

EPISTLE FOR MAY 31, 2015

START WITH SCRIPTURE: Romans 8:12-17

OBSERVE:

This passage explores the dynamic nature of God in relationship with human beings.

Paul begins with a reminder of human nature – that *if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live*. This conflict between *flesh* and *Spirit* requires some unpacking.

The *flesh* is the corrupt and corruptible aspect of human character. Paul is not a dualist who believes that the material world is by nature evil and the spiritual realm alone is good. Rather, the *flesh* is the craving, selfish heart turned in upon itself. Just a few sentences prior to our passage, Paul writes that *Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace (Romans 8:5–6)*.

So what he's exploring here is how the Spirit moves the believer from death to life; from slaves of their *fleshly* nature to children of God. The answer, he believes, is to *put to death the misdeeds of the body*. Except that the sinner cannot do that for him/herself. The execution of sin can only be accomplished vicariously through Christ: *through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:2–4)*

And how do human beings appropriate what God has done for them by Christ's vicarious death on their behalf? This is where the entire dynamic nature of God is revealed in relationship within God and with human beings.

God's Spirit testifies with the spirits of those who have been adopted by God for the sake of his Son, and the Spirit declares that they are no longer slaves of sin and death, but now are children of God. Now these children of God can also declare that God is their Father – their *Abba*. Some scholars believe that this Aramaic word is intended to express an intimacy between Father and child, like the child calling God "Daddy!"

So, once these children of God are “adopted” into the family of God, they now enjoy all of the privileges of an heir. In fact, they are co-heirs with Christ: *Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

APPLY:

These few verses pack a huge wallop! They tell us about our status as children of God and much, much more: that God is for us in ways that we can’t even begin to comprehend.

What becomes increasingly clear is that the doctrine of the Trinity is far more than a theological construct, or an abstract notion. The Triune God certainly exists within a unity that is experienced as diversity, One God in Three Persons. But it is also very true that the each Person of the Triune God is dynamically involved in the salvation and restoration not only of human beings but of creation itself!

God the Father sends forth his only begotten Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, as the perfect Man who lives the perfect, sin-free life. This God-Man condescends to our level as humbly as is possible — even becoming sin on the cross for our sake; and then re-ascends to the very highest place, even at the right hand of the Father. And because he has identified with our fleshly nature, he has restored God’s image in us and raised us up with him. We are adopted as his own brothers and sisters, and therefore become *heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.*

That means that whatever Christ inherits, we inherit. This is made even more clear in Ephesians 2:4–7: *because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.* In other words, whatever Christ inherits we inherit: eternal life, a throne alongside him, and the incomparable riches of grace! Incredible!

And how is all of this activated? Obviously, we are taught deeply by Paul, again and again, *that it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—(Ephesians 2:8).*

But we know this because of the Spirit of God, the Third Person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit puts to death the sinful nature in us, which we call repentance; the Holy Spirit breathes the gift of faith; the Holy Spirit enables us to be adopted as children of God; the Holy Spirit whispers in our spirits that we are children of God and are made bold enough to cry out “*Abba, Father.*”

The one thing that may give us pause is that one phrase included in this passage: *Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.* We certainly like the first part! But the second part, about sharing in his sufferings? Ouch. Not so much.

Maybe Dietrich Bonhoeffer can help us understand this a little better:

To endure the cross is not a tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ . . . The cross means sharing the suffering of Christ to the last and to the fullest. Only a man (or woman) totally committed to discipleship can experience the meaning of the cross. . . Jesus says that every Christian has his(or her) own cross waiting for him, a cross destined and appointed by God. Each must endure his allotted share of suffering and rejection. But each has a different share: some God deems worthy of the highest form of suffering, and gives them the grace of martyrdom, while others he does not allow to be tempted above what they are able to bear. But it is one and the same cross in every case (The Cost of Discipleship, pp. 78,79).

And maybe, just maybe, when we identify so fully with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord by placing our faith in him completely, then we vicariously suffer with him and are raised with him. As Paul says in Galatians 2:20 *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

And only God can accomplish that in us!

RESPOND:

As I've been writing the words above, I've had an odd experience. I'm sitting under a bright light at a round table in my den — and I've been visited by flying ants — or termites, I'm not sure which! They first hovered and climbed all over the light above me — but when I turned that light off, guess where they went next? You guessed it — to my computer screen! First one, then dozens.

It struck me — that's about what I'm like, trying to think through and write about the lofty things I've been writing about in Romans 8: 12–17. I'm like an ant trying to comprehend something far beyond my level. And yet, the light of Christ draws us to himself, doesn't it? Soaring and transcendent as God is, God has loved us, God has come to us and dwelt among us, and God adopts us as his own children and enters into our own spirits! That is miraculous!

Our Lord, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I am like that flying ant. I can no more comprehend the light that I'm crawling over and around than the ant can. And yet, you draw me to yourself. Draw me closer to you, and live your life in and through me. Amen.

BY TOM LETCHWORTH

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