

The Witness of the Spirit

Romans

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Bible Text: Romans 8:14-17

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Our gracious God and heavenly Father, how we thank you together for the shed blood of Jesus Christ and for the righteousness with which he has clothed us by faith and for the boldness with which we can stand before you and anticipate that great day, a day of judgment, a day of majestic glory and glorious majesty and yet, for us in Christ, a day when we can call you our Father in heaven. And we pray as we rejoice in the privileges that are ours as we sing your praises for the encouragement of being with one another as we bring this Lord's day to an end, we pray that now by your Holy Spirit, you would teach us through your word and that by the power of that word and through the secret ministry of your Holy Spirit you will speak to each of us as though we were alone in this room and yet to all of us, to satisfy our hungry and thirsty souls from Jesus Christ, the bread and the water of life. So feed us now, we pray, and flow down upon us Holy Spirit and point us afresh to the riches of your grace to us as we feed on our Savior, Jesus Christ, in his word. Cleanse us, open our eyes, enrich us as you minister to us this evening. We pray this together in Jesus Christ our Savior's name. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now, as we continue our readings in Paul's letter to the Romans, we've come this evening to chapter 8 and verses 14-17 and you'll find the passage in the Pew Bible on page 944. Let's read from verse 12 this evening through to verse 17 so that we can catch the flow of Paul's thinking here.

“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,

that is, in this context obviously, the misdeeds of the body,

“you will live. 14 For all who are thus 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.”

There is a passage in the letters of the great Methodist Evangelist, John Wesley, that has fascinated me since I was 15 years of age. If you are interested in the details, he engaged in a correspondence with an anonymous individual who was known as John Smith. That's the British version of John Doe. John Smith, scholars of Wesley believed, was actually a man who turned out at the end of the day to be the Archbishop of Canterbury and he was deeply opposed to what he thought was the enthusiasm of John Wesley and people like George Whitfield who had the audacity to preach the gospel outside in the fields. For example, to the miners and to other people, the great unwashed who were not fit to come into the presence of the communion of the Church of England. Wesley and Whitfield and others underwent tremendous opposition in the Church of England because of their passion to preach the gospel so this singular individual, a little too cowardly to make his actual name known, engaged in this public correspondence with John Wesley in the year 1745 and 1746. I remember them well.

Here, from John Wesley's works, for those of you who are interested, volume 12, page 100, is part of one of Wesley's letters. “My father,” he says, who was an Anglican clergyman, “my father did not die unacquainted with the faith of the gospel of the primitive Christians of our first Reformers, the same which by the grace of God, I preach and which is just as new,” which was the accusation, “You're preaching new things,” he says, “This is just as new as Christianity. What he experienced before, I know not.” In other words, he wasn't very sure whether his father was a real believer or not, “but I know that during his last illness which continued eight months, he enjoyed a clear sense of his acceptance with God.” What a blessed way to die. The last eight months of his life, wherever he was spiritually before that, he enjoyed the clear sense of his acceptance with God. Here's the sentence that began to fascinate me these many years ago: “I heard him,” says Wesley, “express it more than once, although at that time, I understood him not,” and here are his father's words, “the inward witness, Son. The inward witness, that is the proof, the strongest proof of Christianity.” The inward witness, the strongest proof of Christianity.

Now, lest I communicate to you that at 15 years old I had an encyclopedic knowledge of the history of the Christian church and was a particular expert on the letters of John Wesley, I actually heard these words, first of all, in a movie. A movie on the life of John Wesley and for some reason or other, they gripped my mind and my imagination with a desire to understand and to share in this amazing statement of Wesley's father, the inner witness, the real proof that one is a Christian believer. I don't know whether at that time I associated these words with Paul's teaching here in Romans 8 but this, of course, is what his father was speaking about. “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 thus bearing witness with our spirits that we are the children of God.”

So, it became a characteristic, actually, of Wesley and these early zealous Wesleyan Methodists, “Do you have the testimony of the Spirit? Do you have the witness of the

Spirit?” Or in the words of Wesley's father, “Are you entered into the assurance and the enjoyment that you really are a child of God,” and that as Paul goes on to argue here, “therefore you are a joint heir with Christ and all the riches of God in the gospel have been made over to you?” And you can sense, therefore, from what Paul says here, that he is advancing the argument that he's been pursuing all the way through these most recent verses. In a sense, we can summarize his burden in Romans 8 by saying this: he has spread out the gospel before us and he wants to say to us, “God has provided righteousness for the unrighteous in Jesus Christ. God, who has provided that righteousness for us in Jesus Christ, now begins to work that righteousness in us through the Holy Spirit.”

As he proceeds with this reasoning, he's moving us, as you remember from his great statement at the beginning of verse 1 to his confident climax at the end of verse 39, if we know that there is no condemnation for us because we are in Jesus Christ, we can also be confident that there will be no separation for us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ. As he moves through consideration after consideration, he's taking these Christians in Rome who lived their lives under threat of persecution, who are only beginning to understand the gospel and some of them in danger of misunderstanding the gospel and it's as though he's opening an entire Aladdin's cave of riches to them to say to them, “Dear children of God, you can enjoy the assurance of your salvation and you can enter into the blessed joy of being able to call God your heavenly Father.”

This is important as we will, I hope, eventually see when we get to the closing verses because there is an enemy of the Christian in respect to this. There is one who knows he cannot destroy the salvation that Christ has given to his people and he will, therefore, do the second best thing: he will destroy Christ's people's enjoyment of being Christ's. He will seek to destroy God's children's enjoyment of being confident that they have God as their heavenly Father and, therefore, he will seek to destroy and malign their peace and their usefulness. He will paralyze them with doubts. And so, in a sense, when Paul is speaking to us here, he is laying the groundwork for those questions that he throws out as it were, in Satan's face at the end of the chapter. “Who can condemn us? Who can bring any charge against us? Who can separate us from the love of Jesus Christ?” He's building into us this strong assurance that we are the children of God.

And he begins to do this in a very remarkable way. In verses 1-13, he's been speaking largely about justification and then about the struggles and the warfare of sanctification, the struggle between the flesh and the spirit, the reassurance that we are no longer in the flesh but in the spirit although we have to battle against the flesh and we have to put to death the misdeeds of the body. Then, totally unexpectedly, he has really said nothing to prepare us for this, he says, “If through the Spirit, you put to death the misdeeds of the body,” verse 13, “you will live because those who are thus led by the Spirit.” I wonder if he's reflecting on the 23rd Psalm and the third verse? “He leads us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.” Paul is not speaking here the way Christians sometimes speak about being led by the Spirit in guidance in our lives. He's not speaking about that at all. That's no part of what is in his mind. He's speaking about being led by the Spirit to deal with the sin in your life and he says, “Don't you see that the indications

of putting sin to death in your life are also indications that you must be in the family?" Because this is a family characteristic, this is a family likeness. To seek to, as it were, press out of my life everything that will bring upon my life the frown rather than the smile of my heavenly Father. "So," he says here in verse 14, "those who are led thus are nothing less than led by the Spirit of God as the sons of God." As the sons of God.

Now, that's our status as Christians. Indeed, there is a sense in which for Paul, that is the highest thing that can ever be said about the Christian. It's one thing for us to be justified, to be condemned sinners who have been pardoned and now are justified, it's one thing for us to have been slaves to sin and now being set free but to have been sinful and enslaved and to be brought into God's family and given the title of sons, there is nothing higher than this. There is a sense in which this is the whole of the Christian life. I certainly personally believe that if I grasp the principle that he is my heavenly Father and that I am his son, I am his child, then everything that happens to me in the Christian life, I see within that context and it transforms everything. These are the spectacle lenses the New Testament gives to us to try to help us understand that our sufferings and our difficulties and our struggles, what's happening to us, God is treating us as sons. We're going through child training. He is building us up. The father who never stretches his son or his daughter, leaves his son or his daughter weakened. So, God sets challenges before his children. Paul is so intent on this everywhere when he speaks about what it means to be a child of God, he's building into us a consciousness of who we are in Jesus Christ that will help us to live in every situation conscious that nothing happens to us unless it is purposed by the mind and executed by the hand of our heavenly Father.

So, the Christian is something that the worldling knows nothing about. The Christian is able to discern not God's immediate purpose in why I am going through this, but God's long-term purpose and why it is I may be going through this is because he is training me for glory. He is, as Paul puts it in 8:29 later on, "He is transforming me into the likeness of his own dear Son." If that's true and it certainly is true, if that's true, then obviously one of the most important things for me as a Christian is to be sure that I am a Son of God. To be sure that all the privileges of being an heir of God and a joint-heir with Christ actually are mine. And it's this that Paul wonderfully describes for us, particularly here 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!'"

Now notice several things about what he says here about this ministry of the Spirit: you understand that it is the Father who adopts us in Christ but it's the Spirit who brings consciously into our hearts an awareness that we are the children of God. Notice first of all this very striking description Paul gives of the Spirit's identity. "You have not received the Spirit of bondage again of bondage to fear." He is alluding to the experience of the Roman Christians and others. He says something very similar to the Galatians before they became Christians, how they became conscious of their spiritual bondage, how the more they struggled, the stronger the chains that bound them seemed to become. Paul is saying to them, "You have not received the Spirit of bondage to bring you back to fear again but on the contrary, you have received the Spirit of adoptive sonship. You have received the Spirit of adoption."

John Calvin, the great Reformer, when he begins the third book of his Institutes which is entitled "The Way We Receive the Grace of Christ," says this and I wonder if you think he was right or wrong? He says, "The first title of the Holy Spirit is Spirit of adoption." Wrong or right? Well, you have to wait until Romans 8:15 in the Bible before you ever read about the Holy Spirit as Spirit of adoption and you don't read about the Holy Spirit as Spirit of adoption apart from here in Romans 8 and also in Galatians 4. So, Calvin was wrong? No, Calvin was right.

What Calvin is saying is not the very first title used in the Bible of the Holy Spirit is Spirit of adoption, I mean, he preached through most of the Bible and wrote his way through most of the Bible, he wasn't a dunderhead, he could count. What he is saying is that the supreme title of the Holy Spirit is Spirit of adoption. You see why that is: because the supreme privilege that's given to a sinner is being adopted into the family of God and God saying to you, "You are now my son." Of course, the reason the language of son is used and not the language of children as those of you who are readers of all literature to the time of Jane Austen will know, is because daughters could not inherit until relatively recently. Aren't you glad those of you who are daughters? Those of you who love Jane Austen? What are half of Jane Austen's novels about? They're about the fact that these girls are going to be kicked out of the family home because girls can't inherit.

So, in the world of the New Testament, the apostle who is going on further to call us the children of God, calls all of us sons of God because the Spirit brings us into this consciousness that we are God's children and that all the riches of God's grace provided for us in Jesus Christ have become mine. This is vouchsafed to me, as the old writers to me, confirmed to me by the ministry of the Holy Spirit who assures me that I am a child of God. Do you remember how the Apostle John puts this in 1 John 3? He says, "Behold," look, "what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the children of God." I love the words of John Cotton who was a 17th century English minister in Boston in old England and then amazingly became perhaps the most significant minister in Boston in New England. In his old commentary on 1 John, he has the statement about these words. He says, "The apostle here reproveth our squint looking." As far as I know, there's nobody in church this evening who's got a squint. What happens when you've got a squint? One of your eyes is looking that way, isn't it? One of your eyes is going here and the other eye is going there and so you need to go, don't you? You need that sorted out because you can't see clearly and Cotton is saying what the Apostle John, the apostle of love, is doing is saying, "Now look, you're looking in the wrong place. You're living the Christian life as though you had a squint. You're not seeing your privileges clearly and properly." "The apostle reproveth our squint looking. Look," he says, "what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the children of God and such we are."

So, whenever I live beneath the level of this privilege, I deny myself the riches of the most splendid assurance that I really am a child of God. God wants you to know that. My dear friends, there are communities in the Christian church in history that have said, "God doesn't want you to know that." I regard that virtually as blasphemy for this reason: stand

up if you're a father in the church this evening who doesn't want to know that his children are loved by him. Do you think the heavenly Father is any different? Yes, there are seasons in the mystery of God's providence when we may not feel that but this is his ordinary way and this is why the Spirit is called the Spirit of sonship. That's why the second thing Paul says here, having spoken about his identity, is to give us an illustration of this ministry and I think what he goes on to say is, in fact, such an illustration. "The Spirit of sonship," he says, "bears witness with our spirits that we are the children of God." If you are anything like me, you have these moments when you're conscious, "Lord, how good you've been to me. I am your child." But your own witness is frail and so you see that the heavenly Father sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts to bear witness with our spirits that we are the children of God.

Now, clearly this is not the Holy Spirit whispering to me some special revelation, "By the way, Sinclair, you're a child of God." No, this is much more like what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:3 when he says, "You can't say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit." It isn't that the Holy Spirit is saying, "Jesus is Lord and I'm saying Jesus is Lord," it is when I say, "Jesus is Lord," that's the fruit of the Holy Spirit's ministry in my life. Here Paul is saying, "When I say heavenly Father, when I'm conscious that God is my heavenly Father, it's through the inner ministry of the Holy Spirit bearing witness with my spirit that I really am a child of God."

Then he gives us a further illustration of that, you notice. "The Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are the children of God," he says, "and this takes place when we cry, 'Abba, Father!'" Now, we need to be very clear on this, let me try and put it this way: this is not the Christian saying "Abba! Father." That's not what Paul means. What Paul means is: this is the Christian saying "Abba! Abba! Abba! Father!" Now, why do I say that? For the simple reason that the verb Paul uses is used about 50 times in the New Testament and it's almost always used as a loud cry and it's frequently used of a cry of distress. It's the word of the blind Bartimaeus who cries, "Jesus! Son of David! Have mercy on me!" It's a cry of need. Even the very word itself, the verb that Paul uses, *krazo*, is what the literary people would call an onomatopoeic verb. It sounds like what it means. It's a cry.

Now, why is that so significant? Because I would in danger of thinking that in order to enjoy the ministry of the Spirit giving me assurance I really am a child of God, I would need to rise spiritually, as it were, above the storms and the struggles of life to the point at which I'm saying, "Abba, Father, I'm all yours and everything is peaceful." That's not when you need this ministry of the Spirit. You and I need this ministry of the Spirit when things are tough. You and I need this ministry of the Spirit when we feel life is a mess. The great thing Paul is saying is this, "Don't you see this?" He is saying when the child falls in the street, when the child is in need, when little Craig Wilkes has to go into his dad's shop and say, "Daddy, help me! My tree is swaying in the wind. It's not going to bear my weight. I'm frightened to death of going up into my treehouse again." His father comes and says, "Son, let me show you the way. Let me reassure you that I understand, that I love and I will see you through and you really are my child."

Now, what's the evidence that I really am his child? It's this: that in my darkest moment, my instinctive cry to him is being, "Father!" I think I will say to my dying day that it something that the non-Christian, no matter how religious, will never say in the hour of crisis and I've heard it often enough in the hour of crisis, "I don't understand why God is doing this. O God, help me!" but never, "O Father! Come to my aid." It's almost amazing. Don't you see the genius of this? That when I have nothing else that seems I can hold on to and I'm black and blue with pain and the world is collapsing around me, my fundamental instinct is still to cry out to him and say, "O Father! Father! Father!" In that cry, I've given the clearest possible evidence I could in the dark that I really am a child of God and in this way the Spirit has borne witness with my spirit that I really am his child.

Some of the commentators think that the background of what Paul says here, he has the notion of Deuteronomy 19, of course, that truth is to be confirmed in the mouth of two witnesses. But you see, what he's saying here is this: it's the Spirit coming to our aid in our need that is the decisive witness.

When I was a boy, I guess about, I can't remember, 11 perhaps, 12, my parents used to drag me across the city of Glasgow where I was brought up. Every second Saturday night we would go right across the city to the other side of the city, I think chiefly because we ourselves did not have a television set and my aunt and uncle who lived on the other side of the city had a television set so we were dragged across there to watch Saturday night television. I had two cousins, both girls, and so I don't know what was on the television but we were huddled away with our two female cousins for an hour and stuffed with candies to keep us quiet and, I guess, to get over what was a very excruciating experience for a shy boy to be with his girl cousins for an hour. Then we were allowed through between 8-9 o'clock to watch Perry Mason. The good old days of Perry Mason when there was Perry and Della Street and Paul Drake and they always ended the same way, didn't they? Those of you who are of my generation who watched them? It looked as though Perry was going to lose a case at last and then at five minutes to nine, it was always five minutes to nine, the door of the courthouse at the back – if you're under 50 this is a mystery from past history to you – the door at the back of the courthouse would open and in would appear the debonair and handsome Paul Drake and Della Street would give Perry Mason a nudge and Perry would turn around and there was this Paul Drake wink that is very difficult to imitate and impossible to see from the back of the church. And in would come the witness that Paul Drake had been looking for since about ten minutes past eight. Then, the camera would move over to the DA. I used to think when I was a kid, "It must be fantastic to have a DA in the city." Hamilton Burger. I always thought there was something quite deliberate about that name, Hamilton Burger, because Perry Mason was always making hamburger meat of him.

And when the decisive witness was brought into the courtroom, the case was closed. That's what Paul is saying here: the Holy Spirit is the decisive witness and the great thing is that he comes into play in our lives when it looks as though we may be in danger of losing the whole thing and in our hour of crisis, we cry out, "O Father!" and it's the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we really are the children of God.

So, Paul gives a description of the Spirit's identity, he's the Spirit of sonship. He gives this marvelous illustration of the Spirit's ministry and then as though he is mounting up a tall and high ladder, he takes us a little further and he says, "Do you now see the implication of this for your destiny? If the Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are the children of God, think about what that means if children," he says, "then we are heirs. Heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ." It's amazing that in the course of one verse, he's using this word "heir" three times as though to say to us, "Can you hear what I'm saying? Can you understand the privileges that are yours in Christ? That as the Spirit bears witness with your spirit, that you really are a child of God." That means that you are an heir, an heir of God and a fellow-heir with Jesus Christ.

A fellow-heir with Jesus Christ. What does that mean? It means this: that everything the Lord Jesus assumed our flesh to accomplish becomes our inheritance. Absolutely everything: justification, adoption, pardon, reconciliation, restoration, forgiveness, cleansing, the defeat of sin, the promise of eternal life, the assurance of salvation, the persevering ministry of the Holy Spirit, the final privilege of entering into the presence of our glorious God, receiving a crown of glory that will never fade away, that is being kept in heaven for us who are being kept by the power of God. Everything that he has inherited. Everything he went back to heaven to claim for himself, he claimed for himself in order that he might share it with those who are his fellow-heirs. Jesus is the one who truly says, "He's not heavy, he's my brother," and shares all the riches of God's grace with us.

Then, just in case you didn't notice and didn't feel the whoops, "provided we suffer with him in order that we may be glorified with him." Now, Paul is not saying here, "Okay, if you want that, there are things you do to qualify for that." No, what he's saying is this: that since this inheritance is yours, you share that inheritance with Christ as God joins you to Christ and you suffer with him in order that you may be glorified together with him. Why is that so important? Well, among many reasons it's important for this reason, just notice Paul's logic: he says we are joint heirs with Jesus Christ, that is, provided we suffer with him in order that we may be glorified with him. Why will the glory of the Lord Jesus seem so glorious in heaven? Because he stayed in heaven and never came down to earth? On the contrary, his glory is so glorious to those who trust in him because that glory is crafted and forged out of his suffering. Glory is forged from suffering. You can actually see that in Christians in this world and sometimes you do, that the glory that's in their lives is directly related to the suffering that's been in their lives. The quality of their character is the fruit of the way in which they've responded to suffering and Paul is teaching us here in a moment what he teaches us elsewhere especially in 2 Corinthians 3-4, that for the child of God, suffering becomes the raw materials out of which God creates glory. So, the relationship between my suffering and my glory is not merely chronological, suffering now and glory then. It's actually mysteriously causal in the hands of God. He uses the suffering to create the glory. That's why when people say to us, "Will we recognize one another in heaven?" the answer is yes and no. We will recognize one another but I'm pretty sure our first instinct will be to say, "Are you...? You are. I never knew that's who you really were in Christ." What a day that will be.

So this is, my dear friends, our great privilege: the Spirit witnesses with our spirits that we are the children of God. It's wonderful to think about it, isn't it? Wesley's father, I suspect, was probably an Anglican priest who wasn't a true believer most of his life and in the last months of his life, he experienced the witness of the Spirit that reassured him he was a child of God. Many Christians go through a lot of their lives very secretly with very little assurance. Isn't that true? Here is somewhere to start: when you're in need and you cry, "O Father!" that's actually the highest you'll ever get in the Christian life and he gives it to you when you're at your lowest. Now, a father would do that, wouldn't he, for his children?

Heavenly Father, bring us, we pray, by the Spirit of our Lord Jesus to enjoy the riches of our inheritance and in every dark hour to cry "Abba! Father!" that we may know that we really are the sons and daughters of God. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.