

# **Belonging to the Family of God**

**Scripture: Romans 8:14-17**

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People of God: The family is an important part of our society. It is the building block upon which our culture rests. We all belong to some sort of family. Some families are healthy and strong, where love and nurture takes place within a caring and safe environment. Other families experience brokenness and much pain, where abuse or addictions tear a family apart. But whatever the situation, it is very clear that families are a very important part of our society.

In our scripture reading, another type of family is described. It is one that is far more important than our human families, because we are dealing here with the family of God. It is a family that has its own great benefits to enjoy and delight in. But, as Paul mentions, it also has its share of sufferings.

In these few verses, then, we are reminded that through the Spirit, we become part of God's family, gaining all the benefits of belonging to such a family. Let's unpack this, by first of all looking at its reality, and second at its benefit.

Being part of the family of God is a reality for believers. It is not something that is universal. It does not include everybody. Just as our human families are exclusive, limited to those who are born into it or who come to it through marriage, so the family of God is exclusive, limited to those who gain access to it. We must be clear about this because at one time it was fashionable in part of the Christian community to talk about the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of humanity.

Now there is a sense, of course, in which all human beings are brothers and sisters, having been created by God, the Creator of all living things. There is in that sense a common bond in humanity. Paul in his speech in Athens quotes the Greek poets saying, we are all God's offspring. But this is different than the way the phrase "sons of God" is used in this

passage. In these verses, Paul is distinguishing the children of God from the rest of humanity. Only a portion of humanity are God's spiritual children.

Now we know, of course, there is only one natural Son of God. That's Jesus Christ. In the gospel of John, he is described as being the One and Only Son of God. There is no one else like him. He is unique in terms of his eternal relationship with God. Yet our text talks about us as being sons of God. How can that be?

It's because we are not natural children of God, like Christ. Instead, we are adopted into God's family. We are not born into it. We do not marry into it. Instead, we are adopted. In verse 15, the word sonship can also be translated as adoption. It's a word the Roman recipients of this letter would have been very familiar with.

In the Roman world of the first century, it was not uncommon for a Roman father who had no son of his own and therefore no one to inherit his estate to deliberately choose a son to adopt. This adopted son would be groomed by the father to carry on the family name. No one would question his inheritance of the estate. Being adopted was clearly no inferior status; just as today, children who are adopted are full and equal members of the family.

We have been adopted into God's family, when we believe in Jesus Christ. The opening chapter of the gospel of John puts it this way: *to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.* As adopted children, we have all the benefits of this supernatural family. Benefits that will we shortly describe.

But how do you know, whether or not, you belong to this family of God? Is there any paternity test you can do? From time to time, you will read in the newspaper of a story where a mother sues for support of her child on the grounds that a certain man is the father. But what if he denies it? In the past, this would have been difficult to prove. But today with genetic and DNA testing, a paternity test is easily taken and can prove who the father is.

Is there such a test for this spiritual family of God? Indeed there is. One test is mentioned in our text. We are in God's family if the Spirit of God is leading us in our daily lives. Here we must see the connection with the previous verses. In verses five through 13, Paul contrasts those living according to the sinful nature versus those living according to the Spirit. When we live by the Spirit, following its desires and putting to death the misdeeds of the body, then we know we belong to God's family. As Paul

says in verse 14 *those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.*

Now if I belong to the family of God because of my belief in Jesus Christ and because I am led by the Spirit, and if you belong to the family of God, then that makes us brothers and sisters. This point is not expanded upon in these verses, although it is alluded to. After all, the "you" in these verses is plural, not singular. Paul talks about sons not son, about children not child, we not I.

When Paul deals with the family of God he does not deal with it as a single individual. He deals with it as a collective. After all, family is a collective. Together, we cry out to God. Together, we suffer. Together, we take possession of the great inheritance. While our adoption is in one sense an individual matter, it definitely has collective implications. We cannot think of our adoption into God's family without thinking of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now being part of the family of God comes with great benefits. Four are mentioned here.

First of all, fear is removed from our relationship with God. Paul says in verse 14: *For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you have received the Spirit of sonship.* Fear in this verse is not used in the sense of respectful awe. With that meaning, we must always fear God. Instead, Paul refers to fear in the sense of being afraid. We no longer have to be afraid of God.

Why would we be? Because of the wrath of God. The opening chapters of this letter demonstrated that God's wrath upon sinful humanity is very real. It should cause people to tremble before the Lord. Because how can a sinful and wayward person stand before a holy and righteous God?

But with our change of status, we no longer have to be afraid of God's wrath. We have heard God's declaration: there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. As a result, we ought not to be held captive by a sense of dread. Instead, we can have the attitude of a son. A son who knows he is loved by his father. A son who is protected by his father. A son who can bring before his father all his needs and concerns.

This leads to the second benefit of belonging to the family of God. We can call out to the Creator of the heavens and earth as our Father. Verse 14 ends by saying: *by him we cry out Abba, father.* Only a child can call out to a particular adult as father. Only a child of God can call out to God as father. The Aramaic word "Abba" is an intimate form of addressing a father. It's not a cold, distance address, but a warm and intimate way of addressing one's father. It's like a child calling out "daddy."

The use of this word "Abba" is rooted in the teachings and ministry of

Christ himself. While the OT does use father in describing God, it is not very dominant. But that changes with the coming of Jesus. He constantly spoke about his father. He taught his disciples to pray "Our father in heaven." In doing so, he broke with the stiffness of those around him. The religious leaders and people of Jesus' time would not have dared to use such a personal name for God. Yet, Jesus insists this intimate word be used. We are part of God's family and therefore we should call upon God as father. We can cry out: Daddy.

This is, of course, the foundation of our prayer life. In the catechism's commentary upon the opening address of the Lord's prayer, we find the following comment: "At the very beginning of our prayer Christ wants to kindle in us what is basic to our prayer--the childlike awe and trust that God through Christ has become our father. Our fathers do not refuse us the things of this life; God our father will even less refuse to give us what we ask in faith." Every time then, we come to God in prayer, we are benefiting from being part of his family.

A third benefit of being part of this family is what one can call the inner witness of the Spirit. Paul uses these words in verse 16 to describe it: *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.* The Spirit is at work in our lives and hearts, reassuring us that we are indeed children of God. There are times in our lives when our faith is shaken. There are times when doubts come to the surface. There are times when we feel we do not belong to God's family. But the Spirit is there to reassure us. The Spirit is there to keep us connected to God. Later on in this chapter, Paul says the Spirit intercedes for us when words escape us in our prayers.

Now this inner witness of the Spirit is not just for a few select Christians, though at times some believers may have a greater sense of the presence of the Spirit than others. But this witness of the Spirit is true for all believers. We experience it, when we pray "Abba, father." We experience it when we read and accept the Bible as the inspired word of God. We experience it, when we come to worship with the rest of God's family.

And there are times, in which we experience the presence of the Spirit in a very deep and moving way. Perhaps it comes when one has a sense of peace at a funeral. For others, it comes in a quiet moment reflecting upon the beauty of God's creation. For others, it might be felt in a convention, when a speaker really connects with you. What a blessing it is to have those moments when you can really sense the power and presence of the Spirit.

There is one final and glorious benefit of belonging to God's family. It's the rich inheritance that awaits us. Paul writes: *If we are children then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in*

*his suffering in order that we might share in his glory.* That can be one of the benefits of belonging to a family: of receiving part of the estate of one's parents.

Well, in this family of God a great inheritance lies in store for us. Here we can think of all the glories and blessings of the new creation. There is the new home, free from sin and evil. There is an overflow of blessings, including our new glorified bodies. Above all, there is that intimate fellowship which we can have with God himself. This is what we can look forward to. This is our glorious future. This is our great inheritance.

But the route to that inheritance includes suffering. Being part of God's family does not make one immune from the hurts and sorrows of this life. Its no guarantee that life will be smooth sailing. In fact, the gospel constantly warns us that suffering is part of being a disciple of Jesus. For Jesus, himself, suffering was a key competent on his path to glory. That's also true for those who follow in his footsteps. But in the midst of the suffering of the present time, we can look forward to the glorious inheritance that awaits us.

What an incredible family we belong to. We belong to the family of God. What a privilege that is! What great benefits that follow from it! Don't take this family for granted. Instead, give thanks to God for belonging to a family that has a glorious future. Amen.