

Free From Slavery

Message 9

Sons of God

Romans 8:14-39

Introduction

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes...” With these words Paul opens his majestic exposition of God’s campaign to save us. And what an opening line they are! God did not sit on the sidelines, but has been intimately involved from the beginning. And He doesn’t dabble with us, but focuses all His divine power on saving us. God’s work on us is not merely a patch job, but salvation from death and destruction. And it’s not only for the privileged, but for everyone who wants to be saved. No wonder he is so excited about the gospel – it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes!

Throughout this book Paul constantly deals with the reality of sin – not only among unbelievers, but even in ourselves who believe in Christ. Sin is not a popular topic. It’s ugly and it’s uncomfortable – but it’s real. But sin is never Paul’s focus. The gospel of salvation is his focus. Listen again to some of the key passages we’ve studied so far.

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed...even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe...being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth *as* a propitiation by His blood... 3:21-25

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 5:1-2

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. 5:8-9

Then in chapter 7 Paul deal with the reality of sin in believers. Even we, who have experienced God’s power, still find sin dragging us down. After showing that sin in us comes from the sinfulness of our old nature, the flesh, Paul concludes by reminding us that God will deliver us even from this. Now in reflecting on all that has gone before, Paul announces again in chapter 8, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Do you get the point? Is God clear enough? If you believe in Jesus, God does not, *will* not ever condemn you! Not even a little bit. You are free! Your slavery to death, Satan, hell, and sin itself is over and you belong to God now. You may stumble, you may fail, you may sin again – and you will – but God will never reject you! This is the gospel. This is the message that saved you, and this is the message which is saving the whole world. This is the message of hope and joy and salvation to all mankind. This is the good news that we can live free from that greatest threat of all – God’s anger for our sin.

But it gets better! Some people think of the gospel as a sort of eternal fire insurance policy. Hell is a scary place – a terrifying place, actually – and we *really* don’t want to go there. So by believing in Jesus we can escape eternal torment. Now some people scorn this type of conversion. They notice that some

preachers seem to take a perverse interest in the terrors of hell, and try to scare people into heaven. The problem is that such conversions don't seem to "take". People who are merely interested in their own safety, and not God's glory, don't tend to follow God much. Now I understand this sort of thinking, and there is some truth in this argument. It does seem that people who are scared into conversion often aren't very converted. On the other hand, Jesus Himself never hesitated to warn people of their dismal future if they didn't believe in Him. He didn't seem to refrain from talking about hell and its terrors. The problem with focusing on hell is not so much that it's the wrong message, but that it's an incomplete message. It's true that believing in Christ will save you from hell, but that is only the tip of the iceberg. Tonight's passage gives us four magnificent benefits that are ours, who believe in Christ. We are adopted by God, we are assisted by His Spirit, we are secure in His plan, and we are protected by His love.

Sons of God

Our mission team spent spring break ministering to the kids in an orphanage in Acapulco. The orphanage is a relatively nice place. The kids seem loved there. They get adequate food and clothing, an education, spiritual instruction, and – most important of all – love from the people running the institution. But they don't have fathers. When other kids run home from school or run in from play to tell their dad about their day, these kids have no father to run to. Thursday night I will go to see Benjamin and Stephen in their school performance. The kids in Acapulco will look out into the audience, but in vain, to find their dads there. Some of those kids' dads are no longer alive, or are really lost. They will never know who their dads are. Others do have dads, and even know them. But their dads are too poor to feed and clothe them. Some dads were abusive, so the kids were taken away. It would almost be better if they didn't know who their dads are. What do these kids need more than anything in this world? They need a dad. I bet that they all go to bed often dreaming they had a dad who loved and cared for them.

Do you have a dad that loves and cares for you? I know that some of you do. But some Lehigh students have dads that have failed in some ways. Actually, all dads fail to some degree. But some dads are seriously neglectful or even abusive. On the way up to the RUF ski trip last month we watched *October Sky* in the van. Do you know the story? It takes place in the 1950's, when rockets were a new technology. The boy has a passionate interest in rockets, but his dad wants him to put aside such foolishness and work in the mines. He gets to the point of building rockets that actually work, but his dad refuses to go watch the lift-off. Your heart is just torn by the heart-wrenching disappointment of the boy who longs for his dad to take an interest in his interest. The dad loved his son, but he made a terrible mistake in trying to squash his interest. It's tough to be a good dad.

Our passage tonight tells us that the gospel involves much more than escape from hell. When you believe in Christ, God becomes your father. How can that be? How can we be children of God when He is divine and we are human? We become God's children by adoption. God chooses us and makes us His own children, legal heirs of all He has. Today we tend to think of adoption as a second-class method of getting children. People usually try to have children of their own, and if they can't, they consider adoption. And adopted children are often taunted in school by other children. But in the Roman world, adoption had no such stigma. In fact, adopted children were held in high regard – sometimes even more than natural-born children. So when Paul tells us that we are adopted by God, this means that God deliberately chose us because He treasures us and wants to give us all the benefits that come with being His children.

How do you feel about God being your father? Does it warm your soul? Does your heart race at the thought? Or is it a bit frightening. If your dad was unpleasant, you may not immediately think that it's a good thing for God to be your dad. If going home is not a joy for you, perhaps the thought of facing God is not an unalloyed pleasure. But here's what you should keep in mind. The fact that dads sometimes fail does

not erase the fact that we know what a good dad should be like. We all know, deep down, that we need a dad who loves us, protects us, teaches us, cares for us, and is a delight to be with. You know where you got that idea? From God. All good earthly ideas about fathers come from our heavenly father. And the good news is that there is a father who fulfills all your deepest longings. You have a father who loves you with all his heart, who gives you all you need, and who will never let you down. You have a father who will make you a stunningly beautiful person and who will delight in you all your life. Isn't that what you want more than anything?

We could spend all night discussing the benefits of being children of God, but I want to call attention to three. First, we have the privilege of calling on God. He has our attention whenever we need Him. Yesterday Benjamin finished part of his school work, and he was so pleased, he wanted to tell someone. So he called my cell phone. I was surprised, but I was glad to hear from him. This is how it is with God. The Aramaic word "Abba" is an affectionate term. Some people translate it "Daddy". Isn't it amazing that the Creator and Lord of the universe loves us and wants to hear from us? Amazing, but it's true. Some people may err by treating God disrespectfully, but others err by keeping Him at a distance. Don't. Stick close to your heavenly dad all day, every day.

The second benefit of being God's children is that we are his heirs. It takes faith to see this. To the natural eyes, Christians don't look like rulers of the universe – but we are. We are heavenly princes and princesses – even the ignorant and poor among us. Jesus said His followers will inherit the earth. True, but that's only the start. We inherit all God has. I don't know all the details of what this means. Perhaps it means that we will be able to run all around the universe and play hide-and-seek among the stars. I don't know. But I *do* know that it's all for us to enjoy.

The third benefit of being God's children is that we will receive glory. Do you hope to make the dean's list? Would you love to be at the top of your class? Do you long to be at the top of your sport? The Lehigh wrestling team was at the NCAA championships last week. ___ was the top seed in the nation, but he lost his match. What a blow! What glory would have been his had he won! You may never excel in academics or in sports, but God's children will all be glorious. There is a hitch, though. You have to suffer first. That's the way it works in God's family. You saw Jesus do it. He suffered on earth, and now He is in glory with His Father. You will join your father, too, but you will suffer first. The good news, however, is that the glory far exceeds the suffering. Did you ever knock yourself out for an exam or a paper and get a mediocre grade? It's really aggravating, isn't it? But God says, suffer a little now, and your reward will be far more than you deserve.

Assisted by the Spirit

The Spirit of God is prominent all through chapter 8, and we can summarize all that's said about Him this way: God's Spirit comes to help us. This blessing of believing in Christ is particularly comforting when we go through suffering. Paul reminds us that suffering is a universal experience. Ever since Adam sinned, the whole universe has been in agony. But it's not meaningless suffering – the suffering is like birth pains. There is a reason and there is an end. Our suffering is a prelude to the birth of a new universe. All that you see will one day be transformed into something better. I quoted Psalm 19 in the email announcement for this meeting tonight. "The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork." Today was a glorious day. But as beautiful and wonderful as this universe is, it is a shadow of what is to come. The same is true of you. Man is an amazing creature. Look at what we can do! We can ride to the moon in rockets and operate with microscopic instruments, we can create exquisite music and masterful art work. But all this is a shadow of what is to come. One day we will have perfect bodies and be able to do more than we can now imagine. But just as a baby, which is a wonder and a delight, is preceded by birth

pains – so the glorious future must be preceded by suffering now.

But we don't go through this suffering on our own. God goes through it with us. He has given us His Spirit who helps and comforts us in all our difficulties. And even in the worst situations, even when we are at our wits end – when we don't know what to do, don't even know for sure what is real, don't even know how to pray – when our abilities are exhausted, God's Spirit picks up where we leave off. When you groan under your school work, when a torn relationship casts you into despair, when you are too tired or sick or panicked to act rationally, when you commit some great sin and despair of ever pleasing God, God's Spirit in you groans, too – and your Father hears Him. God doesn't help you from afar. He doesn't send assistance from heaven. In your darkest hour, God is there with you. He goes through your struggles with you. When you groan, He groans. The Father hears the groaning of the Spirit, and He answers that wordless prayer, and He will deliver you.

Secure in His Plan

Now we come to a few verses which are simultaneously vexing and comforting. For many people, Romans 8:28 is one of our favorite verses. “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” In some ways this sums up all we have been saying. No matter what happens to you – good, bad, or neutral – God takes it and uses it so that the end result is positive for His children. Did you fail a course? In some way God will bless you through it. Did a relative die of cancer? God will use it for some good in your life. Did a friend hurt you badly? God will bring good out of it somehow. It's a great comfort and encouragement to know that the things we suffer here in this life not only have meaning, but God turns around and uses for good. That doesn't necessarily make the suffering any less painful, but at least it makes it bearable,

What mars this lovely verse, however, is the following verse.

“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.”

And there you have it – the “P” word. Predestination is the doctrine that God determines all things from the beginning of time. Some people are deeply troubled by this doctrine, for it can appear to deny the validity of human decisions. It can seem fatalistic or deterministic – as though we are just puppets in God's hands. This is not what predestination means, and we might wish to avoid the topic, but there it is staring you right in the face. You can't escape that predestination is in the Bible. This is not the place to give a full treatment of predestination, and we will have more to say about it next week – but let's at least make this point. Verse 28 cannot exist without verse 29. You can't have it both ways. You can't have a God who is in control of all evil events so that He blesses you through them – but who does not control some select human events. Either God is sovereign or not. Thankfully, He is sovereign, as these verses testify.

The comfort of predestination is that God is fully in control. Nothing happens outside of His will. Furthermore, God planned everything from the beginning. Adam's sin was not a surprise. Your birth did not come a minute too early or too late, but right on time. Now this kind of control would be frightening in the hands of a capricious, self-centered, juvenile god, but our God is not like that. Our God loves us, and uses this overwhelming power only for our good.

Protected by His Love

And now we come to the grand climax of this chapter. The opening is a burst of joy, and the middle

is a rich comfort, but the end is a massive, lavish display of God's overwhelming love for us.

the clincher: "What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *can be* against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" 31-32

Conclusion

if you have not believed in Christ, how can you resist him? How can your friends resist him?

C. David Green
Lehigh University
March 25, 2003