

The Witness of the Spirit: Abba, Father

Romans 8:14-17

By [Dr. Frank M. Barker, Jr](#)

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The reading is from Romans 8:14-17 which says

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.

The Apostle Paul didn't plant the church in Rome and he writes to it here. Apparently Paul covers in the book of Romans which is the most doctrinal book in the Bible of what he would have grounded them in had he planted that church. Here in Romans 8 he is focusing on our assurance of Sonship. In Romans 8:14 he speaks of the Holy Spirit leading and our evidence of Sonship when he says *14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God*. The interpretation of that verse 'led by the Spirit of God' the word 'led' in the Greek is *agago* and it's like leading the sheep to the slaughter. It is the idea of being propelled in a particular direction there. B.B. Warfield, a famous theologian, said “It has stamped upon it the conception of the exertion of a power of control over the actions of its subject which the strength of the led one is insufficient to withstand.” He is going to move us in this direction. As many are led by the Spirit are the sons of God.

Notice the relation with the mortification by the Spirit of our deeds of the flesh in the previous verse, Romans 8:13 which says *For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death (mortify) the deeds of the body, you will live*. He is writing to profession Christians and he says “If you live by the flesh you shall die.” If you are sinful in nature which every Christian still has, but if that is the dominate thing in your life, moving you and propelling you along in the wrong direction, living like the world around you and walking the broad road that leads to destruction, living after the flesh, then you shall die. He is writing to professing Christians but not every professing Christian is a true Christian.

The evidence is how do I live? What is the trend of my life? Notice who has to put to death those old ways. It says if you by the Spirit put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. We have to put to death our old ways. We have to flee temptation. We have to die to self. We have to think on those things that are helpful and not those other things that aren't. We have to put to death the old ways. We can put to death those old ways, not totally but progressively through the Spirit, relying on the power of the Spirit and yielding to the promptings of the Spirit. The Spirit will move us in the direction of obedience to the Lord.

Notice the relationship here where He doesn't wash to heaven like logs. You are running a race, fighting a fight and God uses means as He moves us in the right direction. If you're a Christian the Spirit of God is within you. You have a new nature and a new heart. You still have sinful nature. The Spirit will cause you to respond to the warnings like He is warning in this passage. He is writing to professing Christians. If you live after the flesh you will die meaning you will go to hell but if you by the Spirit put to death the deeds of the body, you shall live. He is using that kind of warning, that kind of challenge, that kind of encouragement to move them in the right direction. We're not just logs that are being washed to heaven or robots. We are people and He is building our character as we respond to those warnings and as we exercise our faith and put to death those old ways, flee temptation and so on. "The activity of the believer is the evidence of the Spirit's activity and the activity of the Spirit is the cause of the believer's behavior," says John Murray, a famous theologian.

We see the connection there, the interpretation of this passage and the relation of the putting to death the old ways. Notice the connection of the Spirit's leading in our evidence of Sonship. Is everybody a son of God? Is God the Father of all men? No. There are two Spiritual fathers. There is Satan and God. There is a kingdom of darkness and a Kingdom of light and everyone starts off in the wrong kingdom. When Jesus was talking to the religious leaders who opposed Him, He said "you are of your father the devil and the lust of your father you will do. He was a murderer from the beginning." In what sense was the devil their father? Did he create them? No. He was controlling them. They weren't demon possessed but there is such a thing as demon possession. Most people in Satan's kingdom aren't demon possessed. That's an extreme situation but they are under his control and most people in the world are in the wrong kingdom.

You have to be translated out of that kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son and that happens when you surrender your will to Jesus Christ as your King you enter the Kingdom. That's repentance. Repentance unto life is a saving grace whereby a sinner out of a true sense of his sin and apprehension of mercy of God in Christ you see your guilt. You see the offer of salvation through Christ, doth with grief and hatred of his sin turn from it unto God with full purpose of and endeavor after in obedience. That's the surrender side. The other side of that coin is faith where we put our faith in Jesus Christ. God the Son lived a sinless life and went to the cross to die for our sin so God could forgive us

without overlooking His law. God Himself was going to pay for our failure to keep His law by sending His Son who would die for our sins. We put our trust in Jesus Christ alone and we surrender our will to Him. When we do that we move from that kingdom of darkness into that Kingdom of God's dear Son. The evidence that we are sons is that we live by the Spirit and we move in that path of obedience.

Notice the Spirit's working in our sense of Sonship. Romans 8:15 says **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!"* The Spirit we have not received is the spirit of slavery or bondage where we say "I'm so fearful of God" where we're thinking in terms of having to earn His acceptance. I thought that way and I was a minister. I believed all about Jesus Christ but I actually went to seminary thinking I've been so bad and if I'm going to get to heaven I'm going to have to be a preacher. Notice that I am believing all about Christ but I'm trusting in my improved record. That's not faith in Christ but in my improved record. That's fear where I feel like I have to earn my way to heaven and I'm not quite good enough yet. That's bondage and you didn't receive the spirit of bondage.

According to that verse we have received the Spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry "Abba Father." When you become a Christian you are adopted into God's family. In our human family you enter in one of two ways. You are either born into it or you are adopted into it. When you enter God's family you enter both ways. You are born which is the new birth and the way you become a Christian. Later in Romans 8 it talks about whom He predestined He also called, whom He called He also justified, legally cleared and that's settled. You have a legal clearance. The shorter Catechism says the effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit whereby convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ to be light and renewing our will which is the heart operation, the new birth, He persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ.

How do you embrace Jesus Christ? You do this through repentance and faith.

"Two arms I find to hold Thee fast, Submission meek and reverent faith; Held by Thy hand that hold shall last Through life and over death."

Out of that new heart comes repentance and faith so that effectual call does that work in my heart. He is convincing us of our sin. He is enlightening our mind in the knowledge of Christ. He is renewing our will which is the heart operation and He persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered in the Gospel. That's the new birth and at the same time we are legally adopted into God's family. This changes my nature somewhat and now it will propel me in the right direction but I am also legally adopted.

It's like when you adopt a child. That is your child. If the child disobeys you next week are they still your child? Yes. The child didn't break the relationship but they did break fellowship. Because they are your child what do you do? You paddle them. It says in the Scripture "whom the Lord loves He chastens and scourges every son whom He receives." If you can go around doing some bad stuff and not get paddled, you're not God's child. That's our evidence of being God's child. "Whom the Lord loves He chastens and scourges every son whom He receives" that's part of the way He moves us in the right direction, by warnings, paddling's, by encouragement. We respond to those things because of His Spirit within and our new nature. Incidentally, before that you were a child of wrath. It talks about this in Ephesians 2:3 that prior to being adopted into God's family we were children headed for God's wrath.

Notice what the Spirit of adoption does here. He creates in these children the love and confidence by which they are able to cry "Abba, Father!" God is my Father. Abba is like our word daddy. God is my daddy. The Spirit of God within gives us that sense that God is my Father. Whereby we cry "Abba Father" that's the result here. The witness being born by the Spirit is we come to confidence about that.

Years ago we had a couple in our church named Dick and Lucy and Dick operated the Shelby airport. He also sold light planes. He hired a young man coming out of the military who had been a pilot to sell those planes for him, named Bill Smith. Some of you would know Bill Smith. When Bill moved here to Birmingham he was a single man and he couldn't find an apartment to live in and Dick told him to come live with him and his wife until he found a place to live. So he moved in with them and they kept talking to him about Jesus and kept inviting him to come to church and he didn't want any part of that. Finally they said, "Would you talk to our preacher?" Bill said "I'll do it one time if you'll quit bugging me." So they called me up and said "You have one shot." So I went over one night to visit him and Dick and Lucy had gone out. Bill raised every objection to Christianity I've ever heard plus a few and I tried to answer them. In fact, it finally got to be around midnight and I said, "Bill we're not getting anywhere. It's getting late and I'm going to go home." He said, "No, wait, wait, I want to become a Christian." I said, "You're kidding!"

He said, "No, you didn't persuade me but I live with this couple and I see something in their life that I want." I said, "You see the Holy Spirit in their life." He said, "Well I want it." I went over everything with and explained about how to accept Christ and said "Let's get on our knees and you just follow me in prayer. 'Lord Jesus, thank You for dying for me. Lord, I put my trust in You alone as my Savior and I purpose to obey You. I want You to come into my life. Make any changes You want to and in faith I thank You.'" He repeated the prayer with me and then I said, "Bill don't expect any immediate feelings just trust has come into your life. Let's get together next week to meet weekly and we'll start growing together." He said, "Okay."

The next morning he was shaving and he looks at himself in the mirror and says "I don't think anything happened to me last night. I don't feel a bit different." He went out to the airport where he was supposed to take a light plane over to Tuscaloosa for a prospect and he gets into the plane. Unknowing to him, they had been working on the plane and had taken the pilot's seat out of the plane. They had put it back in but hadn't bolted it back down. So he takes off and the seat starts to topple over backwards, he cusses, gets it under control and says "Father, forgive me." He thought "Father forgive me? I've been cussing for years and I've never said that! I think something has happened to me." He went on to go to our seminary here and planted a PCA church down in Sylacauga. Then he worked with other Christian groups and now he is very active in Christian things here in our city.

He is a great Christian man but notice how the Spirit gave him that sense of "Abba Father." In the beginning he had the conviction of sin when he cussed and things like that. That's the evidence here of the Spirit's working and the witness of the Spirit as He gives us that kind of assurance. There is no fear here. Charles Wesley in his hymn *Arise, My Soul Arise* says "*My God is reconciled; His pardoning voice I hear; He owns me for His child; I can no longer fear: With confidence I now draw nigh, With confidence I now draw nigh, And "Father, Abba, Father," cry.*" He is my Father.

Notice the Spirit's witness and His giving assurance of our Sonship in Romans 8:16 which says "*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God...*" The content of the witness is that we are children of God. What is the method of that? How does the Spirit bear witness? It doesn't say here how but in the light of Scripture and in the light of church history it's a direct witness and John Wesley defined it like this; "An inward impression in the soul whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit that I'm a child of God. Jesus Christ has loved me and given Himself for me where all my sins are blotted out that I even I, am reconciled to God." It's a direct witness, not necessarily that you would hear a voice but it is a spirit given us that assurance.

Then it is a deductive witness as we previously talked about where the evidence confirms this with the Spirit moving us in the right direction. It's a deductive one where I have met the conditions, I've surrendered my will, I'm trusting in Him alone and I want to do His will. I see progress here and not that there won't be some ups and downs but I see progress. When I do bad I really feel awful and so on. So it's the deductive witness there.

The problem there is that a man may be a child of God, a true Christian yet not have assurance of salvation. In John Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress* there is a character named Mr. Fearing who is a true Christian but he's afraid he is not going to make it. He's afraid he's not really a Christian. He keeps wrestling with that. You have true Christians who will wrestle with that. You can be a true

Christian and not have assurance of your salvation but God wants you to have assurance hereby applying these principles we have read about here. We need to carefully distinguish. You can have people pray a prayer like that and they may even hear a voice or something like that but the evidence isn't just voices or something like that. The evidence is this growing trend of obedience and the whole change of your perspective on life. God may give you some unusual experiences.

I think of a fellow whose wife started dragging him to church here many years ago named Bill Lewis. I called him up and went to lunch with him. He didn't believe in Christianity. I gave him Basic Christianity by John Stott to read and he read it. We got back together. He read it very critically so I gave him Mere Christianity by C. S. Lewis. We got back together and he read that very critically and then I gave him something else. He read that and I gave him something else. We did that for seven years and then God began working in his life. His law practice began to have problems because he was a lawyer when they brought the race track to Birmingham and it was controversial. Then his wife was in a head on collision and he knew God was dealing with him. She was recovering in the hospital and we were now meeting weekly.

What I gave him to read he was reading very earnestly and one Sunday I was preaching and he was sitting in the balcony. At the close of the service I said "If you have never received Christ and you want to commit your life just surrender your will and put your faith in Christ" and I led in prayer. He had prayed that prayer before but he had conscientiously excluded the surrender side and he knew he was doing some things that he knew God didn't want him to do but he wasn't willing to change. This time he conscientiously included the surrender side. He said he was lifted up in mid air and circled in a globe of light and put back down in his seat. Now I don't think that really happened but that's what he experienced. I didn't see him hanging there but that is what he experienced. He didn't say anything to anybody but his daughter was with him. They went home and she said to his wife "Momma something happened to daddy in church today." It had shown up.

God gives some people experiences like that. I think of the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus but we don't need that kind of experience to have assurance of salvation. God will give us that assurance through His Word here and His promises. We want to help people with assurance. We point out the promises that God has made. If we truly believe in His Son, relying on Him and purposing to do God's will we are forgiven, adopted and legally cleared and of course that trend of obedience is the second evidence there. We kept people as we bring these things out. We want people to know this and be able to sing "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine. O what a foretaste of glory divine, heir of salvation purchase of God, born of His Spirit, washed in His blood. This is my story. This is my song, praising my Savior all the day long." We want people to be able to say that and know it. It's available to us if we just apply this.

Notice the implications of our Sonship, our position as children of God in Romans 8:17 which says *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.* When Charles Wesley was saved on a Sunday in 1738 that very day he wrote a hymn – *O how shall I the goodness tell, Father, which thou to me hast showed? That I, a child of wrath and hell, I should be called a child of God...* Three days later John Wesley, his brother became a Christian and he burst into the room and they all sang that together. Could you have sung that with them?

J.I. Packard in his great book *Knowing God* gives two tests, two yardsticks of measuring God's love. First, is the cross and in John 3:16 it says *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* The second yardstick is in I John 3:1 which says *"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God..."* Wow! Our position is co-heirs with Jesus Christ. If children, then heirs of God and fellow heirs of Christ. Packard also says "Do I as a Christian understand myself? Do I know my own real identity, my own real destiny? I am a child of God. God is my Father. Heaven is my home. Every day is a day nearer. My Savior is my brother. Every Christian is my brother too. Say it over and over to yourself first thing in the morning and the last thing night, as you wait for the bus, any time when your mind is free. Ask that you may be enabled to live as one who knows it as all utterly and completely true for this is the Christian secret of a holy life, yes, but more a Christian life and of a God honoring life." Amen! This is the secret of a God honoring life.

So whose son are you? Are you led by the Spirit? Do you sense your Sonship? Does the Spirit witness to you and convince you of that? If so, realize your privilege.

*I once was an outcast stranger on earth,
A sinner by choice, an alien by birth,
But I've been adopted, my name's written down,
An heir to a mansion, a robe and a crown.
A tent or a cottage, why should I care?
They're building a palace for me over there;
Though exiled from home, yet still may I sing:
All glory to God, I'm a child of the King.*

Let that reverberate over and over and that will make a huge difference in how we approach life, death, problems and everything. Can you say that? Let's pray.

Prayer:

Lord, we thank You so much for the incredible privilege of being adopted into Your family and having You as Abba Father. We pray that every person reading

this would truly know that and have a valid baseline. If any reading this haven't done that, that even right now in their heart they would make that commitment. If you have never done that do it right now. Just pray in your heart in genuineness "Lord Jesus, thank You for dying for me. Lord, thank You for the option of adoption and Lord I now accept that option. I surrender my will to You and I trust in You alone as my Savior. Come into my life. Thank You, Amen." Amen.

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