

## The Family of God

*From the Epistle: Romans viii. 12 ff.*

... brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. **13** For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die : but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live . **14** For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. **15** For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry , Abba, Father. **16** The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: **17** And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together .

As we look into these rich and comforting words of the Apostle Paul, we will receive a very blessed sense of intimacy which finds expression both with God, and with one another. And this is within the amazing and wonderful concept of *family*.

“Family” for each of us has many different meanings, according to whatever our experience of family has been. For some there are deep and meaningful memories evoked that have served as a healthy foundation for the rest of our lives. And for others, because of our childhoods, the term carries with it a whole range of very different emotions. And most of us have had our very own families subsequent to our upbringing, with their own histories, which also serve to figure very much into what our understanding is of this most primal mode of human existence.

Added to all of the above is the plight of the family in Western culture, of which we are all aware. I venture to say that barely none of us is exempt from the fractioning effects of the times upon what we now are realizing is this extraordinarily vulnerable and even frail arrangement, when so much conspires against its maintenance. What opposes it? Divorce? The rejection of traditional roles accepted by fathers, mothers, and even children, within its context? Powerful notions that it is outdated, or by its very nature a context for abuse, whose role needs to be superseded by the state? The use of the word to include living arrangements utterly foreign to any traditional usage of it? All of this has tended to change the motion of the family from the centripetal to the centrifugal: instead of providing a core of love and acceptance which draws its members inward and keeps them oriented there, even if time and distance have intervened, it has often become no more than a starting place whose pragmatic function is merely to fling its members out into society to serve its purposes. The consequence has been a people adrift, with no place to call home, no real emotional reference point to the past, who are nothing but —to use what seems to me a rather horrifying contemporary term— “human capital”.

But today’s Epistle speaks of believers as both *sons of God* and *children of God* who have been adopted into His family. Elsewhere St. Paul treats this subject similarly:

*Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household* [Thayer: “belonging to a house or family, domestic, intimate”] of God... (Eph. 2:19)

Further, this household is to have that standard function that should characterize every happy home. It serves as a place where...

*we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ...*

in other words, a place of growth and maturation toward a higher purpose.

For us denizens of this cold, dark outer-space of post modernism, which banishes the place and value of human warmth in favor of functionality, emerging out of it into the bright light of membership in God's family is a blessed thought, indeed. We are in desperate need of this household presided over by the benevolence of God the Father.

Notice again today's text: the possession of God's Spirit provides the confirmation of our place in this family: *For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.* This is the identifying characteristic of those claiming membership in this most special of homes. The word *led* implies that all of the motions of our lives bear the mark of the Spirit's control. We are to be *led* in our decisions, in our manner of life and conversation and deportment. This arrangement remains secret, as it were, between the Christian and the One who leads him, and it is a shared secret among the members of the believing family. Those outside, without the Spirit, will not be able to perceive the One who leads, but a life thus lived serves to draw others who in turn will, through spiritual rebirth, become themselves *God's own children*. A life *led by the Spirit of God* will be distinctive, demonstrating that it is indeed being *led*.

The next phrase of the Epistle includes the unexpected note of *fear*: *For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.* The previous chapters of the Book of Romans have contrasted the covenant of the Mosaic Law with the New Covenant of grace in Jesus Christ. The Law always emphasized sin and its corresponding punishment: "Thou shalt...", "Thou shalt not...". It was delivered by God upon Mt. Sinai with a great and unforgettable demonstration of His power, His majesty, and the threat of holy judgment for transgression:

*Ex. 20:18 And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. 19 And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die.*

It was intended to inspire *fear*, because mankind cannot be brought into the wonder of a love relationship with God without first comprehending His holiness, with the crucial inference that because He is holy, a vast gap separates us from Him. In Jesus Christ this gap has been mercifully and kindly closed, resulting in our *adoption* into a family which otherwise we would have been utterly unfit to enter. Instead of running from God, as did the Israelites, we run into His arms, like delighted children, crying *Abba, Father!* *Abba* is a Hebrew term of filial affection, like "Daddy". One can hardly imagine the trembling recipients of the Ten Commandments even daring to ad-

dress Jehovah God in such terms. But in Christ we have received permission to do so, without the shadow of *fear*.

Our solid, sure place within this new family is substantiated by the fact that *The Spirit itself beareth witness* [“gives testimony”] *with our spirit, that we are the children of God...* This is a fascinating phrase. God’s Spirit agrees with our own spirits — our very hearts — that we belong to Him as members of His family. The implication is that we are in possession of a continued and very personal reminder of this state of loving adoption conferred upon us. It is like the sort of affirmation a child that is received into an adoptive family might expect every time his or her gaze meets that of the new parents. It is a statement of ownership made without words: “You belong to me now, as much as my own, naturally born offspring.”

*And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ...* Within the words *heir* and *joint-heir* is the promise of wonders beyond the telling. One might be inclined to cry: “It is enough that I merely be called a *child* and a *son*, let alone receive an inheritance!” Elsewhere the Apostle attempts only to approximate the scope of this promise to God’s children with superlatives such as “riches” and “glory” (Eph. 1:18b), and: *Eye hath not seen , nor ear heard , neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him* (1 Cor. 1:9).

The Epistle ends with a mysterious phrase suddenly introduced into this list of the family rights of the redeemed: *...if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together*. What is intended here? The text appears to include *suffering with Christ* as another among the prime identifiers of this organic bond that God the Father has established with us under the New Covenant. Or does it mean that we shouldn’t mistakenly assume in our discouragement that because we suffer grievously for our identification with Christ, that our trials are an indication of God’s disfavor, and therefore of His rejection? Both meanings seem compelling. But the family of God must faithfully endure the testings to which it is appointed. That *it is* so should confirm for us, not invalidate, our acceptance by Him.

We have a home! Our adoption is sure, and has been thoroughly attested to. It permits us all the blithe joy, freedom, and space that should be the province of any children living in a household ruled by unconditional love. There was a time and a day and a place within our own nation when an understanding of the love of God in Christ was universal enough that it served mightily to underscore and strengthen the model of human families. Perhaps it could be stated this way: at the center of each individual was a heart nurtured by the love and security of a family at whose center were ties of mutual commitment that were as unbreakable as is humanly possible. These in turn were the building blocks of communities whose centers were their houses of

worship. And at the very center of it all, was God. Oh, how much has been lost, and without so many hardly even being aware of it!

May we do our utmost to preserve both our temporal families from all harm, and this eternal family to which we have all been given a most generous welcome.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*