

7. Arguably the most notable feature of Paul's Roman epistle is its progressive, systematic articulation of the great truths of the gospel. Many have regarded it as virtually a mini-Bible. For, as the Scripture is the revelation of God's great redeeming work in Christ, so the book of Romans progressively unfolds and expounds that work in a highly concentrated package. And central to its progressive structure is Paul's sequential, methodical introduction of key gospel themes (righteousness, sin, justification by faith, peace with God, divine love, hope, new life in Christ, the indwelling Spirit, etc.). Verse 8:14 follows this same pattern, introducing for the first time the theme of *sonship*.

Recalling that the core theme of chapters 5-8 is the believer's firm hope, and that the eighth chapter brings that thematic emphasis to its pinnacle, it is appropriate that Paul would here introduce the doctrine of sonship. For, more than any other facet of Christian reality, the believer's status as a *son* affirms and certifies his confident hope before God. Unlike a servant, a son abides in his Father's house forever (John 8:31-36).

This important shift in emphasis is the reason for closing out the previous passage at verse 13, and viewing 8:14 as beginning a new section. At the same time, there exists a tight connection between these two contexts, as indeed there is a seamlessness in the entire eighth chapter as it finds its overarching theme in the gospel truth that the Christian's hope is securely grounded in the Spirit's indwelling presence. As to the specific relation between verses 8:1-13 and the present passage (8:14-17), in the former Paul introduced the Spirit as the *Spirit of life* – the One in whom the believer finds deliverance from the enslaving principles of sin and death. Yet, because He is the *Spirit of Christ*, the Spirit's indwelling presence is the substance of Christ's union with His people. He is joined to them not merely in a forensic sense as the One who justifies them; He is joined to them *ontologically*, Christ's person being joined to their persons. By His Spirit, He is in them and them in Him (8:10; cf. John 17:1-26), and the Spirit is perfecting Christ's life within them as He transforms them into the likeness of their Lord (cf. 8:29 with John 14:16-21, 16:13-15 and 2 Corinthians 3:18).

But precisely because the indwelling Spirit is the point of the Christian's union with Christ, He is also the One who makes them sons in the Son – He is the *Spirit of adoption*. This is the glorious gospel reality to which Paul turned his attention in verses 14-17.

- a. The first thing to note is that Paul was very specific about who is truly a son of God: "*For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God*" (8:14). He did not identify as sons those who have a thorough doctrinal understanding, who are characterized by a notable piety, or who maintain a strict morality. Rather, the sons of God are those who are *led by His Spirit*. This criterion obviously does not exclude altogether matters of doctrine and practice, but it shows them to be non-determinative for who really is a Christian.

A person can believe and do all the right things "in the flesh" entirely apart from the Spirit's leading. But on the other hand, those who are led by the Spirit will not be utterly devoid of sound doctrine and godly practice. The reason is that being *led by the Spirit* is synonymous with being *indwelted* by the Spirit:

- 1) Previously Paul insisted to the Romans that the fundamental mark of every true believer is the indwelling presence of the Spirit (8:9).
- 2) And where the Spirit is present in the soul, there is life and deliverance from sin and death, together with a new capacity and power to serve God (7:6, 8:1-2, 10).
- 3) The Spirit's presence is an *effectual* leading and governing presence, with the result that every Christian walks according to the Spirit and is putting to death the deeds of the body (8:3-4, 12-13). For the only other option is for a person to be "according to the flesh," and this is the defining and determining condition from which Paul insisted the believer has been *delivered*. Those who are of the flesh are not of the Spirit at all.

Thus the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of *translation* as well as *transformation* (cf. John 16:13-15; Ephesians 5:8; Colossians 1:13-14; etc.). His presence and power determine and define the Christian: He is the One who delivers them from death, initiates Christ's life in them, and perfects that life by His own power. Those He indwells are no longer enslaved by and obligated to the flesh; the believer is now "enslaved" by and obligated to the Spirit. In Paul's words, he has been translated from the dominion of darkness – the domain of the "flesh" – and translated into the kingdom of Christ, which is the realm of the Spirit.

- b. Furthermore, because the leading of the Spirit is determinative for who is a son of God, it follows that *only those* who are led by the Spirit are authentic sons. In this way Paul drew attention to the biblical issue of *covenant sonship* and how it has found its fulfillment with Christ's redemption. Previously, Israel – as the physical seed of Abraham – had been constituted as God's covenant sons, and the presence of His Spirit in their midst attested to their filial union with Him (Exodus 4:18-23; Isaiah 63:7-9; Hosea 11:1). Israel was Yahweh's chosen and beloved son, and by His Spirit He led the nation as its covenant Father throughout their generations.

But now, in the fullness of the times, the reality of sonship that had only been typified in Israel's relationship with God had been brought to its intended fulfillment. Like Israel before them, the true sons of God were identified by the leading of God's Spirit, but unlike the typological covenant nation, these sons were identified by the Spirit's *inward* and *transforming* leadership. God's Spirit had resided in the midst of Israel, but not within them. Though covenant sons, they yet continued in the slavery that is bondage to sin (Galatians 3:1-4:25).

- 1) The true Israel – the true seed of Abraham – consists of the covenant sons who are led and directed by the Spirit in the inner man (Isaiah 44:1-5; Ezekiel 36:16-28, 37:1-14; Joel 2:28-32; ref. also Jeremiah 31:31-34).
- 2) They are sons of God because they are joined to the true Son of God – the true *Man of the Spirit* (Isaiah 42:1-4, 59:1-21; John 1:29-34; etc.).

- 3) In this way they are likewise true sons of Abraham. Their status as sons is not due to physical descent or physical circumcision, but results from their being joined to Abraham's singular son and heir (Galatians 3:1-21).
- c. Union with the Son by His Spirit is the sole basis of a person's sonship, and this union brings *freedom* (8:15). The Spirit of adoption is the *Spirit of liberation*. Paul previously declared that He liberates the believer from the enslaving tyranny of sin and death, and now he made known to the Romans that this liberation is manifested in the intimacy of sonship.

The relationship between sonship and freedom lay at the heart of Jesus' confrontation with the Jews of His generation. They understood that only sons are free, and they believed that their physical descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and therefore their status as sons of the covenant – rendered them free in God's sight. The Gentiles lived in the bondage of spiritual darkness and estrangement from God, but *they* were not enslaved in this way. How, then, could Jesus speak to them about the need to gain *freedom*? What the Jews failed to understand was that their covenant status as descendents of the patriarchs did not deliver them from their enslavement to sin (cf. John 8:31-47). They needed to learn, as Paul later would, that the resources of self and law are useless against sin's tyranny (ref. again 7:1-25). Freedom is only to be acquired through the Son, but when the Son makes you free, "*you shall be free indeed.*"

And having now been freed from sin and the condemnation of death, the liberated sons are granted full confidence to cry out, "*Abba, Father*":

- 1) Though, according to God's purpose, they were appointed as heirs from all eternity (Ephesians 1:3-6; 2 Timothy 1:8-10), these sons remained in "*bondage under the elemental things of the world*" until the day of their liberation and adoption when they were joined to the Son through faith (Galatians 4:1-7).
- 2) But now, having gained the adoption of sons, they have the confident boldness and assurance that characterize every child of a devoted father. The terror of God that resulted from and defined them in their former estrangement (cf. Genesis 3:1-10; Hebrews 2:5-15) has been removed forever. The reason is that the Spirit they have received is not a "*spirit of slavery leading to fear again,*" but a "*spirit of adoption as sons.*"

God has overcome men's estrangement from Him by giving His Son. But He has not simply put an end to the enmity and achieved reconciliation. Far more, He has brought them into the perfect and unqualified intimacy with Himself for which they were created; *the Father has made His image-bearers to be sons*, and He has granted to them all the confidence, assurance, and privilege that sonship entails. By His indwelling Spirit He communes with His children in tender intimacy, and they respond to Him with the same confidence as the spotless Son (Mark 14:36).

*“This is but a little word [Abba], and yet notwithstanding it comprehends all things. The mouth speaks not, but the affection of the heart speaks after this manner. Although I be oppressed with anguish and terror on every side, and seem to be forsaken and utterly cast away from your presence, yet am I your child, and you are my Father for Christ’s sake: I am beloved because of the Beloved. Wherefore this little word, Father, conceived effectually in the heart, passes all the eloquence of Demosthenes, Cicero, and of the most eloquent rhetoricians that ever were in the world.”* (Martin Luther)

- d. In addition to being the direct agent of adoption, the Spirit is also the *evidence* of it. This is true first of all in an objective sense: only those who are led by the Spirit – and so also are indwelled by Him – are legitimately sons of God. But in verse 8:16 the witness Paul spoke of is subjective: *“The Spirit Himself bears witness **with our spirit** that we are children of God.”* It is not merely that the Holy Spirit’s indwelling presence is the objective proof of the believer’s adoption; He is also the One who testifies to the believer himself that he has indeed been adopted as a son. He is the “Spirit of adoption,” and accordingly gives to God’s children the confident assurance by which they are able to cry out “Abba, Father.”

And He does this by bearing inward witness in the Christian’s spirit. This form of witness makes many uncomfortable, for it is subjective and therefore liable to self-deception. Nothing is more evident than that people can convince themselves of anything, and the Mormon phenomenon of the “burning in the bosom” is a classic case in point. Nevertheless, the Scripture insists upon the subjective leading and witness of the Spirit as a normative Christian reality, and it is a grievous mistake to attempt to set it aside or explain it away.

- e. The Spirit’s presence effects the believer’s adoption, and His inward leading testifies to it. That adoption, in turn, renders him a bonafide son of God, and so also a suitable *heir* (8:17). Three initial observations are important to make:

- 1) The first is that their status as heirs is another attestation of Christians’ adoption as true sons. Although sonship is not an absolutely essential prerequisite for a person to be an heir, *in the Bible’s perspective it is sons who are rightful heirs*. Thus Abraham’s lament that he was consigned to take a servant as his heir (Genesis 15:1-3).

The inseparable relationship between sonship and inheritance is a key biblical concept, and one that is foundational to God’s promises in the Old Testament. For this reason it is not surprising that it finds its focal point and ultimate fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ. Because He is the singular Son of God, He alone is the rightful heir of all things (cf. Psalm 2; Matthew 21:33-42; Hebrews 1:1-4). As will become apparent, this truth is central to Paul’s present argument, and further serves to inform all of his subsequent instruction in the balance of the chapter.

- 2) The second observation is related, namely that the Christian's status as an heir demonstrates that his sonship has a specific, predetermined goal. God has made him a son for the purpose of realizing a destiny of His own devising; an inheritance promised by divine goodness and secured by divine power (ref. 1 Peter 1:3-5).
  
- 3) Third, the fact that believers are heirs speaks to the *already/not yet* state of their salvation. As a present reality, the Spirit has joined them to Christ by making them partakers in His death and life, so that they are now "dead to sin but alive to God" (6:1-11). By this union with the Son they have become sons of God (1 John 3:1-3); their lives are now "hidden with Christ in God." And because they are sharers in Christ by His indwelling Spirit, they reside where He resides, in the "heavenly places" (cf. Ephesians 1:3, 1:18-2:6; also Philippians 3:20; Colossians 3:1-3).

And yet, "it does not presently appear what they shall be." Even though the "spirit is alive because of righteousness," the "body is dead because of sin" (8:10). The Christian has been delivered from sin's dominating power, but not from its presence and influence (ref. 6:11-14). He is "seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus," and yet he must "put to death his members which are upon the earth." So also, the believer is presently and fully a son of God, and yet an *heir*. He waits to receive the inheritance that is the fullness and consummation of his destiny as a son.

In describing this inheritance Paul first ascribed it to God Himself. Believers are "*heirs of God,*" which is to say that God has appointed them as heirs and their inheritance comes from Him according to His promise. But they are also "*fellow heirs with Christ.*" He is the singular Son and heir of everything that exists, and the Christian is an heir in that he shares in Christ's inheritance by being joined to Him. In every way believers are "sharers" in Christ: they share in His death, His life, His righteousness, His sonship, and His comprehensive inheritance.

And sharing in all things that pertain to Christ includes partaking in His *suffering*. The inheritance of the saints, that is eternal glory with their Lord, comes as the consummation of a life lived as a son of the Father in heaven. *This life is the life of the Son,* and so is attended with the same components as characterized His existence on the earth. The disciple is not greater than his Master; if He suffered so also will they (Matthew 10:16-25; John 15:18-21). Like Him, they will always be subjected to difficulty, as it is written: "*For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered*" (8:35-36). Yet the One who made them sons and heirs will preserve them by His Spirit and present them complete in Christ Jesus; they have overwhelmingly conquered through Him who loved them. All things belong to the Christian because He is *in Christ*. But being in Christ, he is a sharer in every aspect of Christ's life – His suffering as well as His glory. This is why the believer rejoices in suffering: it is yet another evidence that "*he has died and his life is now hidden with Christ in God.*"