spirit is directed toward God and thus life and peace. The bottom line is that any life led by the flesh (separated from God) will be hostile to God and thus incapable of living a God-pleasing life (keeping the Law of Moses).

The only way to live a God-pleasing life is to live a life guided and empowered by the Spirit, and this is the life the follower of Christ is to live naturally. As a follower of Christ, the Holy Spirit lives within

a person; that is, Christ himself lives within the person because the Spirit mediates the person of Christ. This means that even in a world bent away from God and a body caught within the power of this world, a person can move toward a life pleasing to God if they live by the Holy Spirit and not their own power. Therefore, Paul concludes, the obligation of every believer is to live a life led by the Spirit and not on their own power.

### **REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:**

How do you live a life pleasing to God? You keep the rules, or at least that was what I was taught. It was all very clear. These are the things you can do. These are the things you can't do. If you have a question, look to Jesus. So simple, and yet, I found I just couldn't do it. I still can't do it. No matter how hard I try, I simply can't do the very things I know I am supposed to do. Even when it looks like I am doing them, it is just a façade which I am maintaining to look good, a façade that will crack if you watch me long enough. I just can't live a life pleasing to God, not even on my best day. At times this is infuriating, because I know the life I am to live. I see that life in the person of Jesus, but I can't live it, and I don't have to. Well, not exactly. I do have to live it. I am meant to live it. I just don't have to do it on my own strength. As a follower of Christ, I have the Spirit living in me, the Spirit who makes available to me the very life of Christ, the one who has lived a perfectly God-pleasing life. When I allow the Spirit to lead and empower me, I find I live in ways I never thought possible, Christ-infused ways. The trouble is, allowing the Spirit to lead and empower me. I seem to think I have to do it on my own, but on my own always ends up in the same frustrating place, failure. Living by the Spirit takes a huge amount of surrender, something I am growing into as I learn to be still and to invite him to lead throughout my life, in every experience and circumstance. I am not sure I will ever fully get it, at least not perfectly, but the more I surrender the more alive I become because more of Christ's life is formed in me.

### **REAL LIFE WITH YOU:**

How do you live a God-pleasing life? You live like Jesus (1 John 2.6). How do you live like Jesus? You just do it. Whatever! Have you tried that, the just

do it part? How is that going for you? If you are like any normal person, it probably isn't going all that well. The reality is, we can't just do it. It simply is not possible to live like Jesus. Does that mean it is impossible to live a God-pleasing life? Hardly! It is possible, when we don't live it. OK. That sounds strange, but there is a measure of truth to it. When we stop trying and allow the Holy Spirit to lead and empower us, we will discover that it really is possible to live a God-pleasing life. God knew we were not capable of living the way we were meant to live on our own strength. This is why he gave us the Spirit, so Christ could live in and through us the life we were meant to live, the very life he has already lived. The big issue is not really whether it is possible to live a God-pleasing life but how one does it. How does one go about being led by the Spirit? This is something that has to be learned through experience and not just learned as a set of facts. This is because being led by the Spirit is about a relationship, not cold, hard truths. If we want to be led by a person we must first learn to relate to this person, to be with him. This is true for any relationship. One way we can learn to be with the Spirit is through the practice of solitude and silence. Every day this week, consider setting aside 20 minutes to be still with God. Find a place where you can be undisturbed and sit quietly. Don't worry if your mind wanders. Simply call it back gently by saying something like "God, you are enough." Don't be surprised if your body gets fidgety and your mind wants to race. This is the part of you that longs to be apart from God. Gently surrender this to God and confess that he is enough. Over time (months), you will learn that God really is enough and what it is like to be with him. Out of this being with God, you will begin to sense what it is like to know God personally and what it is to surrender to him, the first steps to a life being led and empowered by the Spirit.



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