

Romans #57 – Getting the Overall Picture

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Romans - GIW

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Bible Text: Romans 8:18-39
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We are the congregation of Christ Jesus and we take our text for meditation this morning from Romans 8:16, and I think you will agree that this is one of the most wonderful and comforting statements in the whole Bible.

16 The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:

And yet you know that is also a text of the Bible that has had a great many different interpretations. It is not a text of the Bible altogether easy to understand. This fact was underlined for me during the past week as I was reading some sermons by the great English preacher, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. I think you know that I have a very high esteem for this preacher. I much admire his work in expounding the Scripture but, you know, when he came to this verse he had an awful lot of trouble. It took him over 100 pages as he struggled with this text and I'm bound to say that when he finished, at least for me, the atmosphere was a little bit more foggy than it was at the beginning. This sometimes happens even with great preachers and I think the reason for this is that, in this instance, he allowed his interpretation of the Scripture to be under the control of the study of religious experience.

You see, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones is a great student of the revivals and they are worth studying and I would agree with him that we very much need a revival in the Christian church today, but one of the things that you will find if you study the revivals is that there are a lot of people who give a testimony that goes something like this, "Year after year I was going along and I had no sense of assurance. I believed in Jesus but the Spirit did not witness with my spirit that I was a child of God. But then came the great revival, this period and season of refreshing from on high, and then I got this tremendous assurance. Then the Spirit did bear witness with my spirit that I was a child of God." As a matter of fact in these sermons, I think it is eight or nine of them on this one text of the book of Romans, a great many quotations are given from some of these people and there is no doubt at all that this is the way people see their own experience. It may be that some of you see your experience that way. Maybe you have gone along for a long time saying, "Well, I believe in Jesus but I can't say that the Holy Spirit has been bearing witness with my spirit that I am a child of God."

So because of this, the whole interpretation of this great preacher became a very difficult and prolix matter and I'm bound to say that quite unlike most of the sermons of this man, when I finished reading that 100 pages and those eight sermons, I had to say, "I'm sorry but you didn't make it clear. You made it even less clear than it was at the beginning." And the reason is that he was under the influence of experiences, not letting the text actually speak for itself. So the fact is, brother and sister in the Lord Jesus Christ, if you are a Christian, "you have not received the spirit of slavery leading to fear again but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which you cry, Abba, Father. And the Holy Spirit himself is bearing witness with your spirit that you are a child of God."

Now, I wouldn't dare say that on my own authority because I also have my ups and downs. If you asked me out of my own experience at how I feel about things to make a statement about this matter, I don't think that I would be able either to make a statement as strong as our text, but that's just the point. We're not supposed to start with our own experience and then make the Bible fit what we think our experience is, what we're supposed to do is start with the Scripture and then evaluate our experience and our text said, "The Spirit himself does bear witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God."

So I emphasize this because all the way through the Bible it is clearly stated. For example, John the apostle said that if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you have the witness within you. Now you may not feel like you have it, you might even want to argue with the word of God, but that's what the Bible says. The Bible says the believer has the witness within himself. And it seems to me that the simple point at which even a great preacher sometimes will fail is right here, it's the difference between what really is and what we with our limited purview of understanding might think to be the case.

One of the Puritans put it like this, he says you go out in your garden and you sow some seeds and you go back in the house and you forget about them for the time being. Maybe you go out there three days later and you don't see a thing. You go back there in two weeks time and you say, "Well, nothing is happening. Nothing." Three weeks, not a thing is going on. And then one night there is a gentle rain all night long. The next day you go out there and to your absolute astonishment you look there and all over the place things are sprouting up from the ground and you say, "Well, that did it. That did it, that little rain brought everything to life." Now there is life in the garden but, you know, that doesn't prove that there was no life in the garden. The fact that you didn't see it doesn't prove that there was nothing going on in the garden because as a matter of actual fact, there was a process of germination going on down there where you didn't see anything happen, and it is often exactly that way when it comes to the work of God's Holy Spirit and what our text is saying whether we feel it is true or not is this: the Holy Spirit himself is bearing witness that you are a child of God if indeed you are a child of God. Now, of course, the Holy Spirit does not bear witness that you are a child of God if you are not, but if you are, he does bear witness because you have received the Spirit of adoption whereby you cry out, Abba, Father, and the Spirit himself does bear witness with your spirit that you are one of God's children.

Now, the second thing that is quite clear in this text is the fact that this witness that the Spirit bears is something that is always constant. Now why do I say that? I say that because that's the meaning of a present tense in the Greek language. It means that this is going on constantly. The Holy Spirit is continually bearing witness with our spirit if we are the children of God.

Now I have to admit that I don't always feel like the Holy Spirit is doing that but that's what our text says all the same. And I think if you will stop and realize one significant point in our text, you will see where the solution lies. Now, if that text just said the Holy Spirit himself bears witness that we are the children of God, I don't think I would see a solution, but that's not all that it says. What it says is the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit and right there you can see really if you think it through, the solution to the whole problem that we often feel. You see, it doesn't say that the Holy Spirit sings a solo. That's very easy if somebody sings a solo to tell whether or not he's singing. You either hear it or you don't. But you know if a person only sings a duet and you are one of the two people singing in that duet, then you're not going to hear much unless you yourself are singing and that's the idea that we have here in our text. The Holy Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit.

Now, of course, singing is not the right metaphor because the metaphor really comes from a court of law. I don't know if you've ever been in a court of law to give witness but I have because one day up here on the hill I found a man, the body of a man who had committed suicide and the day came when I had to come to the magistrate court and give testimony about what I saw and found. So I went into a court of law there and I gave testimony about just how it was and where he was lying and all that, and I gave my testimony and after I had given my testimony, immediately after that there was a young girl, she had been up on the hill too with her little dog and she was asked to confirm my testimony and she said to the judge, "Yes, what he said is true. That's exactly the way it was." She bore witness with me concerning the events on the day that we found that man's body and that's the idea that you have here in our text.

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit. He comes along, as it were, and adds his amen to what we are saying. I am saying, "Abba, Father," I'm saying, "God, you are my Father," and the Holy Spirit comes along and adds his amen to what I am saying. And right here you can see why it is that to us it often seems as if the Holy Spirit is not bearing witness when you in your spirit are only speaking in a whisper because of your own spiritual neglect, because you yourself are not exercised in the things that pertain to the sonship with the Father, then you can't expect to hear the Holy Spirit speaking very loudly. But if a time of revival comes along and your spirit is stirred up and you come to a time of intense fellowship with the Father, and that's what often happens in times of revival, then it is no wonder that when you are saying, "Father! Father! Father!" you begin also to be aware of the witness of the Spirit. And that's the simple solution to the fact that people often don't think that the Spirit is bearing witness, it is because they forget that the Spirit bears witness with their spirit that they are the children of God.

You see, when you are virtually silent, the Spirit is as if he were silent also. And yet, you know, even at your lowest moment, isn't this true, even at your lowest moment if you are a child of God, even when you are in the lowest of low times, you still, do you not in your great need cry out, "O Father, please help me! O Father, have mercy upon me!" So even at those times when you don't feel this very strongly, I assert to you that if you are a child of God, you are still doing what it says in our text, you are crying out, "Abba, Father," and whether you are conscious of it or not, it is still true that the Holy Spirit is bearing witness with your spirit that you are a child of God. So our text doesn't say that we always hear the Spirit, and our text doesn't say we're always conscious of the Spirit, but it does say that the Holy Spirit always does continuously bear witness with our spirit that we are the children of God. In good times and bad, if you are Christ's, you do have the spirit of adoption and even in your weakness when you say, "Abba, Father," the Spirit bears witness with you.

Now, one other thing is quite clearly stated in this text of the Bible and that is the fact that this witness is a confirming testimony. Now, I'm not claiming that this is all there is to say about it because, you know, the Bible says God's ways are not our ways, as the heavens are high above the earth, so his ways are above our ways and his thoughts about our thoughts. The work of the Holy Spirit of God is mysterious and there is no theologian and there is no creature who can ever totally and exhaustively explain the wonderful work of the Spirit of God because the Spirit of God is infinite and eternal. So there may be many things about the way in which the Spirit bears witness with your spirit that we cannot fathom and we cannot explain. I'm not saying that this is all there is to it but I am saying that there is one thing quite clear from this text of the Scripture, and that is the fact that the witness of the Spirit is a confirming witness.

What I mean by that is that the great interpreters of the Christian church have always been right in my opinion when they have said the Spirit of God does not bring us visions, he does not speak to us in dreams, he does not give us personal and individual revelation. No, what he does is to speak by way of confirmation and indeed that is why the equivalent statement in other parts of the Bible for what we find here is the term "sealing." The Bible says you were sealed with the Spirit of promise. Dear Christian, you were sealed.

Now, what is a seal? Well, over there in my study I have a diploma that I got many years ago from a theological college, seminary, and if I showed you the seal by itself it wouldn't say anything. That's a fact. It wouldn't say anything because what is stated is on the diploma. "So-and-so, let it be hereby attested by this authority has completed such and such a course of study," and so on and signed by such and such a person with the authority of the board and so on, and then the seal is added. It's not to say anything else but to confirm the statement that is already there on that diploma. And that's exactly the way it is with the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

You know, in ancient times kings had signet rings and everything official had to be sealed by the ring of the king in warm pliable wax and he would press his ring down in that wax and then you would see the image of the king's ring, and by that you would

know that this really was an official message from the king. Now, that seal didn't say anything by itself, it simply confirmed authoritatively the message that was already contained in that document and that's exactly the way it is with God's people. You see, when you become a Christian and you are born again by the Spirit of God and you are converted, do you know what happens? Well, God Almighty by the power of his Holy Spirit presses on you the image of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Now, that image may be a little faint to start with but that's still what the Bible says. We are transformed says the Bible, into the same image from glory to glory. And so one of the great works of the Spirit of God is to impress upon your nature something of the image of Christ and it is in that way that the Holy Spirit attests and confirms your sonship to the Father. Because you really have this nature impressed upon you, what happens? You cry, "Abba, Father." And because the Holy Spirit then bears witness with your spirit, you are enabled by the Holy Spirit to really feel and to know in your heart that what you are saying is true. "Ye verily, O Father, I am your child and you are my Father because I belong to you, the Lord Jesus."

That's still ruling thought in this whole passage. There is therefore now no condemnation to those that are in Christ Jesus. That's why Paul the apostle says, "Examine yourselves, brethren. Don't you know that Christ Jesus is in you, unless you be reprobate. Examine yourselves then. Look in there and see what the Spirit of God really has impressed on your nature and as the Spirit of God enables you to see, you will have this confirming witness and you'll know what it means to say the Spirit himself bears witness with your spirit that you are a child of God."

You do believe in Jesus, don't you? It is his precious blood shed on Calvary which is your only hope, isn't it? You come today, do you not, to cry, "O Father, Father, have mercy upon me! Blot out my sins and own me as a new creature!" Isn't that true? Isn't that really in you? Well, then ask today that the Lord by his Spirit might confirm that witness of your own heart so that you may know that you really have passed from death unto life and are a child of the Father. Amen.

Let us pray.

We ask you, gracious God, to make us conscious today of the witness of the Spirit by stirring us up so that with our own spirit we really do cry out to you as our Father, for that is what you are because of the finished work of Christ. May we have the holy joy of knowing this today as we remember the death of our Redeemer by which he purchased us and made us your possession. This we ask for Christ's sake only. Amen.