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Heirs and Graces

Romans 8 v 12-17

Introduction

It's a common theme in Hollywood films, that the main character grows up not knowing their parentage. They go through the story facing difficult situations, the odds are against them, and then it's revealed that they're the lost prince, heir to the throne, or some other royal position. From Aragorn to King Arthur, Anastasia to Rapunzel, there's always a reveal that the ordinary person is actually a king, a queen, a princess.

I don't like these sorts of stories - we can't all turn out to be the king - and it would be good to have a hero who is just an ordinary person and stays an ordinary person.

However back in reality, we read through Romans 8 and we find out that in fact, we all can be heir to the throne. Not because we're born into the position and find out later on, but because we are reborn and adopted into it. According to Paul, all believers are heirs of God, fellow-heirs with Christ. It's not an earned title, it is by the grace of God, gifted to us when we are adopted into the family of God.

Context

We're working through Romans 8, a chapter full of God's grace to his children. Paul is writing to the Christians in Rome and wants to encourage them to look up and look forward, despite the daily battle against sin, and the persecution that they face. In fact it wouldn't be long after Paul wrote this letter that the great fire of Rome would rage through the city, and the emperor would lay the blame on Christians, resulting in massive persecution of Christians in Rome.

The chapter starts by telling them there is "no condemnation" for those who are in Christ Jesus, and it climaxes with "nothing can separate us from the love of God".

In the section we're looking at this evening we'll continue the comparison between the flesh and the Spirit that Paul started in last week's section, and come to look at the position we have in Christ.

Legalese

Romans 8 is full of the language of the law court. In verse 1 we have "no condemnation" as we think of the accused being judged and yet not condemned. In verse 2 we have the law of the flesh and the law of the Spirit, bringing death and life respectively. Verse 4 talks about the "righteous requirement" of the law.

This section, v12-17, continues the legal analogy by looking at the position of the Christian.

In verse 12 we are debtors:

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. [Romans 8 v 12]

Paul doesn't say who we are debtors to, but rather who we aren't indebted to. We are not debtors to the flesh, which would mean living according to the flesh. So by implication we are debtors to the Spirit. We owe a debt of gratitude to the Lord for new life, for freedom from the power and penalty of sin, for a place in the family of God, for an inheritance that we didn't earn. The verse starts with the word "so", which means we have to look back a verse or two to find out the reason for this debt. And sure enough, we read that we are given new life by the Spirit. That's a pretty big debt!

If the payment of debt to the flesh is to live according to the flesh then the payment for being indebted to the Spirit is to live according to the Spirit. Not that we can at all repay that debt. But the grace of God has been granted to us, and we have received a spiritual resurrection, so we owe it to him to live our lives to please him.

Opposites

Now Paul continues his examination of the opposing consequences of living in the flesh and living in the Spirit.

In verse 13 we read:

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. [Romans 8 v 13]

What does that mean? What is living according to the flesh? Well it's simply following our desires. If we just let ourselves be led by our appetites we are doomed. Living by the Spirit in contrast means looking to God for direction in everything we do, having a servant heart that seeks the good of others before self and the glory of God first of all. Paul talks about putting to death the deeds of the body. This is active language, implying that we're constantly making decisions in our walk. The desires of the flesh don't disappear, but we can choose to reject them. To work diligently when the flesh calls us to laziness; to think of others first when the flesh tells us that we are most important. It's a challenge, but it's clear evidence, as Paul says in very 14, that we are children of God:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. [Romans 8 v 14]

Verse 15 continues the flesh and Spirit comparison:

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!" [Romans 8 v 15]

Family was really important to the Romans, and very structured. There was the "familia", all those who were directly descended from the father of the house. And then there was the "domus" or household: everyone else who lived in the house, including the slaves. A slave held no status in the household and faced a life of hard work. However life was often short in Rome, and often a family would be left without an heir to carry on the family name. In this case the father would adopt someone as his son. They would take on his name and become

the heir to the house and lands. Occasionally the father would free a slave and adopt him as his son.

This is the picture Paul is presenting to us. We are not just in the household of God, we are in the family, as sons. The Spirit has adopted us into the family and we can say we are God's children and he is our father.

Children of God

In verse 16 we are drawn to the law court again.

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, [Romans 8 v 16]

Here we are called to the stand to testify on our own behalf. The question is "Are you a child of God?". We answer "Yes" but what weight do our own words have? Thankfully the Spirit of God stands beside us, and he bears witness: "Yes, this one is a child of God". And this position as a child of God comes because we have been adopted. We have been chosen, loved, called, accepted and rewarded, as a full member of God's family.

And then verse 17 explains the results of this position that we have.

and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, [Romans 8 v 17a]

If we are children of God then we are heirs. There is an inheritance that we shall receive. In fact Paul argues that we are fellow-heirs with Christ, the only-begotten son, in an ever increasing family of adopted brothers and sisters.

Why has all this happened? It is by the grace of God. He looked on us and he chose to pour out his grace upon us. He saw us in chains, and he chose to free us, to adopt us and to call us his sons.

Suffer and be Glorified

It's all been amazing and wonderful up until now. But Paul wants us to keep our feet on the ground. Remember that he's calling the Roman Christians to live their lives according to the Spirit. That means they will be living differently from their fellow Roman citizens. And that's going to cause tension. In fact it's going to lead to public executions as Christians are thrown to the lions, crucified and even burned alive. Paul says

provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. [Romans 8 v 17b]

It's a stark reminder of the times they were living in. And we mustn't forget that there is persecution for the Christian today too. If we try to live our lives pleasing to God then we will find there are people who aren't pleased. But remember that any suffering we face because of Jesus results in us being glorified with him.

Application

Humans are social animals. Even the ones who are loners by nature can still appreciate being part of a group, part of a family. And one of the major markers of true Christians is that they act like a family. I don't mean they fight and squabble all the time. I mean they love one another. They look out for each other, they share with one another. As we gather together for our church service we aren't just meeting together with other like-minded people, like a

political rally. In fact we can be very different. We are different in nationality, in skin colour, in age, in class, in character. But you are my brothers and my sisters, and the Spirit of adoption that dwells in every one of us commands us to love one another. Jesus said in John 13:

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. [John 13 v 35]

If someone came into our church for the first time today, they should be able to say “Wow, these people really love one another. They seem to have a bond, a real family spirit”. Because we do have a real family spirit: the Spirit of adoption who made us heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, by the grace of God