



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Spirit of Adoption

Romans 8:12-17

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We'll be looking at Romans 8:12-17 this morning. This is the beginning of the final drama that Paul's been working towards since Chapter 5. He wrote back there, "Since we have been justified by faith... we rejoice in hope of the glory of God." And remember, as I said last Sunday, suffering and the great persecution Paul knew was soon to come lies behind all of this. And so, we rejoice in our sufferings, "and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Romans 5:1-2, 5). Paul knew that because of what was coming, God's people needed assurance, and so here, he looks back to God's promises through the long story of redemption, he looks at what God has done to fulfil those promises in Jesus, and he points to the way God's people are being transformed and sustained by the Spirit in the present. He sums it up in verse 30, which will be part of next week's lesson, where he writes that those whom God has justified, God has also glorified. If we are in Jesus the Messiah, we walk in faith no matter how bad things may get—and it was soon to get very bad for the Christians in Rome—but we walk in faith, nevertheless, because suffering produces patience, patience produces well-formed character, and well-formed character produce hope—a faith-filled hope that the redemption God has begun in Jesus and the Spirit, he will bring to completion. This is all built around Paul's opening statements in the letter that the gospel, this good news about Jesus as crucified and risen Lord of all, this good news reveals God's righteousness—God's

faithfulness to fulfil his covenant promises.

Paul has rather brilliantly made his point by walking us through the implications of the Cross and the empty tomb and of Jesus and the Spirit and casting the story as a parallel to Israel's deliverance and exodus from Egypt. Because we're not as steeped in that story the way First Century Jews were, it's easy for us to miss what Paul's been up to at some points, but here in 8:17-30 the exodus theme really comes at us with full force. What God did for Israel at the Red Sea and what God did for Jesus on that first Easter morning, God will also do for all those who are now in the Messiah, and not only for them, but for his entire Creation. In our rebellion, we human beings have made a mess of God's creation, we've introduced sin and its corrupting influence, but God has promised to make all things new. Paul's point here is that he certainly will and the work of Jesus and the Spirit prove it. And that means that if we are in Jesus the Messiah, if we've knelt before him in faith and in love as King, then no matter how bad things get, we have assurance and can live in hope, knowing that what he has begun, he will finish.

Oddly enough, however, Paul starts out talking about our assurance by bringing up the subject of debt. In Romans 8:12 he writes:

So then, brothers, we are debtors...

Debt's not ordinarily a nice thing to think about. But think about the context here. Last week we heard Paul declare that there is no condemnation for those who are in Jesus the Messiah. Just as God freed Israel from her slavery and she had a debt or an obligation to live out in *gratitude*, so as Jesus has freed us from sin and death, we have a debt or an obligation to him—not a crushing debt like an underwater mortgage or something you owe to a guy who will break your kneecaps, but a debt born

of gratitude for an action of love, mercy, and grace that has set us free and given us a new life. In Paul's typical style, he starts a sentence here and then he cuts himself off because there's something he has to say first to make sense of all this. He lets this statement hang out there: We are debtors... And then he says:

...but not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

It's critical for Paul to make this point. As we saw last week, if we are in Jesus the Messiah, we are also in the Holy Spirit and that comes with a promise. The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead will one day raise us from the dead. In the meantime, however, there's always the problem of the flesh—the corruption that sin has made in our hearts, minds, and bodies. The life of the Spirit is an already-but-not-yet sort of thing. It's easy, even though we are in the Spirit, to feel the pull of the flesh and think that it still owns us—like the Israelites, freed from their bondage in Egypt, but repeatedly, over and over, falling back into thinking like slaves and wondering if it might be better for them to go back to Egypt. No, the damage that sin has done is still there, it calls to us. We're also surrounded by people who are still enslaved to sin and ready to drag us away from Jesus and back into the old way of life. We know that Jesus is Lord, but the world shouts at us: Caesar is lord! Mammon is lord! Aphrodite is lord! Sometimes we may even be tempted to think that we owe something to Caesar or Mammon or Aphrodite. Brothers and Sisters, we need to be constantly saying "No!" to sin's temptations, "No!" to the world, "No!" to false gods and idols. Paul says the same sort of thing in Colossian 3 where he urges us to "put to death" what is fleshly in us, because in Jesus we have put off our old self and put on a new self—the life of the Spirit—which is gradually reshaping us after the image of the Creator. The Spirit is in the process of undoing the corruption of sin and is making us once again the

people God created us to be—the people meant to live in his presence, like priests serving in his temple. This was the life and vocation he gave to Adam. Adam rejected that life and that vocation, but in Jesus it has been given back to us. So, say no to the flesh. Mortify sin. This is why, in our baptism, even as we take hold of Jesus in faith and even as the Spirit is poured in to us to give us life, we also take a solemn vow: “I renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the sinful desires of the flesh, so that I will not follow, nor be led by them.”

Paul goes on in verse 13:

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Think of a garden. If you let the weeds grow, they will eventually choke out the flowers or the vegetables—whichever kind of garden you’ve got. No, if you want your garden to survive, you’ve got to get on your knees and get your hands dirty and do the hard work of pulling those weeds out one at a time. It’s not fun—which is why I’m not much of a gardener—but it’s essential. The same goes for the sin in our lives. It’s an impossible task if you’re still in the flesh, but the good news is that if we are in Jesus, we’ve been delivered from the flesh and the Spirit, giving us new life, not only enables us to say “No” to the world, the flesh, and the devil, but turns our hearts and minds more and more away from sin and towards God the more we say “No”. Like pulling weeds, it’s not easy work. It’s common to hear Christians talk about “letting go and letting God” as if all we have to do is shift to neutral and let the Spirit take over, but nothing could be further than the truth. We need to *work* at it. This is why God has given us means of grace in the reading, hearing, and preaching of his

life-giving Word, which rebukes, exhorts, and shapes us. It’s why he’s given us the Sacraments as sure signs and witnesses of the new life he’s given. It’s why he calls us to walk together as the Church so that we hold each other up, speak into each other’s lives, and encourage each other when we are weak. The Spirit transforms and empowers, but what he empowers us for is really and truly hard spiritual work. And, Paul stresses, if we are in the Spirit, we *will* do it, because that’s what people who have the life of the Spirit do.

Now, in verse 14, Paul explains not only why this Spirit-led mortification of the flesh leads us to life, but he also explains what he means when he says that we are in debt. Look at what he writes:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

When Paul writes here about being led by the Spirit, he’s got something very specific in mind. Think back to the book of Exodus. When God led the Israelites out of Egypt, when he led them through the Red Sea to freedom, when he led them through the wilderness to the promised land, his presence went before them, manifesting as a pillar of cloud in the day and a pillar of fire at night. Where God led, they followed. Where God stopped, they made camp. Where they camped, they setup the tent of meeting and the pillar of cloud descended to “tabernacle” inside—God’s presence in the midst of his people. And even though the people often struggled to follow God in faith, even though some of them fell back into idolatry, even though many of them grumbled against Moses and against God and even grumbled that things had been better in Egypt, the people held tightly to God as he led them. Why did they do that. Paul points back to Israel’s identity. When Moses went before Pharaoh to demand the release of the Israelites, the ground for that release

was that they were God’s children. “Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, ‘Let my son go that he may serve me’” (Exodus 4:22-23). The promised land was to be the inheritance of God’s sons, his children, but it wasn’t the land for the land’s sake. It was a land flowing with milk and honey, but even the blessings of the land weren’t the main point of the inheritance. The main point, the end goal, the ultimate purpose, was the redemption of God’s people—their being freed in order to live before their creator and to serve him. Israel’s life and vocation was meant to mirror Adam’s original life and vocation.

So when we read Romans with the Exodus in the background we start to see the connections. The wilderness through which Israel travelled mirrors the world through which he travel today. The temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil can have an incredibly strong pull. The lure of sin and of false gods is real. But God is with us. He led the Israelites in the cloud and in the fire and they camped around the tabernacle where his presence rested in the holy of holies. In a similar way, God now leads us, because that’s what God does for his children. In fact, the evidence that we are God’s children is that he does lead us. But there’s one profound and dramatically significant difference. Think back to last week’s passage, particularly verses 9-11. Paul wrote that we are people of the Spirit. If we are in Jesus the Messiah, we are also in the Spirit—or, more specifically, God’s Spirit is in us. Jesus and the Spirit work hand in hand, the Spirit indwelling us and uniting us to the life of God in Jesus. But that’s just it. In the Old Testament, God’s presence was in a building—first in the tabernacle, then in the temple—his presence was in the midst of his people, but not actually in them—which explains why the people struggled to live the life the law called them to live. In Jesus the Messiah,

God has poured the Holy Spirit into us. Paul's point is that as the Spirit once tabernacle in that tent and in the temple, through Jesus, the same Spirit now tabernacles directly in us, his people. And if the Israelites were marked out as God's children, destined for an inheritance, by the presence of God in the tabernacle, how much more are we who are in Jesus now marked out as God's children, again, destined for an inheritance, by the presence of God in our hearts? Think about that. The Holy Spirit marks us as God's sons and daughters. If only we more often lived in awe of the Spirit's presence in us, as the Israelites lived in awe of the cloud and the fire.

Of course, if the Israelites, living under the cloud and the fire could be tempted to fall back into the ways of their Egyptian slavery, so we can be tempted to fall back into the way of our slavery to sin despite the Spirit's presence in us. This is what Paul's getting at in verses 15-17.

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

We've been delivered from sin's bondage by Jesus, but in the midst of the wilderness, the life of the Spirit is usually an uphill battle. People are hostile. The world thinks the good news is foolish. And what we face in terms of hostility is nothing compared to what many of our brothers and sisters face. It's nothing compared to what the Roman Christians reading Paul's letter would face in just a few years. None of this should come as a surprise, though. Jesus promised opposition and persecution. He called

his disciples to follow him by taking up their own crosses. It's easy to forget all this. It doesn't help when there are so many teachers and preachers out there proclaiming a false gospel of worldly blessing and of health and wealth. They preach about Jesus, but pull the mask off and their Jesus is really just Mammon or Caesar or Aphrodite underneath. And yet people listen and the way is hard—we forget that the way from Egypt to Canaan lies through the desert and is hard and full of stones—and we grumble against God. We start to think that he isn't making good on his promises. We think about giving up. But, Paul writes, we've been delivered from slavery and have become God's adopted sons and daughters and we have an inheritance ahead of us with Jesus our Lord.

Brothers and Sisters—and we can call each other that because we are God's children by adoption—Paul's point is that Israel's vocation is now our vocation. If we are in Jesus the Messiah, we are God's children. The indwelling Spirit is not only the evidence, but himself provides the proof. The evidence of the Spirit's indwelling is that we recognise God as our Father. Back in 5:5, Paul wrote that the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Spirit and now, because of that, we cry out to him from the wilderness, we cry out to him when the way is hard, we cry out to him in the midst of opposition and persecution and privation: Abba, Father! "Abba" is the word Jesus used in his prayers when he addressed his Father. It's pretty common to hear that "Abba" is a sort of baby-talk, like "dada" or "papa", but the evidence says otherwise. "Av" is Hebrew for Father, and "abba" as sort of a personal intensifier—not just any father, by *my* father. Adult children used it to address their fathers, not just little kids, and they also used to address respected teachers and rabbis. Interestingly, no one used it to address God, which is why there was such

scandal around Jesus' use of "abba" to address the Father. Most Jewish people would have considered it too familiar. But, then, that was Jesus' whole point and it's the point Paul makes here. If we have been united with Jesus, the Son, by God's own Spirit, then we are God's adopted children and we can approach him not just as Father, but as "Abba"—our own Father. It might help to think of the difference between "Father" and "Abba" as the difference between the old Israel gathered around the tabernacle where God's presence was manifest in a place they could never go and the new Israel, also God's sons and daughters, gathered together as we are today, with his presence actually in us.

I like the way Bp. Wright explains the significance of our calling God "Abba". He writes, "It was a way of making one's own all the exodus promises of the Scriptures, of calling upon the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for deliverance. It was a way, above all, of making Jesus' prayer one's own, and hence of sharing in the sonship of Jesus. It was a way of expressing from the heart something at the very centre of the gospel: that in Jesus the Messiah, the son of God, the covenant faithfulness of God had been revealed for the salvation of all who believe."¹

But this isn't the end. In fact, Paul's just getting started. Verse 17 is sort of the fulcrum on which Chapter 8 hinges. What he's working up to by this talk of sonship is the idea of inheritance. The children of Israel were promised the land of Canaan as an inheritance. Through the Old Testament that promised inheritance got bigger and bigger. It was hinted at as far back as God's promises to Abraham that the point wasn't just this

¹ "The Letter to the Romans" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), Vol. 10, pp. 593-594.

little piece of Middle Eastern real estate, but that God intended to reach the *nations* through his people. This comes out in full force later. In Psalm 2, for example, God promises, “I will give you the nations as your inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth as your possession.” And now Paul shows us what this means when seen through Jesus and the good news. Jesus is the fulfilment of those Old Testament promises. This is next Sunday’s text, but Paul highlights that Jesus is Lord of *all* of Creation, not just Palestine. To rule the world is his birthright and we have a share in that by virtue of our being in the Messiah and adopted sons and daughters of God. Paul points forward to the day when Jesus’ rule is finally realised and consummated. All those who are in him will be raised by the Spirit, just as he was and Creation itself will be set free from sin’s corruption.

Again, this is getting into next Sunday’s text, but it clarifies what Paul’s getting at here when he writes about our being glorified with Jesus.

This is another of those concepts we often get confused about. We talk about fellow Christians who have died and “gone on to glory”—as if “glory” is just another way of talking about heaven. But Paul pulls us back to earth. Actually, what he does is pull heaven down to earth, because that’s the ultimate plan—God’s realm and our realm, torn apart and separated by sin, brought back together as they were in the beginning and with the Messiah reigning in glory over all—like a second Adam, this time fulfilling the human vocation to bear God’s image, to be his steward and his king in Creation—and we, fulfilling that vocation with him. “Glory” is a picture of God’s Creation made new and set to rights, with Jesus as king, and we who are in him by faith, restored to the life of God and to the vocation for which we were created.

And that brings us full-circle—back to where Paul started when he wrote in verse 12 that we are debtors—not debtors to the flesh, but debtors to the God who loves us so much, who so desires to see us redeemed from our bondage to sin and death, that he came himself, becoming incarnate in Jesus, and gave his own life for our sake so that we can be free, so that we can live with his presence in us, so that we can live in hope of the day when Creation—and we along with it—will finally be set right. Forgiveness, freedom, and the life of God’s age to come are our inheritance. It’s all a gift of grace, but such a great inheritance, nevertheless, puts us in God’s eternal debt. It all comes of grace, but our inheritance still comes with obligations. Brothers and Sisters, we have not been redeemed and given a hope of life for our benefit alone. God has redeemed us and made us his sons and daughters so that we might make him known to the nations. That was Abraham’s calling. That was Israel’s calling. Now that’s our calling: to live in such way that we lift the veil on the age and the world to come as we proclaim the good news that Jesus is Creation’s crucified and risen King.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, we give you thanks that through our union with Jesus, your Son, we have been made your sons and daughters. Give us grace each day, we ask, to remember that we are your beloved children and that it is you who leads us through the wilderness to an inheritance of life. Strengthen us and transform us with your Spirit, we pray, so that we are not drawn back to sin’s bondage, but that we may fulfil our calling to be your holy people and to make your Son known to the world. Through him we pray. Amen.