

ABBA! FATHER!

SERIES: BOUND FOR GLORY



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Romans 8:12-17
Second Message
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Romans 8:12-17

When I worked for a newspaper in the East Bay, I had a great living arrangement. I rented a five-bedroom house with four other guys, and I could walk to both work and church. I hardly ever used my car—kind of like these days, come to think of it!

It was the Fourth of July. Among the editors, I drew the short straw and had to work. The first part of the walk to work was downhill, through a greenbelt.

As I was strolling down the hill, a boy, about seven years old, was trudging up the hill. He was toting two baseball gloves that looked to be about half his size. He looked weary, as if he had already been walking a long time. Now he had to climb a hill.

“Where are you going with those gloves?” I asked him.

“I’m going to get my dad,” he said.

My heart immediately sank, because I assumed that the boy didn’t live with his father and that he had to hike across town to be with him on a holiday.

It’s a broken world, scarred not least by broken relationships. If we believe in Jesus, we’re bound for glory, but at times, life seems like a long and lonely journey up a hill. Maybe at times God, our heavenly Father, seems a long way off. Nevertheless, the apostle Paul assures us, we have the Holy Spirit to help us. What is the Spirit doing?

Paul, in Romans 8:12-17, makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 8:12-17:

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.

Obligation of gratitude

In verses 12-13, Paul says that the removal of any prospect of condemnation for believers leaves them with an obligation, which evidently consists of gratitude to God. Also, we have no obligation to the flesh: to fallen humanity that is in rebellion against God and his will.

Sin took over humanity so that “the flesh,” in Paul’s terminology, becomes roughly equivalent to sin. Humans became slaves to sin and obligated to it. Through our connection to the death and resurrection of Christ, God has liberated us from sin. We are no longer subjects to sin, so we are not obliged to it in any way. This needs to be said because the powerful attraction of sin makes it feel as if we are obliged to obey it.

The destination of those who are obliged to the flesh and who therefore live according to the flesh is death, which is equivalent to condemnation: punishment for sin at the end of one’s life. In the vein of Romans 8:5-11, Paul in verse 13 is making a clear distinction between those who have the Spirit and those who don’t, between those who belong to Christ and those who don’t. If one lives according to the flesh, if one’s life is dominated by sin, he does not have the Spirit, and he does not belong to Christ.

Paul makes this distinction, using terrifying language to describe the destiny of those who don’t belong to Christ, to disabuse us of any notion that there is any benefit to sinful choices. He is not saying that believers who make sinful choices will be condemned. He is simply illustrating the dreadful nature of such choices by saying that they are in keeping with dead-end humanity.

And he's also challenging any unbelievers to change their fleshly ways and choose Christ.

Putting to death the deeds of the body

Those who are obligated to God, who have the Spirit and belong to Christ, are, with the Spirit's help, "putting to death the deeds of the body." Paul can speak of sinful deeds in this way because human bodies are still part of the old age, subject to decay and death. Our bodies are not evil. God created them and will redeem them (Romans 8:23). Until he does, our bodies can be used for good or evil.¹

To put such deeds to death means to turn away from sinful choices. Believers do not look to some kind of law and seek to measure up to it; they look to the Spirit, who orients them toward God, motivates them, and empowers them.

Paul is not in this case commanding that we put to death the deeds of the body; he's assuming that we are doing so. Those who possess the Spirit do in fact put to death the deeds of the body, at least to some degree. If they don't, they do not possess the Spirit, and they do not belong to Christ. For only those who possess the Spirit and therefore put to death the deeds of the body, however imperfectly, "will live" beyond the grave in God's new creation.

Nevertheless, nothing in verse 13 would encourage us to become lackadaisical. Paul is very capable, as in Romans 13:11-14, of commanding that we "lay aside the deeds of darkness."

The leading of the Spirit

Possession of the Spirit, and his activity in our lives, guarantees that we will be resurrected. His activity, further defined as his leading, is evidence, in the present, that we are sons of God, connected to the life of God and destined for life with God beyond death.

The Spirit of God not only replaces the law, he also assumes the role of the pillar and the cloud, both of which led Israel through the wilderness to the Promised Land. In the exodus, the Lord called Israel his son and he called individual Israelites his sons (Exodus 4:22, Deuteronomy 14:1). Now, as we journey through the wilderness of this world toward the new creation, God leads us by his Spirit and calls us his sons. The Spirit orients us, and leads us in countless ways we may never be aware of, toward the new Promised Land.

Reminding us that we have no obligation to the flesh, Paul says that the work of the Spirit has nothing to do with slavery to sin. Those who do not possess the Spirit are slaves to sin: they continue to reject God and his will. This kind of slavery involves both fear of freedom from sin and fear of condemnation before God. In slavery to sin, you can't win: You're afraid you'll be missing out if you don't indulge sin, but you're also afraid of the judgment of God if you do.

The Israelites, after being liberated as the sons of God, wanted to return to the slavery of Egypt. Dependence on God, who seemed unpredictable, was too much for them.

Some Jews in Paul's day no doubt would have argued that the Holy Spirit would lead believers to be under the Mosaic Law. But that would involve slavery, because sin co-opted the law and held Israel captive (Romans 7). For Jews who have been freed from the law to go back under the law is to become enslaved to sin again. For Gentiles who had been slaves to sin apart from the law to now go under the law is also to become enslaved to sin again. For anyone to choose any kind of lifestyle of rejecting God and his will is to become enslaved to sin.

The Spirit of adoption

Slaves live in fear. Sons do not. Our heavenly Father, just like the father in Luke 15:11-32, wants sons, not slaves.² Paul calls the Holy Spirit "the Spirit of adoption."³ We were born into sin, but we have been adopted into God's family.

The Spirit does not inspire fear. Instead, he inspires us to cry, "Abba! Father!" Palestinian Jews in the first century spoke Aramaic, a Hebrew dialect. "Abba" was an Aramaic word for "father" that conveyed tenderness. It was used by children but also by adults when addressing their fathers in a familiar way. Jesus addressed God in this way and instructed his followers to do the same.

Addressing God as Abba became so meaningful that New Testament authors, who wrote in Greek, retained the Aramaic wording in three cases (Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6).

This cry is the Spirit's answer to the cry of Paul, speaking for conflicted Israel as a whole under the law in Romans 7:24, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" Answer: Christ, who clears the way for the Spirit, who inspires the cry of free sons and daughters, not frustrated slaves.

In this way, by enabling and inspiring us to connect with God as our Father, the Spirit witnesses to us that we are children of God. As children of God, we cry “Abba!” not always, of course, using that word, but with a sense that we are sons and daughters of God. The Spirit defines us, and he defines us as children of God.

Along the shores

Brennan Manning tells the story of a man named Edward Farrell who visited Ireland to celebrate his uncle’s eightieth birthday. One day, the two men, uncle and nephew, got up before dawn and walked along the shores of Lake Killarney. They stopped to take in the sunrise, standing quietly for twenty minutes. Then Farrell’s uncle, Seamus, turned and went skipping down the road, grinning ear to ear.

Farrell: “Uncle Seamus, you really look happy.”

Seamus: “I am, lad.”

Farrell: “Want to tell me why?”

Seamus: “Yes, you see, my Abba is very fond of me.”⁴

Heirs of God

As children of God, we are also heirs of God, which also means we are fellow heirs with Christ. Christ is God’s Son, so we are God’s sons and daughters. Christ is God’s heir, so we are God’s heirs with him. Jesus, the Messiah who represents Israel, receives what Israel was promised: the world. The Promised Land was called Israel’s inheritance. Both Jesus and Paul understand God’s promise of the land to embrace the entire earth (Matthew 5:5, Romans 4:13). It’s the world, the new creation, the new Promised Land. And it will be ours to rule as vice-regents of our Lord Jesus Christ, fulfilling the original human mandate (Genesis 1:26-28, Revelation 22:5).

All this sounds well and good until we find that we must also share Christ’s sufferings in order to share his inheritance. The good news, in one sense, is that we have no choice in the matter. All will suffer in this sin-sick world, whether or not they belong to Jesus. The better news is that the sufferings of believers are uniquely connected to Christ and therefore bring about the character that prepares them to serve God in the new creation (Romans 5:3-4). Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17, “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,”

Our suffering, whatever form it takes, is integral to being glorified with Christ, which entails being resurrected, as Christ was, to rule with him.

The Spirit creates intimacy and trust

How do we, turning away from sinful choices, put to death the deeds of the body? How do we live in freedom, apart from sin, in the wilderness of this world, with all its rocks, thorns, and thistles? How do we deal with the fear of freedom on the one hand and the fear of condemnation on the other? We address all these questions with the help of the Holy Spirit. How is the Spirit helping us? Not least by reminding us that we are sons and daughters of the Father.

At first, this may not be altogether encouraging for those who have been damaged by their earthly fathers. For some, thinking of God as Father has little appeal. Stephen Colbert writes, “A father has to be a provider, a teacher, a role model, but most importantly, a distant authority figure who can never be pleased. Otherwise, how will children ever understand the concept of God?”⁵ Some think of God as a distant authority figure who can never be pleased because that’s what their earthly fathers were.

All of us need to have our minds renewed to think correctly about God as Father because none of us had parents who loved and disciplined us flawlessly. A good place to start is with the father in Jesus’ story in Luke 15. The best images of our heavenly Father have him bringing shame upon himself by leaving his house to rescue his two sons, the youngest of whom is lost in libertine indulgence and the oldest of whom is lost in resentful obedience. If we sit with those images for a while, our minds will be renewed so that we increasingly appreciate God as our Father.

One of my spiritual disciplines is to regularly listen to my heavenly Father speak these words to me from Luke 15:31: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” This is our Father’s world, and he gives it to us that we might run, laugh, dance, play, weep, work, and worship in his presence as his sons and daughters.

In Gethsemane

In Gethsemane, Jesus falls to the ground and calls out to God, addressing him as “Abba.” Israel was God’s son (Exodus 4:22). David, inheriting the vocation of Israel, was God’s son (Psalm 2:7). Jesus, taking the vocation of

Israel and David upon himself, cries out to the Father as his destiny and the unseen forces of evil press upon him. An hour is coming, and a cup containing a poisonous concoction of suffering and judgment is before him (Psalm 75:8, Isaiah 51:17, Jeremiah 25:15-16, Mark 10:38-39).

Therefore, Jesus prays: “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). That the Son asks the Father for another way, when the Father has already shown him the only way, indicates the depths of what Jesus endured, both in Gethsemane and beyond.

Earlier, Jesus told a desperate father whose son was possessed by an evil spirit, “All things are possible for the one who believes.” Things worked out well for the father and his son: Jesus cast out the demon, all but raising the son from the dead. Jesus told his disciples that the kind of evil spirit that possessed the son can only come out by prayer (Mark 9:23-29).

Now Jesus, the Son, echoes his own words as he prays to his Father. If all things are possible for the one who believes, and if by prayer you can defeat the worst kind of evil, and if it was possible for a father’s son to be healed, should it not be possible for the cup to pass from the Son of God as he prays to God? Who believes more than the Son? Who prays better than the Son?

Jesus, though, will not assert his will. He expresses it, but he doesn’t assert it. What he expresses, mostly, is a willingness to submit his will to that of the Father. He prays to the Father—intimately, trustingly.

The Spirit helps us do the same. Do you think the Father is fond of the Son, who prays, “Abba, Father”? If the Father gives you his Spirit so that you cry, “Abba! Father!” do you think the Father is fond of you? Of course he is!

The gift of the Spirit

What does it mean to relate to the Father intimately, as inspired by the Spirit? It involves being free to share with the Father anything that comes to mind, from joys and praises to sorrows and laments. Most of all, it involves love, as the Spirit floods our hearts with the Father’s affections that they might spill over in our response to him.

What does it mean to relate to the Father trustingly, as inspired by the Spirit? It means, quite simply, trusting

him—heartache by heartache, prayer by prayer, and inch by inch—with your entire life, even while knowing that if you pray “Abba” in Gethsemane, the answer may be a cross on Golgotha.

If you trust the Father with your life, your life will take the shape of the cross. You will share the sufferings of Christ. Your life will be less comfortable than you had hoped it would be. But you will know that your sufferings are part of the birth pangs that result in a new world. “Though he slay me,” said Job, “I will hope in him” (Job 13:15).

Relating to God as “Abba,” intimately and trustingly, is eloquently represented in the prayer that Jesus taught us:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil. (Matthew 6:9-13)

Jesus invites us to address God intimately, as Father. But he also invites us to trust him supremely, for how can we pray for God’s will to be done unless we’re confident that his will is good? If we are able to pray this prayer in a heartfelt way, then the Spirit has moved us to do so.

A window opens

How, then, do we sense the impulse of the Spirit? At no time are we unable to cry “Abba! Father!” The Spirit is always about relating us to the Father. There will be occasions, however, when we sense his movement in profound and, quite often, unexpected ways. It’s as if a window opens and we find ourselves gazing upon the Father, if only for a moment.

Frederick Buechner writes of such windows:

Some moment happens in your life that you say yes to right up to the roots of your hair, that makes it worth having been born just to have happen. Laughing with somebody till the tears run down your cheeks. Waking up to the first snow. Being in bed with somebody you love.

Whether you thank God for such a moment or thank your lucky stars, it is a moment that is trying to open up

*your whole life. If you turn your back on such a moment and hurry along to business as usual, it may lose you the ball game. If you throw your arms around such a moment and bless it, it may save your soul.*⁶

Like a centipede

I experienced such a moment few weeks ago as I was playing volleyball with my thirteen-year-old daughter on the front lawn. Let's just say she was encouraging me to move a little faster. Finally, she blurted out, "You move like a centipede!"

I started laughing. I continued laughing. I couldn't stop laughing—not for quite some time, anyway. It had something to do with the image she conjured. Me: a centipede! It had something to do with who came up with the simile: My daughter. How does such an image, and how do such words, appear in a thirteen-year-old brain? Where does she come up with this stuff? "A centipede?!" I screamed, in mock protest.

Something came over me and I fell to the grass and started actually moving like a centipede, as best I could, laughing all the while. For a moment, I became a child again.

It was one of those moments that make it worth having been born just to have happen. It was as if some sort of window opened and I saw into the hilarious joy of the Father and I reveled in being his child.

With an ache

Be advised, though, that when the Spirit opens such a window, he will often leave you with an ache. You may want the window to stay open, but it won't. You may want for another window to open, but you can't pry it open. The Spirit blows open windows when he wishes and blows them shut when he wishes, and he often leaves you wanting for more. All we can do is be watchful.

The windows give us glimpses into the nature of the Father, especially his boundless love for us, but also allow us to peer into the future, when our capacity to appreciate his love for us will be as boundless as his love. We must not worship the moment, anymore than we would worship a window. We must not live for such moments, but we can live *from* them, savoring what they have shown us about the Father so that we can worship him in the present while anticipating the day when we will, in C.S. Lewis' words, go "further up and further in."⁷

After all, the Spirit inspires us to "cry" with longing. Augustine said, "The whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing."⁸

The Spirit is relational

Romans 8:14-17 and its companion passage, Galatians 4:1-7, make an important contribution to a full-orbed appreciation of the Holy Spirit and his work. They show the Holy Spirit to be, in a word, relational. The Spirit is both powerful and relational. In fact, it's impossible to draw a clear line between the two attributes. The Spirit is relational because he's powerful, and he's powerful because he's relational.

The Spirit doesn't simply want to show himself powerful in your life by defeating sin, serving others, and winning people to Christ. No doubt he is interested in all those things and more. But it's not as if you're the cord and he's the current and he's just passing through because he wants to turn some wheels somewhere.

God is not interested in obedience. He's not interested in the kind of obedience offered up by the dutiful but resentful older son in Jesus' story in Luke 15. He's not interested in the obedience offered up by some scribes and Pharisees, who honored God with their lips even though their hearts were far from him (Matthew 15:8).

God is interested in obedience from the heart, a kind of obedience nurtured in relationship with him that takes over one's whole life. That's why he made a new covenant, which features the work of the Spirit, who writes the law on our hearts and circumcises our hearts (Romans 2:15, 29).

The Spirit wants to nurture your relationship with the Father. He helps us enjoy God. And don't we need this kind of help? Enjoying God is not something many of us do well. And if the Spirit is successful, you'll be a daughter or a son who is also a more available servant.

The Spirit is about relationship, about showing us the truth of who God is, in all his majesty and all his love, and bringing us closer to him in a Father-son/daughter relationship. As we understand at deeper levels who the Father is, and as we become more intimate with him, we are changed. We can't help but be changed.

The advantage of the word "Abba" is that for most of us, it doesn't carry any baggage. We can allow it, and the biblical meaning it carries, to speak for itself.

Based on Romans 8 and Galatians 4, I have adopted a simple prayer for myself: “Abba, I belong to you.” I speak it, sometimes under my breath, sometimes in my mind, as I breathe in and out. I speak “Abba” (two syllables) as I breathe in and “I belong to you” (five syllables) as I breathe out. Sometimes I pray it may times each day. If I can’t sleep at night, I might pray it hundreds of times.

I will often combine this discipline with Luke 15:31. First, I’ll hear the Father say to me, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” Then I’ll say to him, “Abba, I belong to you.” Try it.

A game of catch

Lots of people are going for walks these days. When you go for a walk, be watchful. Who knows, maybe the Spirit will open up one of those windows for you.

Remember the boy I crossed paths with as I was walking down the hill and he was walking up it? The boy continued his journey, but I decided that mine could wait. I wanted to see, if possible, the outcome of his quest. What do you think the boy was feeling as he trudged up the hill? Longing, don’t you think? Don’t you think he was longing to be with his father?

I assumed that the boy was hoping to play catch with his father. I also guessed that they would play catch at a nearby schoolyard. Inconspicuously, I staked out the field and waited.

A few minutes later, the boy emerged from an alleyway and skipped onto the field, wearing one of the gloves. His father followed, wearing the other glove. The two took their places a few paces from each other and began the father-son ritual. The boy no longer looked weary; he looked buoyant as he bounced after his father’s throws.

Yes, it’s a broken world, scarred by broken relationships. Yes, life at times seems like a long and lonely journey up a hill. Maybe at times God, our heavenly Father, feels a long way off. We long to be closer. We long for eternity. Nevertheless, we have the Holy Spirit to help us. What is the Spirit doing? He’s inspiring us to cry, even now, “Abba! Father!”

One day, we will reach the top of the hill, so to speak. How will it then be between God and us? Maybe it will be something like a long-awaited game of catch with a once-distant but now-beaming father on lush green grass under endless blue skies on the Fourth of July.

We’re bound for glory!

Endnotes

- ¹ In Romans 13:11-14, Paul defines deeds of the body as “deeds of darkness,” which include carousing, drunkenness, sexual promiscuity, sensuality, strife and jealousy. He also describes particularly Gentile and Jewish sins in Romans 1:28-30 and 2:21-23, respectively.
- ² Paul says in Romans 6:22 that we are enslaved to God, but he’s contrasting slavery to God with slavery to sin. Slavery to God is an entirely different kind of servitude. It’s the kind of service that an adoring son offers to a loving father. It’s a kind of slavery that’s voluntary and free.
- ³ Some translations, including the New American Standard Bible, assume that Paul is talking about something other than the Holy Spirit and translate his words as “spirit of adoption.” The context, in which Paul is discussing the work of the Holy Spirit, and his similar wording in Galatians 4:6, where it’s clear he’s speaking of the Spirit, would indicate that we should translate his words as “the Spirit of adoption.”
- ⁴ Brennan Manning, *Abba’s Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994), 64.
- ⁵ Stephen Colbert, *I Am America (And So Can You!)* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2007).
- ⁶ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993).
- ⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994) 206.
- ⁸ John Burnaby, editor, Augustine: *Latter Works* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, MCMLV) 290.