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Enjoying God Ministries
Romans #31
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Abba! Father!
Romans 8:14-17

I'm often blessed by reflecting on the many ways in which the Bible portrays our relationship with God. There are all sorts of illustrations and metaphors and vivid word pictures that in one way or another describe who we are. For example, in the OT the people of God are an *army*, of which God is the commander-in-chief. Numerous times, in both the OT and NT, we are described as *sheep*, with God as our shepherd. We are also portrayed as a *building* or a *temple*, of which Jesus Christ is the cornerstone. On several occasions we are portrayed as a *body*, of which Jesus is the head.

There is a great deal of truth in each of these images, but they do lack one important element. None of them communicate the importance of intimacy, warmth, and affection in how we relate to God. In order to describe that aspect of our relationship with God, the Bible employs two other illustrations. One is the relationship between a husband and a wife. It is especially the case in the NT that God's people are portrayed as a *bride*, with Jesus being our groom or husband. The other illustration which also points to the intimacy and affection that exists between God and his people is the one mentioned here in Romans 8:14-17. Here we read that God is our Father and we are his adopted *children*.

I mentioned in our previous study in Romans 8 that the Christian life is inconceivable apart from understanding the person and role of the Holy Spirit. And that is especially true in the text before us today. There are, in this short passage, no fewer than *five glorious things that the Holy Spirit does for us*.

(1) The Holy Spirit is described by Paul as "the Spirit of adoption" because he is responsible for our status as God's children (v. 15).

So what is the greatest gift and most exquisite blessing in the kingdom that God is pleased to bestow? Is it justification? Is it forgiveness? Perhaps eternal life? What about the Holy Spirit himself whom God has given to dwell in our hearts? I don't like comparing God's gifts and I certainly don't want to suggest that these blessings are anything but precious and perfect. But I believe God's most glorious expression of love for us, next to that of his Son dying for our sins, is the right and privilege and authority to become the children of God. Observe the apostle John's words:

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:1-2).

John's tone and terms virtually bristle with urgency and excitement. “Come quickly and see! Look! Listen! You can't imagine what I have to tell you!” Here's an elderly man nearing the end of life who still gets excited about the love of God. Why? Because John knew that God's love has bestowed on us the greatest of all blessings: *sonship*. Here is the test of how deeply he treasures us.

The biblical doctrine of adoption makes sense only when we remember that *we are not naturally God's children*. It is true that God is the Father of all men and women insofar as he is the Creator. But many such “children” of God will spend an eternity in hell. One does not become a spiritual child of God by being born, but by being born-again. We all entered this world as *spiritual orphans*. Here is where God's incalculable love makes its appearance. Listen again to the words of the apostle John:

“He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:10-13).

Paul echoes John and speaks of our adoption into the family of God in Galatians as well.

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoptions as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God” (Gal. 4:4-7).

“For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith” (Gal. 3:26).

Christians are called the “sons” of God three times in Romans 8 (vv. 14, 15, 19) and “children” of God three times (vv. 16, 17, 21). Both words have nothing to do with gender, but with privilege and status. The focus is on intimacy of relationship, not whether one is male or female. Thus women are included as “sons” of God just as men are the “bride” of Christ!

The statement in Galatians 3:26 makes it clear that there is no saving relationship to God as Father without a living faith in Jesus Christ. Being a child of God is not a universal status upon which everyone enters by natural birth. It is rather a supernatural gift one receives by believing in Jesus. Adoption is wholly and utterly an act of God’s spontaneous and uncoerced love. J. I. Packer reminds us that in the ancient world,

“adoption was a practice ordinarily confined to the childless well-to-do. Its subjects . . . were not normally infants, as today, but young adults who had shown themselves fit and able to carry on a family name in a worthy way. In this case, however, God adopts us out of free love, not because our character and record show us worthy to bear His name, but despite the fact that they show the very opposite. We are not fit for a place in God’s family; the idea of His loving and exalting us sinners as He loves and has exalted the Lord Jesus sounds ludicrous and wild – yet that, and nothing less than that, is what our adoption means” (*Knowing God*, 195).

Although the procedure for adopting a child has changed greatly in recent years, there was a time when a couple hoping to adopt would invariably base their choice on physical beauty and intellectual skills. Rarely did one hear of a child with Down syndrome being adopted. Rarely did the orphan with spina bifida go home with new parents. Prospective parents want to know about a child’s natural father and mother. Was this child the product of rape? What is his ethnic origin? Did she come from “good stock”? What is his IQ? I’m blessed beyond words when I hear of people deliberately choosing to adopt children who suffer from some form of disability. But it wasn’t always like that.

God’s choice of us is utterly and eternally different. He didn’t make us his children because we were prettier than others. Divine adoption isn’t concerned with physical health or financial wealth or potential or one’s past history. God loves the unlovely and unappealing. God loves because God loves.

John goes to great lengths to insist that entrance into God’s family is on a different plane from entrance into one’s earthly family. One does not become a child of God by the same process one becomes a child of a physical parent. In other words, spiritual life is not genetically transmitted! My earthly father was a Christian. So, too, was my mother. But that isn’t why *I* am a Christian. Your father and mother may not be Christians. But that has no ultimate impact on whether or not you are. The DNA of one’s parents has nothing to do with becoming a child of God. Your heritage, ancestry, family tree, no matter how glorious and impressive, have nothing to do with your entrance into heaven. The fact that you have descended from noble blood or are the product of peasants is irrelevant.

When you are justified by faith in Christ, you stand before God as Judge and hear him declare: “Not guilty! Righteous through faith in Jesus!” But in adoption God the Judge steps down from behind his legal bench, removes his stately robes, stoops down and takes you into his arms of love and says softly: “My son, my daughter, my child!” I relish the experience of every divine blessing. I thank God daily that I am a member of the body of Christ and a citizen of the kingdom. But nothing can quite compare with knowing that when I was homeless, helpless, and hopeless, God rescued me from the gutter of sin and made me his child.

Oh, yes, there’s one more thing. Neither John nor Paul nor any other biblical author says that we are God’s “foster” children. We are his *adopted* children. As wonderful as being a foster parent can be, it is a relationship that is typically a temporary one. Spiritual adoption, on the other hand, is eternal.

Twice Adopted: A Love Story

Over the years I’ve observed that Christians who’ve come to grips with having been adopted by their earthly parents frequently display unusually perceptive insight into spiritual adoption. It certainly makes sense to me. To be the recipient of such marvelously unsolicited love from people not one’s biological parents must be a tremendous thrill. I’ve sensed this time and again from one young lady who was adopted at birth. Her appreciation for having been adopted into God’s family is understandably immense. She seems to rejoice in this glorious spiritual truth on a level yet unattained by most of us. I have learned much from her as she has shared with me her thoughts on the subject. I think you will, too.

Janie’s biological mother already had four children and for reasons of her own felt compelled to give up Janie, her fifth, for adoption. From the moment Janie entered her new home she began to learn about the kind of love God has for his adopted children. The love her new parents had for her could hardly have been greater had she been their natural born child. Nowhere is this better seen than in the saying Janie’s new mom kept on her note board. It read:

“Not flesh of my flesh / Nor bone of my bone / But still miraculously my own.
Never forget for a single minute / You didn’t grow under my heart / But in it.”

Here is how Janie described it to me.

“Being adopted gives me an unusual ability to understand my adoption into God’s arms. My parents had no idea whether I would be a boy or girl. They wanted me regardless of my gender. God also loves us irrespective of gender. Knowing that they loved me before I was born deepens my gratitude that God knew me and chose me before the foundation of the world!

My adoptive parents chose to ignore my impoverished past. The fact that my natural mother was on welfare didn’t diminish their love for me. Likewise, God knows our wicked past, our spiritual impoverishment, down to the smallest disgusting detail. Yet he loves us anyway! To have been twice adopted and loved in this way goes beyond any words in my vocabulary.”

Janie brought me a copy of the Final Adoptive Decree and pointed out a fascinating and instructive paragraph. It states that “for all intents and purposes whatsoever, the said child is and is hereby declared to be in the same relationship to the Petitioners [the adoptive parents] as if born to them by natural birth, and remaining in such relationship as if the child were their own.”

What this means, among other things, is that Janie is legally as much a child of these parents as any other born to them by natural means. She is a co-heir with all others in that family. We, too, are co-heirs with Christ. The good news is that whereas this earthly adoptive decree is stamped and notarized by the state, our “Spiritual Adoptive Decree” is sealed with the blood of Christ and signed by the God who cannot lie!

Janie also pointed out yet another statement in the decree which says that “the rights of all other persons, if any they have, to the care, control and custody of said child be and the same are hereby forever and finally terminated . . .” If you can’t get beyond the legal language, listen to how Janie explains it.

“These words can be used to describe God’s adoption of me into his family. When I was adopted by my earthly parents, my old identity was terminated. Legally speaking, anyway, I became a new and different person. I became Mary Jane Fox. When I was adopted by my Heavenly Father I also left behind my old self and was reborn with a new identity, a clean slate, a fresh start.”

Earthly, adoptive love, is unspeakably special. Yet such sacrifice and passion, for all its beauty, for all its wonder, pales before the brilliant light of God’s love for you and me, one-time spiritual orphans.

(2) The Holy Spirit constantly and lovingly leads all who are the “sons” and “daughters” of God (v. 14).

Notice first that “all” who are led by the Spirit are children of God. There is both an inclusive and exclusive sense in that word “all.” It means that *everyone* who is being led by the Spirit is a child of God. And it means that *only* those who are being led by the Spirit are children of God.

So, how does the Spirit “lead” us? In light of the preceding verses, specifically v. 13, the Spirit leads us to put to death the sinful deeds of the body. The leading of the Spirit describes his ministry of imparting to us the power and motivation to kill sin in our lives. But the Spirit also leads us in daily decisions we make.

In Acts 16:6-7 we read that Paul and his companions had “been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.” We don’t know how the Spirit communicated this to Paul, but it was definitive enough for Paul that he altered his travel plans. Then it says that when they attempted to go into Bithynia, “the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.” Ultimately, of course, Paul and Silas made their way to Philippi where they encountered Lydia and the church in that city was established. Contrary to what many contend, there is no reason to think that the Spirit operates differently in our day.

Of course, we always need to confirm by other means what we believe the Spirit may be leading us to do. We consult Scripture to make certain that it is consistent with God’s written Word. We should take into consideration the circumstances surrounding the decision, doing our best to determine if our choice is wise and practical. We should speak with other Christians to gain wisdom from them. And the Spirit often leads us by placing within our spirits an unmistakable and unshakeable passion to pursue some course of action. That isn’t to say that our desires are decisive and always to be trusted. But neither should they be ignored.

A bit of Ann’s and my story might be helpful at this point. I have shared much of this before, so forgive me if I sound repetitious. In late 1999 and early 2000 I felt led by the Spirit to step down from my position at Metro Christian Fellowship in Kansas City and pursue a teaching role at Wheaton College. How did I know that the Spirit was leading us to Wheaton? There were numerous contributing factors, but God’s providential orchestration of certain events has to be noted. Here I mention but a few.

- Michael Sullivant’s prophetic declaration in 1998
- Our visit to Wheaton in the fall of 1999 and the simultaneous impression experienced by Ann and me
- November 3, 1999, my experience in prayer, Wheel of Fortune, and the accountant from Wheaton, Illinois
- U.S.A. Today and “Kenny Wheaton” of the Dallas Cowboys
- November 4, 1999, and www.Wheaton.edu
- November 24, 1999, the revision of my CV, and the visit from two Wheaton students

- December 1, 1999, and “in five months, they’ll call and ask me to come up for an interview” / precisely five months to the day, May 1, 2000, I received an offer
- The dreams experienced by several of our friends

Coincidences? Chance happenings? Meaningless serendipities? I suppose some may be led to conclude precisely that. That’s usually the case with such events until they happen to you. It’s easy to be skeptical until such incidents touch your own life at an especially needy moment. I can assure you we did not base our decision to move solely on such considerations. But they were undoubtedly seen by me and my wife as gracious confirmations of what we had decided on other grounds was the leading of God.

Does God really utilize television programs and newspapers and seemingly random encounters and otherwise mundane events to speak to his people and lead them? Yes. I don’t want to endorse a form of hyper-spirituality that looks for divine significance in everything, but neither am I willing to dismiss the hand of God in such matters.

(3) The Holy Spirit does not induce fear but confidence in knowing that God is our Father (v. 15).

Jesus always spoke of God as “my Father”, both as a formal designation and as personal address in prayer. The lone exception to this rule is his cry of dereliction from the cross: “My *God*, my *God*, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). At that moment Jesus regarded his relationship to God as penal and judicial, not paternal.

In the OT, apart from texts in which God is *compared* with an earthly *father*, the word is used of him only 15x. Yet, in not one of those cases does anyone refer to God as “my Father” in personal, individual prayer. But that is precisely what Jesus did and what we are told to do.

Abba, the Aramaic term lying back of the Greek *pater*, was used in Judaism to express the intimacy, security and tenderness in a family relationship. For Jesus to speak of God in this way was something new and unheard of. He spoke to God like a child to its father, simply, inwardly, confidently. Jesus' use of *abba* in addressing God reveals the heart of his relationship with God.

The glorious news is that this is the very relationship with God that we have through Jesus (cf. Gal. 4:6). It is by means of the Spirit's ministry within that we *cry* out: “Abba, Father!” We don’t sigh, we cry! We don’t simply say it, we shout it! This cry of Abba! Father! isn’t the result of logical reasoning. This is more than an arid, ethereal doctrinal affirmation. It is the fruit of the Spirit’s powerful awakening within our hearts of an intuitive experiential awareness that we are his and he is ours. Piper explains:

“We don't *infer* logically the fatherhood of God from the testimony of the Spirit. We *enjoy* emotionally the Fatherhood of God by the testimony of the Spirit. The testimony of the Spirit is not a *premise* from which we *deduce* that we are children of God; it is a *power* by which we *delight* in being the children of God.”

The Holy Spirit does not enter our lives to induce more fear and loathing. He brings to us faith and love. The fear of the slave is in our past. Now and forever more we experience the affection of a child! We don’t approach God as our boss or slave master but as our Father. In a house, slaves had no authority. They only did what they were told. But the children of God have authority over the power of indwelling sin and over Satan himself!

(4) The Holy Spirit testifies to our spirit that we are God’s children and in doing so brings assurance of our salvation (v. 16).

There is hardly a more challenging issue that Christians face than the assurance of salvation. Sadly, there are some people who are *not* saved who think they are. They arrogantly presume that their religiosity and

comparatively civil lifestyle guarantees for them a place in God's kingdom, regardless of what else they believe or how they live.

Then there are some who *are* saved but fear they are not. They live in a constant state of uncertainty. Anxiety and doubt dominate their relationship with God. They tremble at the thought that perhaps they haven't done enough, given enough, sacrificed enough to qualify for citizenship in God's kingdom.

So, on what is our assurance of salvation based? How might we know beyond any doubt that we have been adopted into God's spiritual family? Assurance, I believe, is the fruit or result of three truths. These three truths function like the three legs of a stool. If any one of them is missing, the stool collapses.

First, there is the simple declaration of Scripture, i.e., the promise of God. For example, John 3:16 tells us in straightforward terms that whoever believes in Jesus, the Son of God, and trusts his sacrificial death on the cross, has eternal life. So, do you believe the promise of John 3:16? If you do, you should rest in the assurance that you are now a child of God.

Second, there is the fruit of obedience. The progressive, gradual transformation of our lives in which we become more and more like Jesus does not save us, but it does bear witness to or testify to the reality of saving faith in our hearts. If a person believes John 3:16 but chooses repeatedly to live in defiance of God's Word, there is serious doubt about the sincerity and reality of their profession of faith in Christ.

Third, there is the inner witness of the Spirit who awakens us in our hearts to the reality of our relationship with God. Romans 8:16 is speaking of this third basis of assurance.

I don't like the way the ESV renders v. 16. We should translate it with the preposition "to" rather than "with." In other words, we know that we are saved not only because of the declaration of Scripture and the fruit of obedience but also because of *the inner witness of the Spirit*. As Daniel Wallace put it, "I know I'm a child of God not just because the Bible tells me so, but because the Spirit *convinces* me so." Paul is describing a witness that is immediate, intuitive, trans-rational (but not irrational), and beyond empirical observation or verification.

It is important to observe the connection between vv. 15 and 16. The knowledge that we are sons of God is not a conclusion we draw from the fact that we cry "Abba! Father!" Our cry of "Abba!" is itself the result or fruit of that conviction which the Holy Spirit has evoked in our hearts. In other words, we first receive the Holy Spirit, who then produces in our hearts the unassailable confidence that we are God's children, an assurance that leads us to cry out, in the Spirit's power, "Abba! Father!"

(5) The Holy Spirit awakens us to our status as "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (v. 17).

Just think of it: God has written you into his will! We are "heirs of God"! Of course, God does not die. His bequeathing to us all he has is not the result of anyone's death, but is an act of mercy and gracious generosity to those who should otherwise have inherited hell.

What do we inherit? According to Romans 4:13 (cf. 1 Cor. 3:21-23), because we share the faith of Abraham, we, like him, are heirs of *the world*. As God's children, we inherit all that belongs to him, and God owns the world (Ps. 24:1).

But most important of all, *we inherit God himself!* Imagine the reading of the divine will: "I God, being of sound mind and body, do hereby bequeath to all my children, Me!" Simply put, "believers are heirs not merely of what God has promised . . . but of God himself" (Schreiner, 421).

In Romans 5:2 Paul said, “we exult in hope of the glory of God.” Our greatest expectation and hope is that one day we will see God himself and enjoy and celebrate his glory forever. It isn’t God’s gifts, but God himself who is our inheritance (Rev. 21:3). The psalmist said it best:

“The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup” (or again, “The Lord is the portion of my inheritance”; Ps. 16:5).

“Whom have I in heaven but you? And besides you, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion [i.e., my inheritance] forever” (Ps. 73:25-26).

But I would be remiss if I didn’t remind us all that our inheritance is suspended upon our willingness to suffer with him (cf. Luke 9:23; Acts 14:22). Paul elsewhere said that “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). Peter echoed Paul’s sentiment when he declared, “To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of his glory you may rejoice with exultation” (1 Pet. 4:13).

What kind of suffering do the NT authors have in mind? I think Paul has in view what he will say explicitly in Romans 8:35 – tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword. This is why he would also say in Philippians 3:10-11 that he desires to know Christ “and the power of his resurrection” and aspires to “share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,” so “that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection of the dead.”

Conclusion

When we launched into our time in Romans 8, I pointed out that its central theme is the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit of God is the energizing force by which we put to death the sinful deeds of the body and is the only explanation for how we might live a Christ-exalting life. It is the Spirit who keeps us secure in our faith, leads us in daily life, awakens us to our status as God’s sons and daughters, and enables us to cry out in assurance of salvation: Abba! Father! Perhaps, then, we should conclude with a simple, but heartfelt prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit!