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ADOPTED HEIRS OF GOD

Romans 8:17

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Romans Lesson 48

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Adoption is a beautiful thing to behold. I often look around at this congregation and see families that have adopted children from other countries and think about where those kids would be if they had not been adopted into a loving family. They had no family to love them or provide for their needs. They had no caring dad or mom to listen to their problems or put their arms around them and assure them that things would be all right. Many of them were malnourished and sick. They had no instruction even about basic matters in life such as hygiene, let alone spiritual instruction.

Then one day a couple with love and kindness in their eyes chose them and went through all of the legal and financial matters necessary to bring that needy child into their home. For the first time in their lives, those kids heard prayers and felt kisses before drifting off to sleep. When they awoke frightened or sick in the night, they had the comfort of loving parents to calm their fears or nurse them back to health. They had nutritious meals and nice clothing. They learned what it was like to be a part of a loving, caring family where God is worshiped, His Word is read, and needs are brought before His gracious throne in prayer.

The Bible uses adoption as a picture of what God has done for us. Spiritually we were dirty, diseased, impoverished streeturchins, with no one to care for us. We were not there as helpless victims, but rather because of our deliberate rebellion against God. But one day He showed up at the cardboard shack that we were sleeping in and in love chose us to be in His family. He cleaned us up, removed our rags, clothed us in the righteousness of Christ, fed us with the nourishing truth of His Word, and guided us in His paths of righteousness and wisdom. He brought us into His family, where we have brothers and sisters to share our burdens and our joys. And He made us His heirs, so that throughout eternity we will enjoy the unfathomable riches of Christ.

But these wonderful truths raise a question: If we are God's beloved children, then why does He allow us to suffer? As an

earthly parent, I did everything that I could to protect my children from suffering and to alleviate their pain, whether physical or emotional. If God is an all-powerful and all-loving Father, then why doesn't He do the same with His children? While many books have been written to deal with that issue, Paul here and through the rest of the chapter shows that our suffering is not at odds with God's love for us as His children. Just as our Savior had to suffer first and then enter His glory (Luke 24:26), so too, our path to glory goes through the valley of suffering.

Romans 8:17 is transitional: it sums up what Paul has been saying and it introduces what he will go on to say. Spurgeon (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 51:541) describes Paul's style here as building a sort of Jacob's ladder that takes us up from one step to the next. First (8:14) he says that all who are being led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God. We saw that in the context this does not refer to the Spirit's leading us in matters of guidance about life's choices, but rather to the Spirit's leading us to kill our sin. If the Holy Spirit is prompting and enabling you to fight against and kill your sin, it's evidence that should assure you that you are a child of God.

The next step up the ladder is that if you are a child of God, then you are an heir. Then he goes higher—you are an heir of God Himself and a joint-heir with Christ. The uppermost rung of the ladder is that we will be glorified with Him. Spurgeon applies this by saying (51:542) that every grace we receive should lead us to seek after something higher still. We should never be complacent or think that we have arrived spiritually. We should seek to be filled more and more with all the fullness of God.

With that as an introduction, let's explore some of the riches of our text. I'm convinced that Paul does not want us just to think about these things intellectually and walk away saying, "That's interesting!" Rather, he wants us to feel emotionally the wonderful grace and love of being an adopted child of God and all of the glorious riches that God has stored up for us in eternity so that we can joyfully persevere in our present sufferings. He is saying,

As God's adopted children, we are His heirs and fellow-heirs with Christ, which includes suffering now and future glory.

1. Through God's gracious adoption, we have become His children.

As we saw (8:15), we "have received a Spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba, Father!'" As I explained, "spirit" should be capitalized, referring to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the seal or pledge of our inheritance as adopted children of God (Eph. 1:13-14).

In a wonderful chapter in *Knowing God* ("Sons of God" [IVP], pp. 181-208), J. I. Packer says (p. 187) that adoption is the highest privilege that the gospel offers, even higher than the blessing of justification, because it brings us into a richer relationship with God as our loving Father. He goes on to say (p. 190, italics his) that "*the entire Christian life has to be understood in terms of it*" [adoption]. He illustrates from the Sermon on the Mount (pp. 190-193) how adoption is the basis of Christian conduct, as we imitate the Father. It's at the root of glorifying the Father, as people see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. It's at the heart of pleasing the Father, who sees our hearts, rather than being hypocrites who practice our righteousness before men. Adoption is the basis of Christian prayer, since Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father who is in heaven." Adoption is also the basis of a life of faith, as we trust the Father to provide for our needs.

Then (pp. 194-207) Packer elaborates on how adoption gives us the deepest insights into five other matters: (1) It shows us the greatness of God's grace and love; (2) the glory of the Christian hope; (3) the ministry of the Holy Spirit; (4) the meaning and motives of what the Puritans called "gospel holiness"; and, (5) the clue we need to see our way through the problem of assurance.

Does the doctrine of God's gracious adoption of you as His child make your heart well up with thanksgiving and joy as you realize what the Father has done for you? He picked you out of the gutter of sin, cleaned you up, clothed you with the perfect righteousness of Christ, and lovingly brought you into His family as His child, where you enjoy the unfathomable riches of His grace, both now and for all eternity! Meditate on that truth every day and it will give you strength to resist sin and grace to endure trials.

But, make sure that you are His child! The Bible is clear that by nature because of our sin we all are children of wrath, not children of God (Eph. 2:3). How do we become children of God? Paul explains (Gal. 3:26), "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." Instead of trusting in yourself or your good works to get into heaven, trust in Christ, who died to pay the penalty of sin for everyone who believes in Him. And lest you boast in your faith, keep in mind that salvation is *totally* from the Lord. As Paul writes (Eph. 1:5-6), "In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved."

If by God's grace through faith in Christ you are a child of God, then it follows:

2. As God's children, we become His heirs.

Have you ever daydreamed about what it might be like to be an heir of a wealthy family, like the Rockefeller's or the Kennedy's or the Getty's? From what I've read, many of those heirs are not happy people. They fight and take each other to court, trying to grab or protect their portion of the inheritance. But as children of God, the Creator and Lord of the entire universe, we never need to fear that someone else will get our portion. God is "abounding in riches for all who call upon Him" (Rom. 10:12). Note four truths about our inheritance as God's children:

A. We are heirs of God Himself.

"And if children, heirs also, heirs of God..." At the very least, this means that we will receive all that God has promised to us as His children. But it probably also means that God Himself is our inheritance. This truth was taught in the Old Testament. When Israel conquered the land of Canaan, it was divided up among the various tribes. But the priestly tribe of Levi got no land, because "the Lord is their inheritance, as He promised them" (Deut. 18:2; Josh. 13:33). Do you suppose that any of the Levites looked with envy at the other tribes and their fertile pastures and grumbled, "Where's my inheritance?" And when they were told, "The Lord God of Israel is your inheritance," they complained, "Bummer, I'd rather have some land!" I hope not!

The psalmist knew the joy of having God as his inheritance. For a while, he was envious of the wicked as he saw their prosperity. But then he got his bearings and realized that they would die and face God's judgment. So he affirmed (Ps. 73:25-26), "Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

The prophet Jeremiah also knew this wonderful truth. He had witnessed the awful destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, along with the slaughter of many of his people and the deportation into slavery of many others. It was far, far worse than the 9-11 tragedy in our country. In the midst of his grief, he affirmed (Lam. 3:22-24), "The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'Therefore I have hope in Him.'"

If God Himself is our inheritance, then our salvation is secure because He is eternal and unchangeable and His promises never fail. The reason we have Him for our inheritance is because He first chose us and predestined us to adoption as His children.

B. We are fellow heirs with Christ, who is the heir of all things.

Hebrews 1:2 declares, "In these last days [God] has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world." "All things" is fairly comprehensive! Paul puts it this way as he rebuked the bickering Corinthians (1 Cor. 3:21-23), "For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God."

Again, if we are co-heirs with Christ, our inheritance is secure because there is absolutely no doubt that Jesus will inherit all that the Father has ordained to give Him. In Psalm 2, the nations rage against God and seek to throw off the lordship of His anointed king. But God, who sits in the heavens, scoffs at these proud earthly kings. And then Messiah responds (Ps. 2:7-8), "I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord; He said to Me, 'You are My Son,

today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession.” It is certain that Jesus will inherit all that the Father has promised to Him. And since we are fellow heirs with Christ, our inheritance is secure. Our right to the riches of heaven is not because of anything in us, but because we are in Christ. But, what does our inheritance look like?

C. Our inheritance includes the unfathomable riches of Christ.

In Ephesians 3:8, Paul describes his ministry as “to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ.” I preached an entire message on that verse when we worked through Ephesians, so I can only refer you to it now. In Ephesians 2:7, Paul says, “So that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” It’s going to take the ages and ages of eternity to reveal to us all that God has prepared for us and given to us in Christ!

These riches include our being *heirs of the world*. In Romans 4:13, Paul said, “For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants (lit., “seed”) that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.” Abraham did not inherit the world in his lifetime. The only piece of real estate he owned was the burial cave of Machpelah. But God has promised a new city whose architect and builder is God (Heb. 11:10). Abraham was looking for that heavenly city (Heb. 11:16), and since we are fellow heirs with Christ, who is the seed of Abraham, we will inherit the new heavens and earth with Him.

Also, we are *heirs of the kingdom of God*. James 2:5 declares, “Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?”

And, included with these promises, we are *heirs of eternal life*, which is the joy of knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom He has sent (John 17:3). In Titus 3:4-7, Paul exults, “But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing

of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life." Wow!

I've already mentioned the fourth truth about our inheritance:

- D. The fact that we are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ makes our salvation absolutely certain.

In Galatians 3:29, Paul says, "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants [lit., "seed"], heirs according to promise." Who made the promise? God, who cannot lie, did! In Hebrews 6:17-18 we read, "In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us." The two unchangeable things were God's word of promise and His oath when He swore by Himself to Abraham, "I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you" (Heb. 6:14). God wants us who are His children to know that our inheritance is "imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Pet. 1:4). It's absolutely certain.

But, then, why does God allow His children to suffer now?

- 3. If we have these promises and assurance from the Spirit, then we can endure present suffering as the path toward future glory with Christ.

Paul adds (Rom. 8:17b), "if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him." After meditating on all of the glories of being children of God and heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, the mention of suffering hits us out of nowhere. Why does Paul throw that in here? Well, Paul was a realistic pastor who wanted his people to apply these glorious truths about our future inheritance to the present reality of life in a fallen and hurting world.

Paul himself suffered terribly (2 Cor. 11:23-29). He knew that many of his readers were suffering, some more than others. Some were being persecuted for the sake of the gospel. Some had lost loved ones to martyrdom. But all of God's children go through

trials from the world, the flesh, and the devil. We all go through trials in our families, trials with other people, trials at work (or with being out of work), trials because of our sins and the sins of others against us, health problems, disappointments, heartaches, and grief.

But, why does God allow His children to suffer? I can't be comprehensive, because the Bible contains much on this subject. But, first, if Jesus, God's beloved Son in whom He was well-pleased, had to suffer before entering His glory (Luke 24:26), then why would we expect to be exempt? The popular teaching that it is God's will for His children all to be healthy and wealthy and that we need to claim it by faith is heresy! Have you ever noticed that none of the false teachers proclaiming this nonsense are over 100 and going strong? They're deceiving people for the sake of their own sordid gain.

Also, if Jesus Himself, who was sinless, learned obedience through the things that He suffered (Heb. 5:8), then why would we think that there is an easier course for us? God disciplines all of His children so that we might share His holiness (Heb. 12:5-11). Furthermore, as Philip Melancthon put it, "Where there are no cares, there will generally be no prayers" (cited by J. C. Ryle, "Are You an Heir?" in *A New Birth* [Old Paths Gospel Press], p. 241). Or, as Paul put it (2 Cor. 1:9), "Indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead." Trials drive us to trust God. They purify the dross from our lives. They produce perseverance, proven character, and hope (Rom. 5:3). They keep us from loving this world more than we should. And, they fix our hope on eternity (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

Paul here says that we will be glorified with Christ. Our adoption is a present reality, but there is still a future fulfillment of it, when we receive our new resurrection bodies (Rom. 8:23) and we will be in the presence of the Lord forever (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

J. C. Ryle (*ibid.*, pp. 224-228) whets our appetite for this future glory by asking a series of questions and then expounding on the perfections of heaven. "Is *knowledge* pleasant to us now?" In heaven, we shall know all things and there will be no disagreements among believers. "Is *holiness* pleasant to us now?" Is sin causing us trouble now? In heaven there will be no sin! "Is *rest* pleasant to us

now?" Are we often weary and faint? In heaven we will enjoy God's perfect rest. "Is *service* pleasant to us now?" We will serve God perfectly in heaven, without any of our present limitations. "Is *satisfaction* pleasant to us now?" In heaven, our joy will be perfect and permanent. "Is *communion with the saints* pleasant now?" In heaven, we will enjoy perfect fellowship with God's people. "Is *communion with Christ* pleasant to us now?" In heaven, we will see His face and our fellowship will never be broken by our sin.

Conclusion

How does this apply to us now? In many ways, but consider this illustration from John Newton, the converted slave-trader turned pastor and hymn-writer (cited by John Piper, "Children, Heirs, and Fellow Sufferers," on DesiringGod.org):

Suppose a man was going to New York to take possession of a large estate, and his [carriage] should break down a mile before he got to the city, which obliged him to walk the rest of the way; what a fool we should think him, if we saw him ringing his hands, and blubbering out all the remaining mile, "My [carriage] is broken! My [carriage] is broken!" (Richard Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, in *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, Vol. 1 [Banner of Truth], p. 108.)

Your carriage may be broken, but keep going—there's a rich inheritance and eternal glory just ahead!

Application Questions

1. Do you think often of your adoption as God's child? How could this help your daily battle against depression or discouragement or sin?
2. Do you often think of God as your loving, caring Father? Would doing this more often keep you from sinning? How?
3. Why is the "health and wealth" teaching heretical? How does it damage people?
4. How can we keep our eternal inheritance more in view in our daily lives?

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