

London Justice House of Prayer - Donna Taylor

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Romans 8:12-17

I. Review

A. To better understand Paul's writings, whether it's a verse, a paragraph, a chapter of a whole letter is the following:

- 1) Take care to discover the main overall thrust.
- 2) Pay close attention to Paul's connecting words.
- 3) Think into the first-century perspective.

In the first four verses, Romans 8:1-4, Paul writes there is 'therefore' no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. The life that Torah promised, but couldn't give is provided because of the Messiah and the Spirit; there is therefore no condemnation for the Messiah's spirit-indwelt people.

When the spirit, poured out on the Messiah's faithful people, produced in them the change that verses 5-8 describe, that the right verdict of Torah is what Paul indicated in Romans 7:10; life. In this case, resurrection life.

B. These first 11 verses are simply the first part of the larger argument Paul makes in the whole chapter 8. The amazing revelation we find is that the living God comes not to just dwell among us, but within us. The ancient promises of YHWH's return to Zion are coming true not 'in heaven,' but here in the new creation. This will involve the renewal of the entire creation, and the personal bodily resurrection, we are promised, and also includes the resurrection in the present mortal life.

Everything Paul has been saying up to this point has been about present-day experience. Therefore, the same resurrection power that raised Christ from the dead is in us now. That means we have access to that resurrection power now. Even so, our bodies and souls (mind, will, and emotions) are still susceptible to the effect of sin, which is death in all its forms. We can still live in victory over sin through the power of the Spirit. This is the point Paul is making in context.

II. Sonship Through the Spirit

12 So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. 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. 14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 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!” 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 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. (Romans 8:12-17 ESV)

A. We find in these verses 12-17 a meaning Paul is giving to the truths of justification, glorification, and the work of the Spirit and call to holiness, is subtly different from the meanings the western church has often read into them. We have to look further into what Paul is actually saying and not what our traditions have wanted him to say. Again, we don't need to help Paul out.

This chapter is about the ultimate Christian hope; our Christian inheritance. When we speak of 'hope' and 'inheritance' to most of western Christians, they (us), think of heaven or of 'waiting to be called home,' or of 'going to be with Jesus.' But Romans 8 never mentions heaven, or going up to the sky as opposed to living on earth. This chapter is about new creation, not about escaping the present creation and going somewhere else.

As we in our generation face the groaning of all creation which is obvious, whether in climate change or the increasingly unstable world of wars and rumors of wars, not to mention in our personal lives and those we know, we need to recover the true biblical message. That is where we will find hope and make sense of all we see going on around us.

B. As we look at verses 12-17, we ask the basic question in what Paul is saying. We look at the start and the finish and see what he himself thinks and is talking about. In what way does verse 17 sum up what Paul is saying in verse 12. He says, “we are in debt - not to human flesh and then he goes on. He doesn't then go on to say who we are in debt to.

Most have thought or assumed because he has been speaking about the flesh vs. Spirit, we must be indebted to the Spirit. As we read through the rest of this passage, he begins to speak of us being 'God's sons. In verse 14, he makes this statement; we've received the spirit of sonship; we cry out to God as Abba, father; the spirit testifies that we are indeed God's children. This is our inheritance; we are his *heirs*, “fellow heirs with the Messiah.’

God has made a wonderful creation and He is giving it to us. It's the same as when someone dies and they leave an inheritance to their children, heirs. They leave their estate or all that belongs to them. This is what God has done for us. Paul is saying here, as joint heirs with our Messiah, Jesus, we have received the whole of creation from God and it's our responsibility to take care of it. We are also co-workers in his new world, sharing his wise and healing rule.

Paul is saying clearly here, bringing all this together, we have already received this inheritance from God himself, because of what Jesus has done for us, and we are in

a continual state of being happily indebted to him. As we go on through this chapter we will see this is a debt of love that only love can repay. We need to be forever grateful in what the Lord has chosen to entrust to us.

III. The Glorious Company of Believers

A. Here again is where we need to understand how our western Christian tradition has shaped our theology for many centuries. We have focused on salvation only meaning our goal is in “going to heaven.” That is true, but there is more to our salvation. It also speaks of how we are to behave in our present life and the relationship between our behavior and ultimate destiny.

When we think in Paul’s terms about the new creation and how the spirit has made us already new-creation people, we are standing on the threshold between the present age and the age to come. This means we are also called to stand in the gap between these two ages. Because of Jesus’ resurrection, we are already part of the new creation and on our way to the final rescue of the present creation from its slavery to corruption.

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:22-24 ESV)

When we read the previous verses 18-21, the writer here is contrasting between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. He reminds them of what happened at Mt. Sinai and the awful fear that caused Moses to say, “I tremble with fear.” He says here, but you have come to Mount Zion, drawing from Old Testament imagery of a new heavenly Zion/Jerusalem (Ps. 2:6; 110:2; Isa. 62:6-12), and city (Heb. 11:10, 16; 13:14; Rev. 21:1-22:5).

B. This is to say that Christian believers, us, have access, in the invisible, spiritual realm; into the heavenly Jerusalem, and therefore participate in worship with innumerable angels (Heb. 1:7; Deut. 33:2; Dan. 7:10) and the great “assembly” (vs. 23) of those who have died in faith and are already in God’s presence, the living God. The assembly of the firstborn, speaks of Jesus’ followers being granted an inheritance as they too were firstborn sons.

Enrolled refers to the book of life (Dan. 7:10; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 20:12-15), listing the true followers of Jesus. Spirits of the righteous refers to the saints of the old and the new covenants pictured here as “holy” (righteous) and as personally made perfect because of Jesus’ work on the cross (Heb. 10:14; 11:10), yet their re-embodiment is still to come at the final resurrection.

C. This picture of a present spiritual realm culminates with Jesus, as mediator. The blood of Abel cries out for a curse for vengeance (Gen. 4:10-11; Heb. 11:4), but Jesus' blood brings forgiveness and atonement. This is where we are seated in heavenly realms right now. This is why we can stand in the gap and pray for the rescue of the present creation. This is our vocation, what we are here to do. So, we continue to pray as Jesus taught, "Your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

We are already called to live gladly as God's free children, God's new-exodus people, we are in this world but not of this world the moment we were saved. We are now coming to understand the present work of the Holy Spirit who enables us to pray 'Abba, Father,' even when everything around us is very dark. We will see this come to a climax at the end of this chapter.

IV. God's Royal Priesthood

A. This is the framework in this passage; we are *in debt to God* because, being His heirs, we are to live in the present time as his sons and daughters, the people at whom the world looks to get an impression of who the father must be. It is not just a moral or ethical obligation in working out our own salvation, but to understand we have a calling, just as Israel did in Exodus 19:6, to be God's royal priesthood, standing between him and the whole world.

6 And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel. (Exodus 19:6 ESV)

When the Lord calls Israel 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,' he is not referring exclusively to the role that Aaron and his sons will fill as priests, but also to what Israel's life as a whole is to represent among the nations. By keeping the covenant in verse 5, the people of Israel would continue both to set themselves apart from, and also to mediate presence and blessing of the Lord to the nations around them.

This is what Paul is drawing from. We find Peter applies these terms to the church in I Peter 2:5, 9), he is explaining that the mixed body of Jewish and Gentile believers inherit the privileges of Israel, and he is calling the believers to persevere in faithfulness so that those around them "may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." (I Peter 2:12 ESV)

5 You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ....9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (I Peter 2:5, 9 ESV)

When we are born again, we are called out of darkness, the dark domain, and into the light of the kingdom of God. We are to walk in our calling as kings and priests before the Lord to stand in the gap for those who are lost and fulfill the destiny ordained by God for all his people.

We are going to see in verses 18-30 what it means for us, as God's inheriting children, to be faithful to this larger vocation, calling, in the present time, in relation to the suffering and groaning creation.

V. Heirs with Christ

A. This brings us to our second question, what about the little connecting words? Here again we have the *gar* clauses Paul uses the basic point found in verses 16 and in 17, the *de* clause, this is the case *because* and the 'well then,' if *that* is so then *this* is going to follow. The following is how a literal translation might read (from NT Wright)

12 So then, my family, we are debtors: but not to the flesh to live in accordance with the flesh. 13 For [gar] if you live according to the flesh, you are heading for death; but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14 For [gar] those who are led by God's spirit are God's sons. 15 For [gar] you didn't receive a spirit of slavery, leading back again to fear, but you received the spirit of sonship, in whom we cry, 'Abba, father.' 16 [When that happens], the spirit is bearing witness with our spirit that we are God's children. 17 But if [ei de] [we are] children, then [we are] heirs: heirs (on the one hand) of God, but (on the other hand) fellow heirs of the Messiah, assuming we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (NT Wright)

Here, then, is how this little passage works; in verse 12: We are debtors, but not to the flesh; *because (gar)*, verse 13, the flesh leads to death but the spirit to life; *because (gar)*, verse 14, translated here as 'you see') the spirit-led people are God's sons; *because (gar)* again, verse 15, translated here by the expression native to them, 'did you') you didn't receive the spirit of slavery (did you?) but of sonship. Then it's further explained in verse 15b and 16.

That's the heart of this little passage, our present vocation as God's children and heirs is to be the people in whom God's spirit, bearing witness with our own spirit, prays the prayer that Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, "Not my will, father, but yours be done." This is where Paul was going in this passage, if we are children, we are heirs.

And that's why we are debtors, not in the sense of begrudging our obedience to God, but in the sense of a revelation of our calling (vocation) as God's representatives or agents. His faithful stewards of prayer in our present calling within the groaning of the old creation and our witnessing to the promise of the new.

B. We come to the third question, what happens when we try to read this passage with first-century eyes? When Phoebe delivered Paul's letter to Rome and read it to them, what would his hearers be thinking? This theme of sonship - being sons of God - would definitely resonate with some of them. This was well known in their time as they knew 100 years prior, Julius Caesar had adopted Octavian, also known as Augustus referred to himself 'son of the deified Julius.' He was the adopted son, inheriting the empire and being loyal to the memory of Julius Caesar himself. It continued on with Tiberius and the others. Each one adopted a son to inherit their empire.

So now Paul is claiming here, as he did right at the start of this letter, that Jesus is the true son of the true God - and all Jesus' people *share that sonship*. Jesus' people, you and me, are God's adopted royal family. The sons are what they are, not just to feel good about their relationship with the father, but to *carry out the father's plan and purposes*. To rule wisely over God's empire, which is the whole world - the inheritance he promised to Abraham, as we find in earlier chapters in Romans 4:13 and 5:17. Those who receive God's gift will *reign in life*. However, this is for a very different kind of empire.

This is a picture of the Kingdom of God vs. the Domain of Darkness. Paul is using the theme here of sonship with two specific things. First, there are the Jewish roots of the idea, seen in the Exodus story where the slave people of Israel receive this amazing royal calling. Then, we see the pagan aspect, in this case Caesar's arrogant claim to some kind of worldwide empire. Within our New Testament teachings, they focus on the Jewish roots and pagan idolatry, which we find in the Psalms, Isaiah and others.

VI. The Exodus Story

A. As we have already seen, Paul is drawing from the Exodus story in Romans 5-8. In Romans 6, the slaves come through the water to freedom. In Romans 7, they arrive at Mount Sinai, where Israel repeats Adam's sin, resulting in exile and death. But through Jesus and the work of the spirit, we see God's own presence coming to dwell within His people as in the wilderness Tabernacle, in verses 9-11.

Here in verses 12 and 13, Paul is saying the same thing Moses' said to the people at the crossing of the Jordan: here is death and here is life - so choose life. He's reminding them of the reality of how quickly Israel was within sight of the promised inheritance and wanting to quit and go back to slavery. Imagine preferring slavery in Egypt to the land flowing with milk and honey! Yes, there will be challenges ahead, but they will lead to the inheritance.

When Moses went before Pharaoh he said in Exodus 4:22-23, “Israel is my firstborn son.. so let my son go *that he may serve me.*” Israel is to worship God, in other words, to be God’s priests; and, as God’s son, also God’s *royal* priest, to be set in authority over the world. Paul is saying to them, “You are here in the first place because of what Moses did in confronting Pharaoh and leading his people out of slavery and into their inheritance.

That had been Israel’s vocation, calling, and now was supremely fulfilled in Israel’s representative, Jesus the Messiah.

Now it is shared by the spirit with all his people, Jew and Gentile alike. This is the main point Paul is making. We are now called to be the royal priesthood, to be God’s image-bearers. We were designed, created to be conformed to the *image* of Jesus. We can clearly see the exodus-story in verse 15, where Paul contrasts sonship and slavery. You were slaves; you are *now* called to be sons; so don’t even think of going back to Egypt! Thinking in these terms: we are the people of the new exodus.

B. So to the ‘inheritance’ to say it once more, is not ‘heaven.’ It is the entire creation. Here Paul is drawing from Psalm 2, one of the most popular psalms in the early Christian writings. It says, “the nations rant and rage against God the creator, but God sets in place his king in Zion and addresses him as his son. ‘Ask of me,’ he says to the king, ‘and I will give you *the nations* for your inheritance, and *the uttermost parts of the world* for your possession.’ Psalm 2:8. This is also found in other messianic psalms, 72 and 89.

The ‘inheritance,’ from Psalm 2 through to Romans 8, is no longer one strip of land in the Middle East. *The whole world is now God’s holy land.* What God does in and for Israel is what God is going to do *through* Israel, specifically through Israel’s anointed king and his spirit-filled followers, *for the whole world.* This ‘kingdom,’ this messianic inheritance, is to be shared with all the Messiah’s people. If we are God’s heirs, and thus indebted to God, verse 12, then we are *fellow heirs* with the Messiah.

VI. From Suffering to Glory

A. In the latter part of verse 17, Paul says, “provided we suffer with him, in order that we may also be glorified with him.” We find in scriptures where Jesus himself was obedient made it clear that the way to that ‘glory’ - the glory of the worldwide rule - is through the hard road of suffering. (Hebrews 5:8) Jesus obedience through suffering is a powerful message for believers. It suggests that suffering can be a means of spiritual growth. and a way to deepen our relationship with God, the Father.

That is the point Jesus explained to the two disciples in Luke 24 on the road to Emmaus who didn’t understand what had just happened, and in Mark 8, when Jesus taught that to follow Him along the path of true kingly power - it is by taking up the cross. One place where Jesus himself addressed the father as ‘Abba,’ was in Gethsemane as he wrestled with his calling, that the way to the kingdom was through the cross. He cried out in agony, “Father, not my will but yours be done.”

Paul makes in clear in verses 12-13, the road to life is the road of humiliation, the active putting-to-death of things that the body would otherwise want to do, this is our calling to holiness where we find hope. In Verse 15, ‘you received the spirit of sonship, in whom we call out “Abba, father!” When we do that, ‘it is the spirit itself giving witness to what our own spirit is saying, that we are God’s children.’

It is to discover that the God who made the world is both deeply personal, deeply loving and deeply paternal.

In verse 17, we discover the vocational pathway for those who pray the Abba-prayer is the same as it was for Jesus himself: the path of suffering. But this suffering is not, as we will see later, a question of ‘something unpleasant we just have to get through.’ Like the sufferings of Jesus himself, Paul seems to see this suffering as a comfort and joyous way of life for us as believers.

B. This is one of the ways Paul understands Jesus’ followers to be walking out our calling as the royal priesthood, as the image-bearers, the true humans, the true children of God. This is how we are ‘conformed to the image of the firstborn son,’ we see in verse 29. This means that through our life, and especially through our needing to pray the intense prayer of verses 26-27, God’s purposes may be worked out, not only in and for us but actually through us.

This is how we begin our glorious calling of *reigning in life* through Jesus the Messiah. That is only one part of what Paul means by our being ‘glorified.’

We will look at this further in with verse 17 leading as a bridge into verses 18-21.