

Romans 8:15-17 You are special

Introduction

Paul has already drawn attention in verse fourteen to the first blessing of the gift of the Holy Spirit to followers of Jesus. We have the privilege of being prompted counselled and directed through our consciences by the Holy Spirit. It is a gentle and gracious encouragement to become the man or woman God created us to be. It is not an aggressive or forceful encouragement but the opposite, enabling us to sense at times how we ought to behave and the choices we ought to make in given situations. This must not be understood as some kind of dramatic guide to all the detailed decisions we make –though on occasions it can be, but more often the Holy Spirit guides our minds into framing and holding to a set of principles or convictions which govern the choices we make. Our mindset is not the evolutionary one of ‘the survival of the fittest’, far from it! Our calling is to live as God-honouring people in community with other people. Our Bible verses for the year as a church reminds us of this. Luke 10:27 states: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind*”; and, “*Love your neighbour as yourself.*”

In Romans 8:15-17 the apostle outlines three other aspects of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Jesus’ followers. He describes these incredible blessings that are ours through what Jesus has done for us on the cross. He first of all highlights our experience of the Holy Spirit.

1. Our Experience of the Spirit (Romans 8:15)

¹⁵*The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by Him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’*

The overall theme of Romans eight is our security in Christ; that God wants to assure us that He has provided for us everything we need to live for Him through life’s ups and downs, good times and bad. What does this involve?

(a) **Our adoption by God** *the Spirit you received brought about your adoption...* It is important to stop and reflect on what adoption meant to Paul. In our culture a couple may long to have a family but for a variety of possible medical reasons one or both of them may be unable to conceive a child naturally. Although medical advances have now made it possible for certain conditions to be overcome, there are still many couples for whom the only possibility of having a child in their family is to foster or adopt one for whom the authorities or a particular agency is seeking appropriate parents. In these cases, as with other planned pregnancies, the parents take responsibility for the little one on the way and offer their love and support when their boy or girl enters the world. Or at least that is what ought to happen. Sadly some children never experience the love of biological parents and need adoptive parents. What is abundantly clear is that an adopted child by definition has to be a wanted child. You cannot legally adopt a child in our country without going through a rigorous series of checks to ensure that this child, who has already been disadvantaged, now gets the best possible care for the rest of their childhood to help prepare them for their adult lives. The vast majority of adoptive parents do a really good job caring for the child that enters their family. Albeit some of these children struggle to adjust to the fact that they were given up for adoption in the first place. For the majority, they enjoy the security of a loving family who have actively chosen to welcome that child into their home. The custom of adopting children was a Roman one. It was not a part of the experience of mainstream Jewish families. The extended family within Jewish communities would take care of their children so that the state or other authorities had no need to organise the care of any potentially vulnerable children. What kind of custom,

then, is Paul describing in the Roman world of his day? It is a very specific and clear practice. A Roman man has no biological children. He wishes to perpetuate his name and pass his estate or other worldly possessions to someone when he dies. Remember in that culture and others around the world until comparatively recently (19th century in the UK) women were not allowed to own anything but were under the authority of either their father or husband if married. This Roman man decides that he will choose a young man whom he respects and maybe has already got to know through his work or through some social context whom he will invite to become his son. This process of adoption was very special. It was irreversible and the one duly adopted had exactly the same rights and responsibilities under the law as a naturally-born son. It is possible that because the father chose him as a young adult he might have had a better relationship than some naturally-born sons have with their biological father. It was an irrevocable step. The young man was now a son to that father forever!

(b) **The purpose of our adoption** *The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship* (Romans 8:15). Fear of the loss of a situation can paralyse people into inactivity or to underperforming in a variety of contexts. A child who has no sense of security or lacks clear boundaries in their lives will exhibit to varying degrees dysfunctional or disruptive behaviour as they seek to gain attention, even if it is of the negative variety. In homes, classrooms and other settings relationships can be marred by individuals lacking secure loving relationships in their lives to anchor them for life. What Paul is saying here is this: whatever your upbringing and family circumstances, when you put your faith and trust in God you can know for sure that your heavenly Father loves and cares for you to the fullest extent. He has done and will do everything you need to become the person He intends you to be. Part of that showering of love upon us is the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 1:11-14 Paul wrote: *In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. **When you believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of His glory.** The word translated a seal in verse 13, in modern Greek could be in another context translated as 'an engagement ring', as long as we understand that this engagement could not be broken – unlike the agreement a couple might make regarding marriage in our own country which might, sadly, be called off by one party or both, despite a previous intention to marry expressed through a formal engagement. Paul's point in Ephesians 1:13 is to indicate that the gift of the Holy Spirit to a believer is an absolute guarantee of what is to follow beyond this life. Any blessings now are just a foretaste, a minor glimpse of a quality of life and relationships for which we were created. Therefore, if we truly grasp this point then our fear of losing our salvation or God rejecting us for our shortcomings should disappear like a morning mist on a warm summer's day. God loves you this much to take care of your future!*

(c) **We have a Father in heaven** ... *And by Him we cry, 'Abba, Father.* (Romans 8:15) Here the word first used by a Jewish baby *Abba* and that by many Gentiles at that time in the Roman empire *Pater* are placed side by side, describing the same reality, that we have *one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all* (Ephesians 4:6b). Why is this significant to Paul's readers and hearers? Ephesians 2:14-16 reminds us: *For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in His flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility.* There is both a deeply personal

and a strongly relational aspect to understanding God as our Father as Christians. It is not merely ‘me and Jesus’ in a private arrangement. On the contrary, although we must individually respond to the Gospel we become part of something much bigger than ourselves in its local, national and global expression –the church of Jesus Christ. We need to grasp this truth because it is vitally important to us. Remember when Jesus’ disciples wanted guidance about a pattern of prayer (Luke 11 and Matthew 6), He taught them these words: *This, then, is how you (plural) should pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”* (Matthew 6:9-13). The personal aspect of relating directly to God in the name of Jesus, through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, is central to our prayer lives. Although we value the prayers of others for us- and we need them! Every Christian can come directly to God in prayer there is absolutely no need of any earthly intermediary. There are references in the Old Testament to God as *Father* (Psalm 103:13: *As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him;* or Isaiah 64:8a which declares: *Yet you, Lord, are our Father...*); and the statement that God viewed Israel as *my first-born son* (Exodus 4:22); and the heart of God is revealed with the anguish He felt when His people turned their backs on Him and worshipped other gods. Jeremiah 3:19-20 is a good example of that grief where Jeremiah portrays God saying to Israel: *How gladly would I treat you like my children and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.” I thought you would call me “Father” and not turn away from following me.*²⁰ *But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me,’ declares the Lord.* Jesus with one exception, (the cry of dereliction from the cross, *My God, My God, Why have You forsaken me...* (Mark 15:34, a quotation of Psalm 22:1) when He was representing us as sinners on the cross, referred to God as *Father*. In the week before His crucifixion, at a public gathering in Jerusalem, for example, Jesus prayed these words in prayer in public: *‘Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? “Father, save Me from this hour”?’ No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.*²⁸ *Father, glorify Your name!’* (John 12:27-28). The child of God under the influence and direction of the Holy Spirit has the privilege of calling God *Father*, because we have entered a special relationship with Him through Jesus.

2. The Witness of the Spirit (Romans 8:16)

¹⁶*The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.*

Here is the third encouragement that is another reason for knowing that we are in God’s family through Jesus. We have the inner witness of the Holy Spirit that is supportive of and linked to our acceptance of God the Father as our heavenly Father. It is very difficult to express in words what Paul is stating in this verse. A Christian will have times when they have an inner conviction to phone someone or visit or in some other way respond to a prompting of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the calls or visits were of particular significance in their timing – at just the right time when that person may have needed some assistance and may even having been praying that God would send someone to help them –and soon afterwards not knowing the circumstances a fellow Christian shows up. On the surface many of these individual circumstances appear coincidental or chance happenings to an outside observer. However, over the years a Christian will be aware of these events happening and know within them that there is a supernatural dimension to this prompting to act.

There are also special encounters which Christians may have with the Lord when He is particularly close to us; it may be an experience of assurance or joy, maybe after a testing time or one where we have been crying out to God for assistance. It can happen to an individual quiet and on their own or in the midst of a large congregation at a Christian service

or conference. The danger some Christians face is trying to be prescriptive and saying that what they have experienced should be normative for other Christians. God deals with us personally and no two people have the same experience of the Lord in their ongoing relationship with Him. The reason for this is quite simple –our life experience and daily circumstances are different. It is no surprise that the majority of the most extraordinary supernatural encounters have been experienced by some of those who have suffered the most for their faith in torture camps or other institutions of Governments who wish to eradicate our faith from their jurisdictions. The most extraordinary event that demonstrates the witness of the Spirit is when a true Holy Spirit revival comes down on a community. In December 1949 in the Parish of Barvas, the leaders of the Parish Church and their minister had a conviction that a genuine Revival from God would visit their community, despite no visible signs in the wider community. They invited Duncan Campbell, the leading minister in the Faith Mission from Edinburgh to speak at a series of evening meetings. The crowded church that night had a stillness before the start of the service not felt by the speaker before such was the intensity of expectation of God at work. The service was concluded but no-one left; eventually the majority of people went outside the building but stood in solemn silence until a cry was heard from the church of a young man under conviction of sin yielding his life to God. The entire congregation returned into the building at which time several more men and women began weeping in earnest crying out to God for salvation; in the early hours of the morning other people, unchurched people were convicted by God to get out of their beds and go to the church, moved by a power they had never experienced before. The sense of God's presence swept through the area with church after church having nightly services that continued often till 3am. One night the minister of Carloway left the meeting at the church convinced of the need to go to a nearby dance hall. He entered the gathering –which caused the music to stop! He suggested singing a Psalm and prayer which didn't go down well, but began with a few words of exhortation and prayer and the Holy Spirit convicted person after person of their sin and need of Jesus. (Duncan Campbell, *God's Answer*, pp.74-77). This may be the extraordinary witness of the Spirit, which we may never experience, but over time in each of our lives as Christians we will have those moments when we sense His presence in our lives.

3. **The Blessings of the Spirit** (Romans 8:17)

¹⁷ *Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory (Romans 8:17).*

In Philippians 3:10-11 Paul wrote: *I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participation in His sufferings, becoming like Him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.* Years ago I heard Geoff Capes, then a former champion shot-putter from the UK, speak about the effort required in training for some competitions he was planning to enter. His words were few but decades later they still resonate in my mind: 'No pain no gain, no suffering no glory'. It summed up a very biblical theme from the apostle Paul that what is worth investing our lives in will cost us. Why do we give God first place in our lives? It is because of what lies ahead at the end of the journey. In this life people can be disappointed when they expect a wealthy relative or friend to leave them a significant sum in their will. Paul speaks here about the inheritance of the Christian. What is it lies ahead of each of us if we commit our lives to follow Jesus? It is certainly not a guarantee of an easy life. In Mark 8:34-36 Jesus said some deeply challenging words: *Then He called the crowd to Him along with His disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Almost without exception the first generation of Christians who set off to proclaim the good news of Jesus in the Roman world lost their lives because of their fearless loyalty to Jesus. I was struck some months ago to hear someone explaining what it means to follow Jesus in North Korea. The person indicated that*

each individual who professes Christ knows that this choice will probably lead to a death sentence at the hands of the state and thereby accept that in effect they have died. Every day they live from that moment onwards is a privilege and a bonus. The challenge of living for Jesus in Scotland is in a different cultural context, but our calling to be faithful to Him is no different. What is our inheritance as a Christian? What lies ahead of us?

(a) **Our inheritance** (i) A heavenly home (John 14:1-3) *'Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in Me. ² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am.* Words of assurance for now not just at funerals; God has taken care of your future beyond the grave – hallelujah! The Roman Empire ruled by fear. The threat of death kept the vast majority of residents in line. The exceptions were the Christians who willingly when forced to make a choice laid down their lives as martyrs rather than deny their faith. 'Jesus is Lord' not 'Caesar is Lord' was their declaration. Paul told the Christian residents of the Roman colonia (retirement community for Romans citizens) in Philippi these powerful words: *But **our citizenship is in heaven.** And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body* (Philippians 3:20-21). Recognition of this fact will keep us grounded when the independence referendum result this autumn is finally over. Our primary allegiance is not to any earthly geographical location, but to the Lord Jesus Christ and what He has in store for us. (ii) A heavenly celebration There are people outside the Christian faith who have an image of heaven as a boring place where there is a distinct lack of enjoyment and pleasure! Our response to such an observation has to be –have you read the Bible to see what it contains on this subject? Jesus in His parables communicating what heaven is like used the imagery of wedding celebrations on more than one occasion (for example, Mathew 22:1-14 & Matthew 25:1-13); also a banquet to honour the return of a prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32); although the picture language is not easy to interpret in Revelation, the words of Revelation 21:4 concerning heaven do appear as clear statements of part of what it will be like. *"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death" or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'* How do you feel hearing these words? I find such a place exceedingly appealing, not least when I know, and we can know that this is what awaits us beyond the grave. All activities in God's new creation will bring satisfaction and fulfilment whether work or praise and adoration of God – or whatever we will do. All relationships will be good and enriching no tense moments or angry words in the place God has in store for us. If that is 'boring' then your threshold of experience needs recalibrating –the best is yet to come –hallelujah! (iii) A heavenly calling In II Timothy 2:8b-12a Paul wrote: *This is my gospel, ⁹ for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. ¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. ¹¹ Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with Him, we will also live with Him; ¹² if we endure, we will also reign with Him.* We are part of something far bigger than we ever imagined- praise His wonderful name! Exactly what kind of work we will do in eternity is not clear, but the parables of Jesus (for example, Luke 19:11-27) indicate that our stewardship in His service on earth will have a direct bearing on what we do in the life to come –more than that we cannot say. (iv) Heavenly character qualities What will we be like in heaven? Will we recognise one another? Will we look the same or endless similar questions to which we cannot give definitive answers, but we do have some information. In I John 3:1-3 it states: *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! **And that is what we are!** The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what **we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when***

*Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.*³ *All who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure.* Can you even begin to grasp what that means? It is more extraordinary than my little mind can take in, but it sounds extraordinarily wonderful! (v) heavenly relationships *heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ...* The Psalmist Asaph wrote these words of testimony in Psalm 73:23-26: *Yet I am always with You; You hold me by my right hand.*²⁴ *You guide me with your counsel, and afterwards You will take me into glory.*²⁵ *Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You.*²⁶ *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.* Is this your testimony as well? Is God your supreme focus? (vi) A heavenly focus In Hebrews 11:13-16, following some illustrations of individuals who displayed faith in a great and wonderful God, we read these words: *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.*¹⁴ *People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.*¹⁵ *If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.*¹⁶ *Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.* God has more in store for you than you have ever asked for or imagined –if you are His child this morning. He simply asks us to keep our focus on the future as we make choices for our lives in the present time.

(b) The pathway to our inheritance *indeed we share in His sufferings...* Jesus at the Last Supper declared: *‘I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world’* (John 16:33). A large and increasing proportion of our fellow Christians live with serious persecution from active discrimination leading to loss of employment and accommodation to imprisonment, torture and even death in some cases. Between 2006 and 2010 active persecution against Christians was documented in 139 countries on earth. According to the secular International Society for Human Rights, based in Frankfurt, Germany, 80% of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are perpetrated against Christians (see John L. Allen, *The Global War on Christians*, 2013, for more details). There is general pain, suffering, heartache and disappointments we all suffer as part of our human experience of life, but for the typical Christian in the world today there is a cost far greater than we have had to face in the UK for several centuries. We cannot say Jesus didn't warn His people what lay in store for His faithful and dedicated followers.

(c) The proof of our adoption as His children *if indeed we share in His sufferings...* In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*¹¹ *Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.*¹² *Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* (Matthew 5:10-12). At the Last Supper Jesus said even clearer words on this subject. *If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first.*¹⁹ *If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.*²⁰ *Remember what I told you: “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.*²¹ *They will treat you this way because of My name, for they do not know the one who sent Me* (John 15:18-21). We are amongst the most privileged Christians on earth with the freedoms we have enjoyed in the last couple of centuries. However, be encouraged to note that the extraordinary growth of the Christian Church over the last century has been in places where opposition to the Gospel has been strong and at times fierce, for example in China. Why should we stand firm? What lies beyond for those who endure faithfully to the end?

(d) The pathway to glory *in order that we may also share in His glory* Jesus told the couple of the road to Emmaus on the first Easter Sunday: *Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things*

and then enter his glory? (Luke 24:26). Jonathan Chao told the story of a Chinese pastor imprisoned for his faith in 1960. When he was released in 1979 his congregation had grown from 300 to 5,000 members. By the early 1990s it had increased to around 20,000 (J.M. Boice, Romans, Vol. 2, p. 859). The biblical lesson and the lesson from Church history is that Christians who seek to be effective witnesses for Jesus in evangelism and church-planting will face opposition and all kinds of discouragements, but Our Father in heaven reminds us of the reason why we must persevere in the work to which He has called us. So why do we keep going in God's work when at times it is hard, discouraging, exhausting and sometimes with little outward signs of blessing from it? These words of Paul from II Corinthians 4 are appropriate ones with which to finish: *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal* (II Corinthians 4:16-18). Amen.