

## **The Call**

Isaiah 6:1-8  
Romans 8:12-17

Our Bible Study and Brew group studied the Apostle Paul this week. N.T. Wright, co-author of our study guide, writes that Paul is the man who, “invented something we can call Christian theology.” Paul's writings are the earliest to do theology, to systematize Christian belief, to organize and explain it in depth. Nowhere do we find a better example than in his last known writing, the book of Romans. But before we dive into Paul's teaching in Romans 8, a few notes about Paul the person.

I try always to use inclusive language. That is, I prefer “person” to “man”, “brothers and sisters” to “brothers”. Paul did not write inclusively. In our passage he refers to “sons” and “the spirit of sonship”. We will explain what that means in a few minutes. For now I want to suggest that for his time and place, Paul was actually a bit of a progressive. His entire ministry was aimed largely at the Gentiles, a fact that blew the brain circuits of his fellow Pharisees. In the book of Acts we read that Paul accepted women into positions of leadership in the churches, an unthinkable thing for almost all the cultures of the time. If Paul's writing seems exclusive please understand it reflects the ingrained thinking patterns of the ages.

Yet Paul was also a Pharisee. He had rigorously studied the Old Testament,

especially the Pentateuch. If his theology challenged the Jewish understanding of the meaning and purpose of God's law, he never could quite shake its template. He thought about everything through the lens of the law. In order for us to understand Romans 8, we must understand that while its author was challenging his own people's traditions, he also still saw everything from their perspective.

Our passage today moves through three distinctive modes of being under the Old Testament law. Paul starts by referring to slaves, moves to children, and finishes with heirs. The Jews in his day did not practice slavery. In previous centuries, and in accordance with that law, they did have what we might call indentured servants. The Mosaic law allowed for servants to work for masters for up to six full years. At the dawn of the seventh year—called the Jubilee—the servant was freed of all obligation to the master. The masters had to provide food and shelter but also had the full force of the law backing their control of their servants. On the other hand, the Hebrews had on several occasions experienced slavery at the hands of foreign empires. So the Pharisee Paul understood that under the law Jews could serve an indenture period, and that slavery was a ghastly horror. In Romans 8:12 our translation tells us he writes, “we are debtors, not to the flesh...” In the original Greek he wrote, “we are slaves”. But slaves to what?

Paul gives us two parallel tracks: flesh and Spirit. In his Pharisaical mind “flesh” symbolizes sin. No prude, he does not have the Puritanical distaste for the body and its functions of which some moderns accuse him. Using the word flesh to stand in for

disobedience of God's law (sin) has its roots way back in what scholars call the “Textual Prophets”, men like Elijah who appear in the texts of the books of Samuel and the Kings. These men lived before even Isaiah. Paul means we must serve either sin or the Spirit of God. He adds that if we live according to the flesh, if we remain slaves to sin, we die. But if by the power of the Spirit we “put to death the deeds of the flesh” we will live.

But what does it mean to “put to death the deeds of the flesh”? Paul tells us it means to be “led by the Spirit of God”. John Calvin found three ways in which the Spirit of God leads us: listening to the conscience God has implanted in us, giving thanks for God's gracious forgiveness, and seeking to grow ever closer to God in Jesus Christ. When we use the momentum the Spirit gives us to do these and other spiritual acts, we become “children of God”. (Again, Paul uses “sons” but we know he believed all people can become children of God.) In the Mosaic law children had certain rights. Our laws dovetail nicely with this as we codify the provision and protection we hope all parents would give their children. In this passage the important thing is not the specific rights but the fact that the Spirit of God leads us into an increased status. No longer slaves, we have become children.

Paul has yet one more move to make. When we call, “Abba! Father!” the Spirit makes us heirs of God. Abba comes from the Aramaic vernacular of Hebrew that Jesus and his followers spoke. Abba means “father” and has a familiar, if not familial, feeling. It is what a child would call his or her daddy. When the Spirit leads us into

such an intimate relationship with God that we can call him “Daddy” (or her “Mamma”), we have become heirs. And again, for Paul the Pharisee the term “heir” has a specific meaning in the Mosaic law. Under that code, only a son could inherit, and in practice only the eldest son received more than a token portion of his father's property. (Jesus, in telling his parable of the Prodigal son, has the younger son ask for his “share”. His audience would have understood this to mean a fraction of the total property, enough to live on for a short time.)

Paul's thought is that the Spirit makes all who enter into relationship with Christ elder sons, eligible to receive the richness of the inheritance he holds for us. He writes that we can expect to become glorified with Jesus. We will be lifted up, exalted, blessed, **glorified**. The old African-American spiritual The Calling puts it this way: “The Lord calls His children/Calls us all to glory/The Lord calls His children/Called to tell God's story.” For the second week in a row I did not feel glorious as I wrote these words. The news of Gayle Wilson's killing at the hands of her son was too fresh. And we had also just learned of the death of those two friends of Gail Nattkemper's. I do not wish to overplay this. I did not have a faith crisis. Yet the senseless, random nature of both incidents put a dark cloud over things. It makes one wonder what God's purposes are. In times like those, those purposes can seem terribly obscure.

The African-Americans who sang the spirituals could tell us a thing or two about slavery and suffering. It was precisely from the dark cloud of oppression that they found the spiritual strength to emerge into glory through song and praise. To sing of

glory was not to deny the pain, but to confess their faith in God's ultimate purposes. God calls us into glory. The Apostle Paul believed that glory would come in the resurrection life. The very next verse after our passage reads, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." Paul believed the inheritance God offers will come to all its glorious fruition in the life which is to come. Which means we must take it all on faith. Which in turn means we need to rely on the Holy Spirit all the more.

This week a friend, we'll call her Jody, posted on Facebook the story of her trip to a fast food place. It had one of those two-lane drive-throughs. You go left or right to place your order, and then merge like a zipper into one line to pay and pick up your food. The car in the other lane, whose driver had placed his order after her, tried to cut her off. He kept gunning his engine and making one-second jolts forward, hoping to intimidate her into backing off. Normally, Jody wrote, she would let him go, not caring enough to confront such a bully. But her nephew had worked the window at that very location. He had told her they line up the orders in a queue. If the drivers reach the window out of order it can actually get a bit complicated to sort out the drinks and bags. So Jody steeled her nerve and went ahead. Suddenly a woman jumped out of the passenger's side of the other car, walked up to within a few feet, and started screaming at her. Jody wished she had thought to start the timer on her phone because it felt like this woman sustained her profane tirade for five minutes, walking forward every time the line moved.

Was the other woman having a terrible day? Jody asked. Was she on drugs? Was it COVID stress? How should a Christian react to such a thing? It made me wonder how I would have reacted. Since I do not wear a clerical collar would I have gotten mad enough to take advantage of the woman not knowing I'm a pastor and give her a strong dose of her own medicine? Sadly, I am capable of that. Or would I have found the spiritual maturity to at least ignore the tirade, if not to try to find some way somehow to express why I insisted on going first?

Life can be nasty. People die in tragic ways. Pandemics happen. Terrible days come and go. How should a Christian react? We should react by remembering that God has called even the likes of us into relationship. God has made sinners inheritors of glory. We have hope because Jesus already suffered in our place. We do not deserve it. We are sinners. ***So when somebody screams at us we ought to remind ourselves God loves them, too.*** For in our inmost beings we are no better than they are.

My friend Jody reported that when she got to the window to pick up her food the girl who served her apologized. "No need to do that, it's not your fault," Jody said. Then the girl said, "Well, I'll pray for her, anyway."

Grace instead of judgment. Forgiveness instead of recrimination. Glory instead of darkness. This is what God offers us. Let the Spirit move you to receive—and to give—these precious gifts.