

Romans: The Spirit of Adoption

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Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, give us humble, teachable, and obedient hearts, that we may receive what you have revealed, and do what you have commanded. Amen.

Background

Romans is Paul's magnum opus and the most significant letter in the history of Christianity. Some have argued Romans is the most influential letter ever written—period.

It's the book of Romans that St. Augustine turned to when a child's sing song voice told him to "take and read" which led to his famous conversion. Luther called Romans a "gate of heaven" and that this particular passage should be "written in letters of gold" because it's filled with so much comfort. John Calvin wrote that once the book of Romans is understood, a passageway is opened to understand all of the Scriptures. After hearing Luther's commentary on Romans, John Wesley's heart "was strangely warmed" and the founder of Methodism's life came to a turning point. And then in the 20th century, Karl Barth, that century's greatest theologian, described his encounter with Romans as if he were "feeling his way up the stairs of a dark church tower and seeking to steady himself on the handrail, instead found himself clutching a bell rope that sounded the alarm for the whole town."

Romans is not an easy book. My brain and body are still aching from wrestling and laboring with it all week long. But if you're willing to patiently and prayerfully pour over this majestic, nuanced, and complex book, you will be richly rewarded.

Paul was seasoned in his faith by the time he wrote Romans—for twenty years he had been preaching, writing, and engaging in missionary journeys and church planting for Christ. His maturity, experience, and wisdom enabled him, along with the inspiration of the Spirit, to write this masterpiece. Paul wrote Romans as a way to introduce himself to the house churches in Rome that he had not yet met. Rome was the center of the known world—the cradle of civilization, commerce, and culture. And so Paul saw the strategic importance of writing a comprehensive understanding of the gospel for the most influential city in the world.

The churches in Rome were a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers—and tensions were developing between the two groups. And so Paul wrote Romans to bridge the divides between these two radically different people groups who were living in community together. Not only that, Romans is a thoughtful guide on how to bring together conservatives and liberals in mutual forbearance in Christ Jesus. We learn from Paul a much-needed lesson on how to graciously live together in the midst of our differences.

In this particular passage, we hear about the centrality of the Spirit of Christ in the Christian, in the faith community, and in all creation. For it is the Spirit of Christ that graciously provides for us a new status, a new family, and new hope for the future.

Scripture: Romans 8:12-25 (NRSV)

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—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. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Romans: The Spirit of Adoption

Ancient Roman adoption was an involved process that had two elaborate rituals.

First, *mancipatio*: Three times a symbolic sale took place. Two times the child was sold by the birth father, and two times he was bought back. But the third time, the natural father did not buy the child back—thus severing the old family ties.

Second, there was *vindicatio*: Here the adopting father went to the Roman magistrate and presented a legal case for transferring the parentage. The ceremony was carried out in the presence of seven witnesses. These seven witnesses could be called upon at any time in the future to vouch in court that the adoption was genuine.

Several dramatic changes transpired after *vindicatio*:

- The adopted son lost all rights in their old family.
- He was regarded as a new person entering a new life and their past no longer had influence or authority.
- All debts were reconciled from the adopted child's old life.
- In the eyes of the law, the son belonged 100% to his adopted father. The child got a new Father.
- The adopted son became an heir to the father's estate.
- He gained all the rights of a birth child in the new family.

For example, Julius Caesar named in his will Gaius Octavius Thurinus as his adopted son and heir. This adopted son became Caesar Augustus.

So it is with us. As spiritual orphans, we've been adopted by the Spirit of God into God's forever family. We're now God's sons and daughters by grace—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. No longer slaves to sin or fearfully anxious about our status before God, by the Spirit of Christ we cry out affectionately as children, "Abba Father!"

The Aramaic word *Abba* was an affectionate term used by children in the home. And it's what Jesus called God in the Garden before his death. By God's grace we have the same close relationship with God that Jesus has with the Father—especially in times of suffering and hardship. And in those times we feel accused or doubtful or unworthy of our close relationship with God, the Holy Spirit takes the witness stand on our behalf and speaks "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God" that we are most assuredly adopted sons and daughters in the family of God.

There's a saying in AA that "your addiction makes you need more and more of what is not working." In many ways sin can be understood as addiction. We try to find fulfillment in what will never give us fulfillment. Christ intervenes and breaks the vicious cycle of addiction in our lives and gets us healthy again and on the road to recovery. Our old life, our unhealthy appetites and ambitions, hold no authority or grip over us anymore. But we must diligently live into and struggle for this reality Christ has opened for us.

God frees us from slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt saying,

“Let my people go!”

And so we’re set free to serve the living God. But it is possible for us to go back to our old life in Egypt to the familiar fear of slavery. Paul is saying to us, “Don’t go back. Don’t swim back across the Red Sea I miraculously parted and go back to Egypt. Don’t go there.

Instead, we have a new story, a new script, a new strength. The life-giving Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead resides within us. The Spirit has sparked within us a strong inner conviction—to follow Christ with every ounce of our being. The indwelling Spirit empowers us to crucify our self-destructive habits and dysfunctional relational patterns. And the Spirit assures us in our heart of hearts, that we belong to God—100%, body, mind, and soul.

- The past is past. Our debts are paid.
- Christ’s resurrection is our resurrection.
- Christ’s rising is our rising.
- Christ’s life is our life.
- Our destinies are forever entwined with Christ’s.
- We live in Christ, with Christ, and through Christ.

But we must never forget:

- Christ’s crucifixion is also our crucifixion.
- Christ’s dying is our dying.
- You can’t have a resurrection, without a crucifixion.
- You find life by dying.

Here’s our great hope:

Having suffered with Christ, we will be glorified with Christ.

The good news for us is that we’re never alone in our suffering. Christ suffers with us.

- Our suffering has meaning. It is not wasted.
- Glory takes root and blossoms in the soil of suffering.
- Both living and dying with Christ help us resemble Christ our older brother more and more.
- In Christ, we grow into our childhood.
- We’re nurtured, but not coddled.
- We develop into thankful, respectful, and responsive children who honor thy Father in heaven.
- We want to please God wholeheartedly and avoid those things that would hurt God.
- We wouldn’t dare become entitled or spoiled children.

As one of my favorite commentators C.E.B. Cranfield wrote,

“we continue to do it, and do it ever more, and more sincerely, more consistently, and resolutely.”

We’re free, by means of the Spirit, to daily put to death our self-centeredness and pride.

In Christ, we can choose life and refuse to live hell on earth, where our lives are self-destructive and self-absorbed. This is what it means to be led, guided, impelled, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit will blossom in us individually and as a community more and more.

The good news is that we can’t ever earn or lose this privileged place in the family of God—it’s all a gift. All grace. We have no need to fear being cut out of God’s will. Perfect love casts out all fear. We’re his beloved children and heirs for eternity.

This is our reality. But not entirely. Not in full. There remains a “not yet” as well. We live in overlapping worlds, the world of the “already” and the world of the “not yet.” The present world and the world to come.

This is where Paul gets poetic on us—and he personifies all of creation. He paints a picture where the whole created universe is on tip toe and straining its neck—eagerly scanning the horizon for the day when sin’s dominion will be broken, death and decay banished, and God’s glory would arrive in all its fullness.

Ever since Adam’s bite from the forbidden fruit, all of creation became subjected to futility and frustration by God. But God pre-loaded hope even into our futility. He designed within his plans that someday we will be fully liberated from this disjointed and at times dismal existence of ours. The groaning and yearning and waiting of us and all creation is a cry and a hope for the curse to be reversed.

You see, salvation is not just a me and God thing. Salvation and deliverance are not just for human beings, salvation is for the entire created order, or as the Scriptures say there will be a “new heaven and a new earth.”

In our present pain, we have a hope that there will be:

- No more frustration of failed undertakings.
- No more senseless shootings in mosques, schools, churches, and concerts.
- No more depression.
- No more death of children.
- No more earthquakes or tornados.
- No more cancer.
- No more broken relationships.
- No more decay and corruption.

Jesus, the One who brought about the death of death, also brings about the life of life. He will make all things new—forever.

Not only us, but all of creation is included in this promise. One day, we and all creation, will be able to fulfill our ultimate purpose. We are God's children now, but in that day, on our resurrection, this reality will be fully manifest and experienced. This future gives us hope in our present pain. We know, as Paul says later in Romans 8 that,

“all things work together for the good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.”

All things. Not all things are good. But God uses all things—even bad things, to work together for good. So we keep struggling and we refuse to surrender. We don't cave in or give up when we're down and out. We remember that our very real pain and hardship, pales in comparison to the hope of glory that awaits us. Our pain is labor pain. These birth pangs remind us something new and beautiful and eternal will be birthed through these temporary trials and tribulations we undergo. We carry on, says Paul as, “more than conquerors.”

The Holy Spirit exchanges our forbidden fruit and gives us the first fruits, the first part of a spiritual bumper crop we will enjoy in full in the future. We enjoy the heavenly food of the fruit of the Spirit now—but it is only an appetizer or sampling of the harvest we will someday enjoy in full. Nourished, yet hungry, we and all creation, expectantly wait for Christ's Great Banquet Feast at the end of days.

Amen.

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