

Adoption
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

Romans 8:12-25 (RSV)

²So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—¹³for 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. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in[£] hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes[£] for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Introduction and Comments:

As I was studying and researching for today's message, especially given some of Paul's hard to grasp explanations of the believer's relationship to God and others in Christ, I couldn't help but recall the story about a theologian and an astronomer, who were talking with one another regarding their fields of expertise.

The astronomer said to the theologian that after reading widely in the field of religion, he had concluded that all religion could be summed up in a single phrase.

"What's that?" said the theologian.

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," said the astronomer, with a bit of smugness, knowing that his field was so far more complex than theology.

After brief thought, the theologian replied that he, too, after reading widely in astronomy, had concluded that all of it could be summed up in a single phrase as well.

"Oh, and what is that?" the astronomer inquired disdainfully.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star; how I wonder what you are!"

Sermon:

To properly understand Paul and his writings, we must understand a little bit about Paul and his culture. However, I would add that anyone that says he or she thoroughly understands Paul is 900 years old and has only studied Paul for 800 years. Such then is my feeble attempt today.

Paul, as we gather from his various letters, grew up in a well-to-do Israelite family in Tarsus, a major seaport and commercial center in the Ancient Near East, in what today is Turkey. He learned tent making as an occupation, which was most likely his father's business, but he was also

a highly-educated, Hellenistic Pharisee, of a Judean school of thought. Paul's writings reflect his Hellenistic education, particularly the influences of the Cynic-Stoic schools of philosophy along with his Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint.

Given Paul's Cynic-Stoic worldviews, and his Hebrew-to-Greek scriptures, he, like so many, understood the material world, including human beings, as having been corrupted by a cosmological anti-God, anti-life force, or was created imperfect by some inferior god or daemon. The evidence for corruption or an imperfect creation was evidenced by evil, death, and decay - anti-life things - in the world. For Paul, an anti-life force gained access to the Edenic world of "In the beginning" through the portals of Adam's and Eve's decision to disobey God; subsequently corrupting creature, creation, and all humankind until some holy time in the future.

Paul and many of his Hellenistic, Israelite contemporaries, given the Persian and Greek influences on Judaism, understood human beings to be comprised of bodies, minds, and spirits or souls. Souls were preexisting entities, created by God before the beginning of the beginning to be incorporated into bodies by God at conception. The soul for many of the rabbis, contrary to others in the Greek thought world, was not seen as being imprisoned in the body. The body or the material world was the vessel or means for the soul's development and improvement. Accordingly, the number of the righteous that are to come into the world [was] foreordained from the beginning, although the number of those which are to become incorporated [was] not determined at the very first.¹ Therefore, Paul can talk about God foreknowing a person or the predestination of the believer with ease given these views. I add Paul's views have present problems and challenges to Christian thinkers across the ages.

At physical death, the spirit is set to return to its origins, either to attain a positive after-life or not, based upon its merit in this life. For many, at death the soul needs to have the appropriate knowledge to find its way either back to its original, blissful state or to its new and improved state of being. Thus, the need for divine, spiritual revealers or guides to come on earth to impart the knowledge of right-living and the soul's way back to their primordial, spiritual state or to show them the way to some new state. These ways of thinking, although over-simplified, are crucial for hearing and understanding Paul and our scriptures today.

By his own admission, Paul was an extremely devout and zealous Pharisee, what one could call pious or religious to a fault. (*So heavenly concerned as to be no earthly good, as my grandfather use to say*) It is clear in his letters that Paul's basic zealousness did not change after his Damascus Road experience with the risen Christ, while he was en route to persecute and purge Christ-confessors in Israelite communities. Paul is considered the architect of much of Christianity as we know it today, especially wherein his blending of Hebrew and Greek thought opened the spiritual doors for non-traditional, Israelite Jesus-confessors and confessing pagans to become members in good standing in the Abrahamic covenant through God's love and universal grace in Christ.

In the immediate chapter to our passages today, Paul talked about the timeless human struggles with sin and its wages of death; that is, physical death and spiritual death. Spiritual death viewed as the soul or spirit being cut off from God in the spiritual realm and excluded from the resurrection or included in the resurrection only to undergo a final stage of punishment in the fires of hell. However, Paul talks about sin in a much broader sense than just acts of immorality.

Paul understands sin - missing the mark in one's relationship to God and others - as an innate and pervasive penchant of our human nature. The penchant to sin even infects what we today would call a person's or a people's religious life. Thus, that part of the human psyche that seeks relationship with God through its own efforts paradoxically results in a person doing the right

¹ <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13933-soul>, accessed July 22, 2017

things for the wrong reasons and working contrary to their aims. To this point, Paul points out that as good as the Mosaic Law was and appropriate as it was for its time, it was inadequate to the task of providing eternal righteousness before God. This was not due to any fault of God or the Law but to the inadequacies of a corrupted human nature. I add that it may seem counter intuitive that a person being highly religious, hyper-moral or -ethical for totally selfish reasons can be as wrong before God as say committing adultery or murder; but, there you have it in Paul's thought. I remind us that the Letter to the Romans was written to a community of Jewish and non-Jewish believers, not unbelievers.

In chapter 8 of Romans, Paul lays out the new life in Christ although he doesn't give us many details. The believer's new life in Christ is life lived in and out of the Spirit as adopted children of God. Here Paul is referring to the Hellenistic practice of adoption, which was not part of the Israelite culture. In the Israelite culture, orphaned children were the responsibilities of the family or extended family no matter how far it was extended, not others.

Let me share some insights into adoption that may set the stage for the remainder of my message today. A teacher and her first graders were discussing a picture of a family. One little boy in the picture had different color hair and complexion than the other family members. One child suggested that he was adopted and a little girl said, "I know all about adoptions because I was adopted." "What does it mean to be adopted?" asked another child. "It means," said the girl, "that you grew in your mommy's heart instead of her tummy."

As spiritual Children of God in Paul's thought, the believer is no longer at risk of being cut off from God in the physical world, despite its pitfalls, drawbacks, adversities, and persecutions, or in the spiritual world, because those in Christ now participate in a mysterious, spiritual reality that defies ancient and modern understandings of existence, time, and space. The believer now lives in a timeless, indescribable reality bound up in the processes of God's love that was in the beginning before there was a beginning, where they were foreknown or with God, and will always be.

All of Paul's thoughts on such matters hinge on the Righteousness of God; that is, God acting in accordance with God's own true nature as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer; wherein, God is continually righteous as it were, the believer before the Divine Self through the mysterious work of Christ on the cross.

Therefore, Paul tells the reader in today's scriptures that those who live in the Spirit as opposed to those who live in the flesh, i.e., striving for a soul-saving relationship with God through hyper-moral or religious works of righteousness need to stop - it won't work. Paul knows this first hand; so, he tells people don't fall back into the old trap and become enslaved to a Do-It-Yourself righteousness, no matter its traditional legitimacy. The believer is now under the Law of Love, which is far more moral and ethically demanding, but more forgiving and life-facilitating than the Mosaic Laws.

Paul speaking metaphorically goes on to say that all of creation and creature, as if possessed of a single consciousness, innately knows that this reality is not right and that there is a better one in the offing. Creation, as if in the pains of child birth, is bemoaning the current state of affairs and has been waiting for the revealing of the children of God to help birth the new order. These adopted children of the Spirit are duly equipped with the first fruits or manifestations of the new order to make this happen. Those fruits are the charismatic allocations or gifts of the Spirit, such as healing, teaching, communicating, loving beyond social, religious, and ethnic boundaries, and the faith in the rightness and holiness of their labors. Paul understands that the small number of believers in Christ, the adopted children of God, scattered across the Roman Empire of his day, possessed the capacity and power to usher in the kingdom of God.

"For in hope we were saved," Paul says. That is, in hope and faith of what is now, but not yet, the believer's spirit stands restored to an original relationship with God, awaiting the day when

the will and rule of Holy Life will be made fully manifest again in the physical world. As we read elsewhere, the souls of the dead in Christ will be resurrected and those living in Christ will be changed in the twinkling of an eye, all to be as Christ was and is. Thus, the believers are joint heirs with Christ in the benefits of the family of God.

In the Christ community, the believer has or should have a fore taste of what is coming and what all this means; so, believer be patient and faithful; work toward holy ends, through holy means, and love and care for one another because the kingdom in its essence is here now in that love and caring, and it is yet to be in its fullness. Also, all the pain, suffering, and hardships of living for and in Christ in this life pale in significance, when compared to what awaits the believer.

In closing, hear Paul's final comments in this chapter:

³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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