

The Spirit of Bondage and Adoption

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"For you have not received the Spirit of bondage again to fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit, Himself, bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." [Romans 8:15,16](#).

THESE two verses are full of the word "spirit," and they are also full of spiritual truth. We have read in previous verses about the flesh and of the result that comes of minding it, namely, death. But now, in this verse, we get away from the flesh and think only of the work of the Holy Spirit upon our spirits—and of the blessed privilege which comes of it— "that we should be called the sons of God." We cannot enter into this except by the power of the Holy Spirit, for the spiritual Truths of God must be spiritually discerned—our eyes need God's Light and our spirits need the Holy Spirit's quickening. We breathe our prayer to the Great Spirit that He would make us feel the full meaning of His Words.

I think that I see in the text the fourfold work of the Spirit. First, the Spirit of bondage. Secondly, the Spirit of adoption. Thirdly, the Spirit of prayer—here it is, "Whereby we cry." And fourthly, the Spirit of witness—"The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God."

I. Consider, first of all, THE SPIRIT OF BONDAGE. Much of the bondage in which we are plunged by our fallen nature is not the work of the Spirit of God at all. Bondage under sin, bondage under the flesh, bondage to the fashions and customs of the world, bondage under the fear of man—this is carnal bondage, the work of the flesh, of sin and of the devil. But there is a sense of bondage to which, I think, the Apostle here mainly alludes, which is of the Spirit of God. Before the Spirit of God within us becomes the Spirit of liberty, He is, first of all, the Spirit of bondage. The Spirit is not, first, a quickening Spirit to us, but a withering Spirit—"The grass withers, the flower fades: because the Spirit of the Lord blows upon it: surely the people is grass."

The Divine Spirit wounds before He heals, He kills before He makes alive. We usually draw a distinction between Law-work and Gospel-work, but Law-work is the work of the Spirit of God and is so far a true Gospel-work that it is a frequent preliminary to the joy and peace of the Gospel. The Law is the needle which draws after it the silken thread of blessing and you cannot get the thread into the stuff without the needle—men do not receive the liberty wherewith Christ makes them free until, first of all, they have felt bondage within their own spirit driving them to cry for liberty to the great Emancipator, the Lord Jesus Christ!

This sense or Spirit of bondage works for our salvation by leading us to cry for mercy. Let us notice that there is a kind of bondage which is, in part, at least, the work of the Spirit of God, although it is often darkened, blackened and made legal in a great measure by other agencies which do not aim at our benefit. That part of the bondage which I shall now describe is altogether the work of the Spirit of God. That is, first, when men are brought into bondage through being convicted of sin. This bondage is not the work of Nature and certainly never the work of the devil. It is not the work of human oratory, nor of human reason—it is the work of the Spirit of God! As it is written, "When the Spirit of Truth is come, He shall convince the world of sin."

It needs a miracle to make a man know that he is, in very deed, a sinner. He will not admit it. He kicks against it. Even when he confesses the outward transgression, he does not know or feel the inward heinousness of his guilt in his soul so as to be stunned, confounded and humbled by the fact that he is a rebel against his God. Now, no man can ever know a Savior without knowing himself a sinner—even as no man can value a physician while he is ignorant of the existence and evil of disease. By the killing sentence of the Law of God we are bruised, broken and crushed to atoms as to all comeliness and self-righteousness.

This, I say, is the work of the Spirit of God. He works a necessary sense of bondage within us by putting us under a sense of sin. The Spirit of God is always the Spirit of Truth and, therefore, He only convinces men of that which is true. He puts them into no false, or fanciful, or needless bondage. "When the Spirit of Truth is come, He shall convince the world of sin"—because it is sinful. When the Spirit puts men into bondage because they are sinners, He only puts them into their right place. When He came to some of us by the Law, He made us feel what we were by nature—and what we felt and saw was the truth. He made us see things as they really were. Until He came, we put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter, darkness for light and light for darkness! But when the Spirit of Truth was come, then sin appeared as sin. Then we were in bondage and it was no fancied slavery, but the very truth.

The Spirit of God also brought us farther into bondage when He made us feel the assurance that punishment must follow upon sin, when He made us know that God can by no means clear the guilty and that He was not playing with us when He said, "The soul that sins, it shall die." We were made to feel the sentence of death in ourselves, that we might not trust in ourselves. At that time we trembled on the brink of fate. We wondered that we were not already in Hell. We were so convinced of sin that it was a matter of astonishment to us that the sentence did not immediately take place upon us. We were speechless before God as to excuse or justification. We could not offer anything by which we could turn away the edge of justice, though we saw it like a glittering sword stripped of the scabbard of almighty patience.

Do you know what this means? I can hardly hope that you will prize the Atonement, or feel the sweetness of the expiation by blood, unless, first of all, you have felt that your

soul's life was due to God on account of your transgressions! We must know a shutting-up under the sentence of the Law of God, or we shall never rejoice in the liberty which comes to us by Grace through the blood of the Lamb of God! Blessed be the Spirit of God for working in us this double sense of bondage—first making us know that we are guilty and, secondly—making us feel that the justice of God must punish us for sin!

And then, further, the Spirit of God operates as a Spirit of bondage upon the hearts of those whom God will save by bringing them to feel the bitter impossibility of their hoping to clear themselves by the works of the Law. We heard this sentence thundered in our soul—"By the deeds of the Law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight: for by the Law is the knowledge of sin." We could not meet our God under His Law—we looked up to Sinai's fiery summit where the Lord revealed Himself and we felt that its crags were too steep for our tottering feet to climb! Even if the way were smooth, how could we dare to pass through the thick darkness and hold communion with Jehovah, who is a consuming fire?

The Spirit of God once and for all weaned us from all thought of a righteousness of our own. We were divorced from the legal spirit and compelled to abhor the very notion of justifying ourselves in the sight of a pure and holy God by our works, or feelings, or prayers! This was, by His Grace, the work of the Spirit of God! This result is always produced in every child of God, but not always by the same degree of bondage. Fetters of different weights are used in this prison, as wisdom and prudence appoint.

The Spirit of bondage comes not to all alike, for some find peace and life in a moment, and come to Calvary as soon as Sinai begins to thunder. I have known this Spirit of bondage come with great force to men who have been open transgressors. Others who have been kept by the preventing Grace of God from the extremes of open sin have not felt as much of it. But men that have blasphemed God, broken the Sabbath and violated every holy thing—when they are brought before God under a sense of sin—have frequently had a hard time of it. See how Saul was blinded three days and did neither eat nor drink. Read John Bunyan's, "Grace Abounding," and notice the five years of his subjection to this Spirit of bondage.

It must, in Bunyan's case, be noted that his bondage was far from being altogether the work of the Spirit, for much of it arose from his own unbelief. But still, there was in the core and heart of it, a work of the Spirit of God most wonderfully convincing him of sin. I would not wonder if some of my hearers who may have gone far into outward transgression are made to feel, when brought to spiritual life, great grief and humiliation under a sense of their sin. Such bondage often happens to those who, as the old authors used to say, were "close sinners"—men who did not even know that they were sinners at all, but, in consequence of their morality and the strictness of their lives, had a high conceit of their own excellence in the sight of God.

Certain of these people experience most fearful convictions of sin—as if God would say to each one, "I must rid you of your self-righteousness. I must cure you of trusting in your moral life and, therefore, I will let you see into the depths

of your depravity. I will discover to you your sins against My Light and knowledge, your sins against conscience, your sins against the Love of God. You are brought into sore bondage, but that bondage shall heal you of your pride." I have noticed one thing more, and that is that those who are, in later life, to be greatly useful are often thus dug, tilled and fed in order that much fruit may be brought forth by them in later years. I have had to deal with as many troubled souls as any living man—and God has greatly used me for their deliverance—but this never could have happened, so far as I can judge, unless I had, myself, been the subject of a terrible Law-work, convincing me not only of my actual sin, but of the source of that sin, namely, a deep and bottomless fountain of depravity in my own nature.

When I have met with persons driven to despair and almost ready to destroy themselves, I have said, "Yes, I understand all that. I have been in those sepulchral chambers and can sympathize with those who are chilled by their damps. I know the heart of a stranger, for I, also, was a captive in Egypt and worked at the brick kilns." In such a case this bondage of spirit becomes a profitable preparation for later work. The sword that has to cut through coats of mail must be annealed in many fires. It must endure processes which a common blade escapes. Do not, therefore, expect that the Spirit of bondage will be seen in all of you to the same degree, for, after all, it is not the Spirit of bondage which is to be desired for its own sake, but that which comes after it—the Spirit of liberty in Christ Jesus!

Our text reminds us that the result of this Spirit of bondage in the soul is fear—"The Spirit of bondage to fear." There are five sorts of fears and it is always well to distinguish between them. There is the natural fear which the creature has of its Creator because of its own insignificance and its Maker's greatness. From that we shall never be altogether delivered, for with holy awe we shall bow before the Divine Majesty, even when we come to be perfect in Heaven. Secondly, there is a carnal fear, that is, the fear of man. May God deliver us from it! May we never cease from duty because we dread the eye of man! Who are you that you should be afraid of a man that shall die? From this cowardice God's Spirit delivers Believers.

The next fear is a servile fear—the fear of a slave towards his master, lest he should be beaten when he has offended. That is a fear which should rightly dwell in every unregenerate heart. Until the slave is turned into a child, he ought to feel that fear which is suitable to his position. By means of this fear, the awakened soul is driven and drawn to Christ and learns the perfect love which casts it out. If servile is not cast out, it leads to a fourth fear, namely, a diabolical fear, for we read of devils, that they "believe and tremble." This is the fear of a malefactor towards the executioner, such a fear as possesses souls that are shut out forever from the light of God's Countenance.

But, fifthly, there is a filial fear which is never cast out of the mind. This is to be cultivated. This is "the fear of the Lord" which is "the beginning of wisdom." This is a precious gift of Grace—"Blessed is the man that fears the Lord." This makes the saints fearful of offending lest they should grieve Infinite Love. It causes them to walk before the Lord with the fear of a loving child who would not, in anything, displease his parents. When the Spirit of bondage is at work upon the heart, there is much of the fourth form of fear, namely, servile fear—and I tell you that it is the Spirit of Truth which brings this to us because we are in a condition which demands it—we are slaves until Christ sets us free and, being still under the Law, servile fear is our most natural and proper feeling. Would you have the slave rejoice in a liberty which he does not possess? Is he not the more likely to be free if he loathes his slavery? I wish that every man here, who is not a child of God, would become possessed with servile fear and tremble before the Most High!

Now, mark that while this fear lasts, it is intended to work us toward God. I have already touched upon that. This bondage, which causes fear, breaks us off from self-righteousness. It makes us value the righteousness of Christ and it also puts an end to certain sins. Many a man, because he is afraid of the consequences, leaves off this and that which would have ruined him and, so far, the fear is useful to him. And, in later life, the sense of the terror which fear worked in his soul will keep him nearer to his Lord. How can he return to that evil thing which once filled his soul with bitterness and grief?

But now I want to notice that in due time we outgrow this bondage and never receive it again, for, "We have not received the Spirit of bondage again to fear." There comes a time when the Spirit of Truth no longer causes bondage. Why not? Because we are not slaves any longer and, therefore, there is no bondage for us because we are no longer guilty, having been cleared in the court of God and, therefore, no sin should press upon our spirit! We are made to be the children of God and God forbid that God's children should tremble like slaves! No, we have not received the Spirit of bondage again, for the Spirit of God has not brought it to us again. And though the devil tries to bring it, we do not "receive" his

goods. And though sometimes the world thinks that we ought to feel it—we are not of the world—and we will not "receive" the world's spirit.

We are new creatures in Christ Jesus! We are not under the Law, but under Grace! And, therefore, we are free from our former bondage. "We have not received the Spirit of bondage again to fear." I know some Christians, or persons who call themselves Christians, who often come under this spirit of bondage. They erroneously say, "If I have sinned I have ceased to be a child of God." That is the spirit of bondage with a vengeance! If a servant disobeys, he will be sent adrift—but you cannot discharge your child. My son is my son forever! Who denies that? Sonship is a settled fact and never can be altered under any possible circumstances. If I am a child of God, who shall separate me from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, my Lord?

Some perform all religious actions from a principle of fear and they abstain from this and that iniquity because of fear. A child of God does not desire to be thus driven or held back! He works not for reward. He toils not in order to gain salvation. He is saved! And because God has "worked in him to will and to do of his own good pleasure," he, therefore, works out the salvation which God has already worked in! Blessed is the man who knows that he is no longer a servant, but has become an heir of God, a joint-heir with Jesus Christ!

II. This brings us to our second head which is, THE SPIRIT OF ADOPTION. I should require a week to preach properly upon this blessed theme. Instead of preaching upon it, I will give you hints. Will you kindly notice that the Apostle said, "You have not received the Spirit of bondage"? If he had kept strictly to the language, he would have added, "But you have received the Spirit of—what? Why of "liberty." That is the opposite of bondage! Yes, but our Apostle is not to be hampered by the rigid rules of composition! He has inserted a far greater word—"You have received the Spirit of adoption."

This leads me to observe that from this mode of putting it, it is clear that the Spirit of adoption is, in the highest sense the Spirit of liberty! If the Son make you free, you shall be free, indeed. If you become sons through that blessed Son, oh, the freeness of your spirits! Your soul has nothing to fear—you need not dread the wrath of God, for He has sworn, "I will not be angry with you, nor rebuke you." The Believer feels the love of God shed abroad within him and, therefore, he exercises a liberty to draw near to God such as he never had before. He has access with boldness! He learns to speak with God as a child speaks with his father! See what a blessed thing is this Spirit of liberty, this Spirit of adoption.

Now, the Apostle said, "You have not received the Spirit of bondage again to fear." What is the opposite of that? He should have added—should he not?—"but you have received the Spirit of liberty by which you have confidence." He has not, in so many words expressed himself thus, but he has said all that and a great deal more by saying, "Whereby we cry, Abba, Father." This is the highest form of confidence that can be thought of—that a child of God should be able, even when he is forced to cry, to cry nothing less than, "Abba, Father." At his lowest, when he is full of sorrow and grief, even in his crying and lamenting, he sticks to, "Abba, Father"! This is a joyous confidence, indeed! Oh, that God may give it to you, dearly Beloved, to the very fullest!

Thus it is clear that the Spirit of adoption is a Spirit of liberty and a Spirit of confidence. As a child is sure that its father will love him, feed him, clothe him, teach him and do all that is good for him, so are we sure that, "No good thing will be withheld from them that walk uprightly." And He will make all things to "work together for good to them that love God." The Spirit of bondage made us fear, but the Spirit of adoption gives us full assurance. That fear which distrusts God—that fear which doubts whether He will remain a loving and merciful God—that fear which makes us think that all His love will come to an end is gone, for we cry, "Abba, Father," and that cry is the death of doubting and fearing!

We sing to brave music, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him." The Spirit of adoption, moreover, is a spirit of gratitude. Oh, that the Lord should put me among the children! Why should He do this? He did not need children that He should adopt me. The First-born alone was enough to fill the Father's heart throughout eternity! And yet the Lord puts us among the children! Blessed be His name forever and ever! "Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God!" The Spirit of adoption is a spirit of child-likeness. It is pretty, though sometimes sad, to see how children imitate their parents. How much the little man is like his father! Have you not noticed it? Do you not like to see it, too? You know you do!

Yes, and when God gives the Spirit of adoption, there begins in us, poor fallen creatures as we are, some little likeness to Himself—and that will grow to His perfect image! We cannot become God, but we have the privilege and the power to become the sons of God. "Even to as many as believe on His name" does Jesus give this privilege and, therefore, we grow up into Him in all things, who is our Head—and at the same time the pattern and mirror of what all the children of God are to be! Thus, dear Friends, let us see with great joy that we have not received, again, the Spirit of bondage! We shall not receive Him any more! The Spirit of God will never come to us in that form, again, for now we have been washed in the blood! We have been taken away from being heirs of wrath even as others! We have been placed in the family of the MOST HIGH and we feel the Spirit of adoption within us, whereby we cry, "Abba, Father!"

III. Just two or three words upon the next office of the Holy Spirit, which is THE SPIRIT OF PRAYER. Whenever the Spirit of adoption enters into a man it sets him praying. He cannot help it. He does not wish to help it—

"Prayer is the Christian's vital breath, The Christian's native air. His watchword at the gates of death— He enters Heaven with prayer." And this praying of the true Believer who has the Spirit of adoption is very earnest praying, for it takes the form of crying. He does not say, "Abba, Father." Anybody can say those words. But he cries, "Abba, Father." Nobody can cry, "Abba, Father," but by the Holy Spirit. When those two words, "Abba, Father," are set to the music of a child's cry, there is more power in them than in all the orations of Demosthenes and Cicero! They are such heavenly sounds as only the twice-born, the true aristocracy of God, can utter, "Abba, Father." They even move the heart of the Eternal!

But it is also very natural praying—for a child to say, "Father," is according to the fitness of things. It is not necessary to send your boys to a Boarding School to teach them to do that. They cry, "Father," soon and often. So, when we are born again, "Our Father, which are in Heaven," is a prayer that is never forced upon us—it rises up naturally within the new-born nature and because we are born-again, we cry, "Abba, Father." When we have lost our Father for a while, we cry after Him in the dark. When He takes the rod to us, we

cry, but we cry no other way than this—"Abba, Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me."

It seems to me to be not only an earnest cry and a natural cry, but a very appealing cry. It touches your heart when your child says, "Don't hurt me, Father. Dear Father, by your love to me, forgive me." True prayer pleads the fatherhood of God—"My Father, my Father, I am no stranger. I am no foe, I am Your own dear and well-beloved child. Therefore, like as a father pities his children, have pity upon me." The Lord never turns a deaf ear to such pleading. He says, "I do earnestly remember him still," and in love He checks his hand. And what a familiar word it is—"Abba, Father"! They say that slaves were never allowed to call their masters "Abba." That was a word for free-born children only—no man can speak with God as God's children may.

I have heard critics say, sometimes, of our prayers, "How familiar that man is with God." And one adds, "I do not like such boldness." No, you slaves! Of course you cannot speak with God as a child can! And it would not be right that you should! It befits you to fear, crouch and, like miserable sinners, to keep yourselves a long way off from God. Distance is the slave's place—only the child may draw near! But if you are children, then you may say, "Lord, You have had mercy upon me, miserable sinner as I was, and You have cleansed me, and I am Yours. Therefore deal with me according to the riches of Your Grace. My soul delights herself in You, for You are my God and my exceeding joy." Who but a true-born child of God can understand those Words of God—"Delight yourself, also, in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart"?

I do not know any more delightful expression towards God than to say to Him, "Abba, Father." It is as much as to say—"My heart knows that You are my Father. I am as sure of it as I am sure I am the child of my earthly father! And I am more sure that You would deal more tenderly with me than that my earthly father would." Paul hints at this when he reminds us that our fathers, verily, chastened us after their own pleasure, but the Lord always chastens us for our profit. The heavenly Father's heart is never angry so as to smite in wrath, but in pity, gentleness and tenderness He afflicts His sons and daughters. "You in faithfulness have afflicted me."

See what a blessed state this is to be brought into, to be made children of God, and then in our prayers to be praying, not like serfs and servants, but as children who cry, "Abba, Father"!

IV. Now, the last thing is, THE SPIRIT OF WITNESS—"The Spirit, Himself, bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." There are two witnesses to the adoption of every child of God. Two is a legal number—in the mouth of two witnesses the whole shall be established. The first witness is the man's own spirit. His spirit says, "Yes, yes, yes, I am a child of God! I feel those drawings towards God; I feel that delight in Him; I feel that love to Him; I feel that wish to obey Him which I never would have felt if I were

not His child. Moreover, God's own Word declares, 'To as many as received Him'—that is Christ—'to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name.' Now, I have received Christ, and I believe on His name—therefore, I have the evidence of God's written Word that I am one of the sons of God. I have the right, the permission, the authority, to be one of the sons of God! That is the witness of my spirit—I believe and, therefore, I am a child."

Now comes in the witness of the Holy Spirit. Nobody can question His veracity, but how does the Spirit of God witness to our sonship? First, He witnesses it, as I have already said, through the Word of God of which He is the Author. The Word contained in Scripture is quite enough for us if we have a saving faith. We accept it and believe it. The Spirit of God thus witnesses through the Word and that is the surest medium! "We have a more sure Word of testimony," said Peter. That is a wonderful declaration of the Apostle! Peter had spoken about seeing Christ transfigured on the holy mountain. Was not that sure? Yes, it was, but he, in effect, says—We have a more sure Word of testimony than all the sights that we have seen. Therefore we do well if we take heed, as unto a light that shines in a dark place.

Next, the Spirit of God bears witness by His work in us. He works in us that which proves us to be the children of God. And what is that? The first thing is that He works in us great love to God. None love God but those that are born of Him. There is no true love to God in Christ Jesus except in those that have been begotten again by God's own Spirit, so that our love to God is the witness of the Spirit that we are the children of God. Furthermore, He works in us a veneration for God. We fear before Him with a childlike reverence—everything that has to do with God becomes sacred to us when He communes with us. Yes, if He only met us in a dream, we would say, "How wonderful is this place! It is none other than the House of God and the very gate of Heaven."

The place of His feet is glorious in our eyes! The meanest of His chosen are honorable in our esteem! This holy awe of Believers is a proof of their being God's children. If He is their Father, they will reverence Him, for we know that when we had fathers of our flesh, they corrected us and we gave them reverence, for it was due them. Shall we not be in subjection to the Father of our spirits? That subjection is the surest evidence that we are, indeed, the sons of God. In addition to this, the Spirit of God works in us a holy confidence. By His Grace we feel, in days of trouble, that we can rest in God. When we cannot see our way, we go on joyfully without seeing. What is the good of seeing with our own eyes when the eyes of the Lord are running to and fro in the earth to show Himself strong on the behalf of all them that trust in Him?

Our faith feels a joy in believing seeming contradictions; a delight in accepting apparent impossibilities! We have a belief in God's veracity so sure and steadfast that if all the angels in Heaven were to deny the Truth of God, we would laugh them to scorn! He must be true

and we know it—every Word in His Bible is as certainly true to us as if we had seen the thing with our own eyes—yes, and truer, still, for eyes deceive and mislead—but God never can! Wherever there is this blessed child-like trust, there is the Spirit's witness that we are the children of God.

And then, again, when the Spirit of God works sanctification in us, that becomes a further witness of our sonship. When He makes us hate sin. When He makes us love everything that is pure and good. When He helps us to conquer ourselves. When He leads us to love our fellow men. When He fashions us like Christ—this is the witness of the Spirit with our spirit that we are the children of God! Oh, to have more and more of it! Besides which, I believe that there is a voice unheard in the outward ear which drops in silence on the spirit of man and lets him know that he has, indeed, passed from death unto life. This, also, is the seal of the Spirit to the truth our adoption.

Now let us begin at the beginning and bless Him that He has made us feel the bondage of sin. Let us bless Him that He made us fear and tremble—and fly to Jesus. Let us bless Him that He has brought us into the adoption of children. Let us bless Him that He helps us to cry, "Abba, Father." And, lastly, let us bless Him that, tonight, He bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God!

Dear Friend, do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? If so, all the privileges of an heir of God are yours! If you do not believe in Christ, the Spirit of God will never bear witness to a lie and tell you that you are saved when you are not! If you are not saved and not yet a believer in Jesus, I tell you that you are like a blank document to which the Spirit of God

will never set His hand and seal, for He is never so unwise as to sign a blank paper! If you have believed, you are a child of God and the Spirit of God sets His seal to your adoption! Go in peace and rejoice in the Lord forever!—

"Nor fret, nor doubt, nor suffer slavish fear—

Your spirit is released, your path is clear!

Let praise fill up your day and evermore

Live to love, to copy and adore!"