

# The Holy Spirit's Role in Assurance of Salvation

*Dr. Joel R. Beeke*

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:1–17

Text: Romans 8:12–17

If we are true believers, the Holy Spirit's role in our personal assurance of faith can scarcely be stressed sufficiently. Without the Spirit, we will either be kept from having assurance when we should have it, or we will think we have it, when we have no right to it. Only through the Spirit's work can we be assured that we are true Christians.

Because we are weak and in constant need of divine assistance, the Holy Spirit works assurance in us on behalf of the Godhead. Romans 8:16 makes plain that this is the special work of the Holy Spirit when it says literally in Greek, "*Himself*, that is, the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." The Greek sentence in verse 16 begins with the pronoun *Himself*, giving emphasis to this divine work of assurance that we are the children of God by the Spirit upon and with our human consciousness.

In this sermon, with God's help, we will look briefly at the Spirit's capability to do this great work of assurance, and second, more largely, at the Spirit's evidences of doing this work as expounded by Paul in Romans 8:12–17.

### **Evidences of the Ability of the Spirit in Relation to Assurance**

As God, the Holy Spirit is able to do this work. In His wisdom, He knows precisely what we need to comfort, encourage, and assure us. His power overcomes every barrier raised against assurance. His energy never varies or fades, so that even in the most demanding times in life, the Spirit testifies of our adoption.

In the divine economy, particular responsibilities rest upon particular persons. It is not that there is no sharing in most of these areas but there is special responsibility and involvement by one divine person in particular. This is especially true of the Holy Spirit in relation to assurance. As our Lord prepared His disciples for His death, resurrection, and ascension, He told them that the divine Comforter would come in His place: “I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless [or orphaned]: I will come to you” (John 14:16–18). The despair of the disciples after the resurrection vanished with the coming of the Spirit in His mighty, indwelling power. His presence assures believers through the darkest times that we are not left as orphans!

This peculiar work of the Spirit is evident in the way that He affirms sonship or adoption. Galatians 4:4–7 parallels and amplifies Romans 8:16: “But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons” (vv. 4–5). Here the work of redemption through Christ goes beyond the forensic language to the familial reality, “the adoption of sons.” But how do we know that

we are adopted by God? Galatians 4:6 goes on to say, “Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” Do you see the direct connection? The Father does not want us to live in suspense about whether we are truly children of God. That reality is affirmed by the testimony of the Holy Spirit in our own hearts, so that He urges forth the cry, “Abba! Father!”

### **Evidences of the Witness of the Spirit in Relation to Assurance**

The entire paragraph of Romans 8:12–17 presents a tapestry explaining the assuring witness of the Spirit. Paul sets before us six major strands in this tapestry, all of which work together for those of us who are believers so that the Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are the children of God.

*First, the Spirit's work in developing a sense of “ought-ness” within us (v. 12).*

The Holy Spirit affects our desires or works in us a sense of holy “ought-ness.” That ought-ness means, as Paul says in verse 12, that we feel indebted “not to the flesh, to live after [or according to] the flesh.” Paul is saying, “There is a certain revulsion for the things of the flesh that is highlighted and amplified by the conjoining work of the Spirit upon our spirits.” When the Spirit sheds His own light on this holy ought-ness to live in accord with the Spirit and a holy revulsion against sin, so that we understand that He has worked within us the marks of grace, such as loving righteousness and hating the works of the flesh—which entails hating all sin since all sin is after the flesh—we may know that we are children of God.

That Spirit's work of witnessing “ought-ness” within us includes many other positive things as well:

- He bears witness to our spirit and mind that the whole of the Bible is true and illuminates the Scriptures for us, so that we readily believe the entire Word of God is authoritative for our faith and practice.
- He makes clear for us how we are to live, so that we learn to love God's law and run to obey all His commandments and seek to overcome evil with good.
- He cures us of our spirit of self-dependence in a large measure by giving us clear sights of Christ in His beauty and fullness, showing us that He is our all-in-all, which in turn makes sin exceedingly sinful and odious.
- He works within us a tender and respectful love for each person of the Trinity, and gives us a burning passion for fellowship and a deeper experiential knowledge and enjoyment of each divine person.
- He moves us to long to be filled with the Spirit so that we yearn to surrender to Him complete control of our entire lives and long to please God in the pursuit of gospel holiness and service.
- He stirs our souls and affections so that our hearts burn within us, enabling us to know His witnessing work of imparting Christ-centered peace and Spirit-endowed quietness in our souls.
- He provides liberty in intercessory prayer for our fellow believers and moves us to love them and commune with them about God and His wonderful truth, thereby delivering us from solitary religion. We learn by His witnessing work that we can't be loners, for if we have God as our Father, Christ as our elder brother, and the Spirit as our sanctifier, we will also have the church as our mother and fellow believers as our brothers and sisters.

- He causes us to know experientially some foretaste of the blessedness of heaven, which Paul calls “the firstfruits of the Spirit”—the beginnings of the full crop or perfection of glory (Rom. 8:23). He moves us to long to be in glory and shows us that we truly belong there, for where our Savior dwells is our real home.

*Second, the Spirit's help in mortifying the deeds of the body (v. 13).*

The Spirit uses this ought-ness, this not living after the flesh, to lead us to mortify or put to death the deeds of the flesh. Paul goes on to say in verse 13, “For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.” Paul does not hesitate to identify the child of God as one who “through the Spirit” puts to death “the deeds of the body.” John Owen explained what Paul means by “deeds of the body”: “*The body*, then, here is taken for that corruption and depravity of our natures whereof the body, in a great part, is the seat and instrument, the very members of the body being made servants unto unrighteousness thereby.... It is indwelling sin, the corrupted flesh or lust, that is intended.”<sup>1</sup>

But why does Paul use such strong language as putting to death the deeds of the body? Again, Owen explained, “To kill a man, or any other living thing, is to take away the principle of all his strength, vigour, and power, so that he cannot act or exert, or put forth any proper actions of his own; so it is in this case.”<sup>2</sup> The work of Christ in His death on the cross laid the deathblow to the deeds of the body, but that work is applied in degrees throughout our lives as those in union with Him. “Be killing sin or it will

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1. Owen, *Works*, 6:7.

2. Owen, *Works*, 6:8.

be killing you,” wrote Owen, and then added: “The vigour, and power, and comfort of our spiritual life depends on the mortification of the deeds of the flesh.”<sup>3</sup> Chiefly involved in this work, therefore, is the Holy Spirit, for it is only “by the Spirit,” as He strengthens us and brings to our aid the graces God has provided, that we have any success in mortifying the deeds of the flesh. In that process, the Holy Spirit engages our conscious minds and breathes affirmation that we are children of God.

So it is “through the Spirit,” Paul tells us, that we recognize our mortification as a genuine work and thus confirm our sonship. Here is the difference between those ascetics and mystics that by sheer strength of will and punishment of their bodies live in isolation from everyone else to mortify the flesh, and the child of God who lives in the world but is not of the world. The Spirit comes to the believer’s aid so that he might be salt and light in the world about him while not loving the world or the things in the world. The Spirit does this by (1) making us alert to sin, to patterns of disobedience, to areas lacking discipline, to enslaving attitudes, to creeping strangleholds of pride. He alerts and exposes these areas, which leads us to (2) grief over our sin. Our grief over our sin affects us so that sin becomes odious to us. We become burdened about our areas of disobedience. (3) Then the Holy Spirit takes us back to the gospel, applying the sin-killing work of Christ at the cross, showing us that we are free from the bondage of whatever sins beset us. (4) He enables us to fight the good fight of faith, to put on the whole armor of God to resist the onslaught of the adversary. (5) And then, by His strength co-laboring with our fighting, He enables us to put the sword through sin. As this happens,

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3. Owen, *Works*, 6:9.

the Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God.

*Third, the Spirit's leadership in living as a Christian (v. 14).*

Continuing in this same vein of thought, Paul declares in verse 14, "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, *they* [emphatic in the Greek] are the sons of God." This leading is an ongoing activity demonstrated by the present tense and passive voice verb. It is the same verb used in Galatians 5:18, "But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law."

The Spirit's leading is one of the most important evidences of being a child of God. "These words" of Romans 8:14, wrote B. B. Warfield, "constitute the classical passage in the New Testament on the great subject of the leading of the Holy Spirit."<sup>4</sup>

What does this phrase "led by the Spirit of God" mean? Few subjects are so intimately related to the Christian life as "the leading of the Spirit," and few have adequate conceptions of what that means. Some ignore the subject altogether because it's enshrouded in mystery, whereas others speak of it lightly and glibly and always feel they are being led by the Spirit. Some think the very expression "leading of the Spirit" smacks of fanaticism, whereas other dear children of God shy away from it and thus from their privileges as well.

The leading of the Spirit refers to that office of the third person of the Trinity by which He guides all believers—not just peculiarly eminent saints—through the wilderness of this life to glory. This leading is not the Spirit's first work in the hearts and lives of sinners. His

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4. Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Power of God unto Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 151.

first task is to bring them to new life. Before He leads us, He must regenerate us; He must quicken us.

But the Holy Spirit does not leave the newborn believer there; He not only regenerates and quickens the sinner, but from that moment on directs and leads his life so that he will begin to and increasingly live in harmony with that new nature implanted in him. The Holy Spirit works in us, the apostle says, both to will and to do in accord with God's own pleasure (Phil. 2:13). Based on the Word of God, the Holy Spirit directs our actions by enlightening our understanding and guiding our inclinations to do what is pleasing to God. This work of leading is essential for the well-being of the life of faith; if you are not led by the Spirit, you cannot be a child of God.

The work of the Spirit in leading consists of *illuminating* and *directing*. Both of these are necessary. We need the Spirit both to enlighten our minds to inform us of our duty as well as to enable us to walk in obedience to God's precepts. The metaphor of leading is taken from the blind and the weak. A blind man who cannot see needs someone to take him by the hand, to guide him, to lead him. A lame person cannot walk in the way, and he too needs someone to support him. Those two things are combined in this office of the Holy Spirit. He guides and supports God's people. He enlightens their minds but He also enables them to walk in the way that leads to heaven.

Eric Moerdyk explains this well:

Do you see the beauty of this work of the Holy Spirit? Do you see how when God gives you spiritual life, He activates you? When someone leads you by the hand, you still must move your feet and walk along. You are still responsible; you still must act. But you act following the leading of another! This is the leading of the Spirit. He does not force you to obey God, but comes with sweet power to lead you. And when you resist His leading, that is sin. That is like trying to drive your car with



the emergency brake still activated. There is this inner resistance and unhappiness about where you are going, and a tug to slow you down and make you realize, something is wrong. I don't belong here, I should not do this. This is what it means to be led by the Spirit of God.<sup>5</sup>

The Holy Spirit leads and guides us in God's ways, always in concert with *His Word*. God's Word is the standard by which we must regulate our lives. As David says, "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105). The Bible is our map that we must consult on the road to heaven. This includes the Spirit's more direct influences upon our minds and hearts, all of which are also Bible-based. The Spirit will always work in harmony with His Word.

Based on God's Word, the Spirit sometimes speaks to His people in an intimate, direct way. If you are a believer, you know what I mean. Sometimes the Spirit influences your mind by *biblical applications* that restrain you from going into the ways of sin and encourage you to go in the ways of holiness. For example, when we are tempted to commit a sin, the Spirit will strive with us so that we feel that we must not yield to this temptation because it is dangerous for us and is dishonoring to God. The Spirit leads us to fight against our lusts.

When God's children are not backsliding, they are being led by the Spirit who is constantly forming Christ in us, as Paul expresses to the Galatians (Gal. 4:19). Through the application of His Word, the Holy Spirit directs us in the way of holiness. The Holy Spirit never leaves us stagnant but affirms our adoption as God's children even in the middle of the spiritual conflicts that arouse the graces He has implanted in our hearts. In the

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5. Eric Moerdyk, sermon no. 41 on Canons of Dort, Head V, art. 10 (part 5)—see [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com).

process of exercising those graces in the Christian walk, as the believer is led by the Holy Spirit in pursuit of conformity to Christ, the Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God.

*Fourth, the Spirit's impartation of the sonship of adoption (v. 15).*

In verse 15, we find the consciousness that we belong to the Lord by way of a contrast, as Paul speaks of having received something as opposed to what we have not received: “ye have received the Spirit of adoption” and not “the spirit of bondage,” or slavery that leads “again to fear.” Paul here helps us in understanding the precise character of the Spirit given to us in Christ. He is not the Spirit of bondage. He doesn't keep us in indefinite bondage to the law or lead us back to where we started out. There's a necessary connection between the Spirit given to us and the knowledge of our own sonship in Christ, since He is categorically the Spirit of adoption.

This Spirit of adoption, therefore, is not something additional or optional, but it is something essential to the well-being of the Christian life. The Christian life, when properly lived, is life in the Spirit—the Spirit of adoption—the Spirit that will not disown the sons of God. Nor does that Spirit want the sons of God to disown their own sonship!

I have only one son. I care a great deal about how I treat him because he is my son. I am more patient with him and persevere more with him than with other young men because he is my son!

The fact that we are sons of God, dear believers, determines the Father's attitude toward us and should determine our attitude toward the Father. A son is not dispensable. A son is not hired help who can be fired. A

father can't and won't just send his son away. A son is not a dog eating crumbs under his table.

There is a new liberty in sonship that belongs to the Christian—a liberty that affects every area of life. Sonship is affirmed as the liberty that is exercised in worship, in prayer, in embracing God's promises, and in embracing God as a personal Father. Paul demonstrates this in the text, saying, "whereby we cry, Abba, Father." Michael Barrett explains the commonly misunderstood term *abba* well:

The *ab* part of the word is the standard Semitic term meaning "father"; the *ba* part of the word reflects the Aramaic way of making a word definite. In other words, *abba* does not just mean "father"; it means *the father*. . . . It is not to be equated with the equally phonetically simple expressions "dada" or "daddy" that English-speaking children so easily utter as their first appellation of their earthly fathers. *Abba* is not a nickname; it is not a childish term of sentimentality or endearment. Rather, it is an honorific title that expresses the utmost reverence and respect due to any father—and infinitely more so when referring to the heavenly Father. . . . Although not a trivial term of endearment, *abba* does express the intimacy of the father-child relationship.<sup>6</sup>

In contemporary language, the believer who cries out "Abba, Father" with great reverence is confessing, "the Father is my Father." The Greek word used for "cry" (*krazomen*) expresses "the fervent utterance of the devout believer," as Leon Morris put it.<sup>7</sup> The word *krazomen* emphasizes that such cries take place in great need, but also that such cries take place as the child of God recognizes his sonship in prayer, in worship, and in responding to the Father's promises. That recognition comes through the witness of the Spirit. In our urgent need while in the

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6. Barrett, *Complete in Him*, 182–83.

7. Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 315.

depths of our own darkness, the Spirit suddenly grants us at times the divine right and intimate privilege of crying to Him from the depths of our souls, “Abba, Father!”

Often the witness of the Spirit comes to us almost serendipitously. My good friend Derek Thomas once told me that when he visited Jerusalem, he encountered a wonderful example of this between a young boy and his father who was dressed in the regalia of an orthodox Jew. Since the father was walking much faster than the boy, every few steps the boy would have to run to keep up with his father’s fast pace. The boy finally collapsed, and cried out to his father in desperation, “Abba, abba, abba, abba!” His father turned around, bent down, scooped him up, and carried him away on his shoulders. Dr. Thomas told me that he never grasped the beautiful word “abba” so well as at that moment. That’s it; the God of creation, the God of the heavens and the earth, the God who is holy, the God of the thunder of Sinai, the God who will condemn sinners to hell, that God becomes my Father in Christ Jesus, through the Spirit of adoption, and receives me into His family so that when I cry out with utmost reverence, “Abba, abba,” in all my need, He stoops down, picks me up, embraces me, and carries me forward. This is the distinctive blessing of the New Covenant, that we as believers may call upon God in a profound sense—“Abba, Father,” by the Spirit.

Most commonly the Spirit’s witness may be known and felt as we join Christ’s corporate body in worship, focusing upon the Lord, and our hearts are lifted to recognize with fresh love that God is our Father through Christ the Lord. At such times, we feel the intense consciousness of sonship because of what Christ has done for us on the cross, so that we can rejoice that God is our Father. At other times, we may be engaging in private devotions, or fellowshiping with another believer, or simply driving

down the road when the Spirit may so witness with our spirits that we are secure in the salvation of the triune God, that we may cry out with Thomas, "My Lord, and my God," and with Paul, "Abba, Father," with all the intimacy that these tender yet strong words imply. In that cry, the witness of the Spirit is prominent because that witness is inseparable from the child-Father relationship. Consequently, in such acts of private devotion or in familial communion—especially while worshiping in God's house, the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God.

But there is still more. The Spirit's witnessing of our sonship of adoption within our conscience, based on God's Word, brings us into a whole new way of life. When expounding Romans 8:15, C. E. B. Cranfield said, "In this one brief expression we find the whole of what it means to live in accordance with the will and the law of God."<sup>8</sup> Using abbreviated language here, Cranfield indicated that if we can call God our Father, and if we can cry out, "Abba, Father," this means that behind us is the history of our now belonging to Christ, having been given another mind and attitude—a new set of standards, values, goals, and purposes in life.

A father once told me that a child he was adopting—who was already living with him—once said to him, "If I am adopted, does that mean I can be unadopted?" This boy was soon issued a new birth certificate and could never be unadopted.

The same thing can be said about our relationship with God. If he has adopted us, if He has declared you to be His child, that is irreversible. Forever you will be His

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8. C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans, A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 189.

child. Think about that; revel in it, and find great joy and assurance in the reality of it.

*Fifth, the Spirit's witnessing with our spirits that we are God's children (v. 16)*

“The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God,” verse 16 says. I wish to focus here on adoption and sonship as inseparable from assurance.

There is a repetition of phrases in Romans 8 referring to sonship or family relations for the Christian as part of God's family, which includes “sons of God” (vv. 14, 19), “children of God” (vv. 16, 21), “heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (v. 17), and then the explanation of our predestination so as “to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (v. 29). Thus the theme of adoption runs through this highpoint of the Epistle to the Romans. Being adopted as a child of God “is the highest privilege that the gospel offers,” writes J. I. Packer, “higher even than justification.”<sup>9</sup> Justification is primary because our need for forgiveness and right standing with God is present. But adoption steps higher since the forgiven are now part of the family! Paul moves from forensic language in justification to family love in adoption. Packer then expounds several important truths about our adoption and sonship:

- *The entire Christian life has to be understood in terms of it.*
- *Our adoption gives us the key to understanding the ministry of the Holy Spirit.*
- *Our adoption shows us the meaning and motives of “gospel holiness,” [that is], Puritan shorthand*

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9. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 186–89.

for authentic Christian living, springing from love and gratitude to God, in contrast with the spurious “legal holiness” that consisted merely of forms, routines, and outward appearances, maintained from self-regarding motives.

- *Our adoption gives the clue we need to see our way through the problem of assurance.* That is, like the Reformers and Luther in particular, we learn to recognize the difference between what Tyndale called “story faith” as opposed to true saving faith. “Faith,” declared Luther, “is a living deliberate confidence in the grace of God, so certain that for it one could die a thousand deaths, and such confidence...makes us joyous, intrepid, and cheerful towards God and all creation.”<sup>10</sup>

This personal realization of being adopted by our heavenly Father into His family changes our entire lives. Like Jesus, our entire goal in life now becomes doing our Father's will (John 5:30). We now strive to control our thoughts, words, and lives by the conviction that God is our Father and we are His children. When Romans 8 is set alongside 1 John 3, it becomes obvious that our glorious adoption greatly impacts our every relationship, including:

(1) *Our relationship with the triune God.* We now find our greatest love in God the Father and His Son, so that we share as God's adopted children in the very love with which the Father loves His Son (John 17:23). We now find our security in the fatherhood of God, knowing that He will mold and train us according to His eternal plan for Christ's sake. We find our security in Immanuel's atonement in fulfilling His Father's will and dying for us as

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10. Packer, *Knowing God*, 190–203.

ungodly sinners. We find our security in the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, knowing that He will never forsake us.

I know I am entering a realm of mystery here that is better felt than told, but, especially when we are cast down and afflicted, weak and faint, and are in trouble and trial, the Holy Spirit makes His comforting presence known and grants us a gracious reviving so that we are lifted in spirit. When we feel deserted, He comes and moves us to fervent prayer; we feel contact with the Father and the Son by the Spirit, and our hearts open so that we with unspeakable liberty pour out our souls in prayer to the Almighty (cf. Rom. 8:23–28). By the Spirit's felt presence, we experience fresh visitation from on High, sweet fellowship and communion with the triune God, such that we know we are the adopted children of God.

The Holy Spirit is the one bringing us into that sweet fellowship. What a joy it is for a believer to know that this Spirit inhabits us, and moves us to embrace God as our Father, and the Son of God as our Elder Brother. Speaking of the Spirit, Jesus says in John 4:14: "But the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." Later Jesus says, "Out of his belly [the inner man] shall flow rivers of living water." And John adds, "But this spake he of the Spirit" (John 7:38, 39). So the Spirit indwells the believer, and there are times when the believer, in his own conscience, may co-witness with the Spirit's witness that he actually feels and knows that indwelling. At such times, the triune God and His truth is embraced with assurance, so that the truths of the Bible become more real and alive and precious than anything in this life. Adoption greatly augments our relationship with the triune God for good.



(2) *Our view of affliction.* Inevitably, our relationship with God as Father involves discipline because our Father will not allow us to be less than what He intends us to be. It affects the way that we face adversity, suffering, and difficulties because, as children of God, Romans 8:28 does truly mean that God is causing all things to work together for our good as His children!

(3) *Our relationship to ourselves.* As 1 John 3:3 says, "Every man that hath this hope [of adoption] in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure." Every adopted child of God knows that holiness is an important part of God's purpose for happiness in God's family. Thus, every believer wants to purify himself daily, by using the spiritual disciplines to mortify and put off the old nature and to put on the new (Col. 3:8–17). And when he does so as a believer, he will discover that his increased assurance of adoption by God combined with personal holiness will deliver him from a burden of cares, fears, and doubts. He will feel like a new person. All the advantages of being assured of his adoption and salvation will accrue to him, for assurance "produces heaven on earth, sweetens life's changes, keeps the heart from desiring the world, assists communion with God, preserves from backsliding, produces holy boldness, prepares a man for death, makes mercies taste like mercies, gives vigor in Christian service, and leads to the soul's enjoyment of Christ."<sup>11</sup>

(4) *Our relationship with believers.* Being part of our Father's family affects our behavior so that we have a desire to live as sons and to be like our Elder Brother, Jesus Christ. As God's adopted children in Christ and by His Spirit, we learn to love our brothers and sisters in

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11. Brooks, *Heaven on Earth*, 129, 139–47.

Christ in a way that human nature could not forge. We now see every true Christian friend as a gift of the Holy Spirit. We recognize in each other the saving ministry of the Spirit through the marks and fruits of grace, and the Spirit enables us through godly fellowship to strengthen each other in assurance. The Spirit uses believers to help other believers on the way to the Celestial City. As Paul comforted others with the comfort with which he was comforted by God (2 Cor. 1:4), so believers move others to greater assurance through the assurance with which they themselves have been assured by God. As adopted sons, we learn to view the details of our days through loving family eyes—the family of God, even to the point of being willing to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters (1 John 3:14–18).

(5) *Our relationship with the world.* First John 3:1b tells us that this relationship will be a troubled one: “the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.” On the one hand, we share with Jesus the unspeakable love of the Father, but on the other hand, we share with Jesus the hostility, estrangement, and even hatred of the world. We ought not to be surprised when the world despises us, for it despised—even crucified—our Elder Brother.

(6) *Our relationship with our future hope.* Sonship certainly affects our hope, because as children of God we are also declared to be “heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17). “When he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). We have a glorious, sin-free future with our everlasting Father, our Elder Brother, and countless brothers and sisters, among

an innumerable army of angels. Heaven, as Edwards said, will be a sin-free world of love.<sup>12</sup>

What a future God's adopted children have! At times, the Holy Spirit may give God's children assured and special foretastes of it—especially as they draw near to the Celestial City. Here is one example written by Edward Payson (1783–1827), an American Congregational preacher, who wrote to his sister from his deathbed:

Were I to adopt the figurative language of Bunyan, I might date this letter from the land of Beulah of which I have been now for some weeks a happy inhabitant. The Celestial City of my deathbed is nearly full in my view. Its glories beam down upon me. Its breezes fan me. Its odors are wafted to me. Its sounds strike upon my ears. Its spirit is breathed into my heart. Nothing separates me now from heaven but the river of death which now appears as an insignificant little stream that may be crossed at a single step whenever God should give me permission to go home. The Son of Righteousness has gradually been drawing nearer and nearer, appearing larger and brighter as He approaches. And now He fills the whole hemisphere of my life, pouring forth a flood of glory in which I seem to float. A single heart and a single tongue seem altogether inadequate to my needs. I want a whole heart for every separate emotion that flows through me, a whole tongue to express that emotion. Oh, my sister, my sister, could you but know what awaits the Christian! Could you but know what I now know, you would not refrain from rejoicing and leaping for joy at my departure.<sup>13</sup>

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12. For a longer treatment of these changed relationships, see Joel R. Beeke, *The Epistles of John* (Darlington, U.K.: Evangelical Press, 2006), 124–29.

13. Edward Payson, *Memoir: Select Thoughts and Sermons of the late Rev. Edward Payson*, 3 vols. (Portland: Hyde, Lord & Duren, 1846), 1:406–7.

Who taught Payson this? Obviously, the Holy Spirit! As the Spirit opened this for Edward Payson, I don't have to tell you that his conscience co-witnessed with the Spirit he was a child of God on his way to glory.

*Sixth, the Spirit's assurance connected with heirship and suffering (v. 17)*

Finally, this amazing section stressing how the Spirit assures believers of salvation concludes by speaking about the child of God's heirship (v. 17a) and suffering (v. 17b)—both of which are signs of adoption. Those who are led and adopted by the Spirit are “heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.”

The greatest privilege of adoption is *heirship*. God's adopted children are all royal heirs-apparent and co-heirs with Christ. “Men may have many children yet but one is an heir,” wrote Jeremiah Burroughs. “But all the children of God are heirs.”<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 12:23 calls them “the first-born, which are written in heaven.”

An heir becomes the owner of all that belongs to another person when that person dies. An heir has the full legal right to ownership because of the will and testament made by the person giving the inheritance. Receiving an inheritance therefore is always a bittersweet thing. On the one hand, you are gifted with an inheritance. On the other hand, that inheritance only becomes yours because your loved one has died. You are left with the inheritance instead of with your loved one.

How astonishing Paul's statement is: the sons of God are heirs of God! The Father sent Jesus Christ as the God-man to the cross to purchase the legal right for the holy offended God to adopt sinners by faith in Jesus Christ and

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14. Burroughs, *The Saints' Happiness*, 192.

to make them heirs of Him who is the legal heir of all that God possesses—yes, of *all* things, Hebrews 1:2 says.

But you will then ask why you lack so much in this world, or why you face so many crises. The answer lies in the assuring Spirit conjoining your inheritance with your suffering, because suffering is part of the inheritance. God has appointed His children joint heirs with Christ. Christ came to this inheritance by suffering in this world, and therefore God uses suffering to prepare His sons for glory. That's why Romans 8:17 adds that we are "joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together." Sons receive the discipline of their fathers, do they not? God disciplines His children and heirs to make us partakers of His righteousness and holiness (Heb. 12:10–11).

The consciousness of sonship even values suffering in identity with Jesus Christ, as Romans 8:17b says: "if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together." Suffering is not viewed as an end in itself but points to a greater end of being glorified together with Christ. The Spirit makes us conscious that Christ is everything, so that even in suffering we identify with Him, knowing that we also are following His pattern: suffering before glory. And in that process, the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

But glory is coming—glory and kingship together with Christ, Paul says: "that we may be also glorified together" (Rom. 8:17c). The Puritans make much of joint-heirship with Christ in terms of kingship. As co-heirs with Christ, believers share in Christ's kingship, and therefore partake of the kingdom of heaven as their inheritance. Believers are made kings to the Father in His spiritual kingdom in three respects, wrote Thomas Granger: "1. Because they are lords and conquerors of their enemies, sin, Satan, the world, death, and hell.

2. They are partakers of the kingdom of Christ and of salvation; for we have received of Christ grace for grace, and glory for glory. 3. They have interest, dominion, and sovereignty of all things by Christ.”<sup>15</sup> Herman Witsius stressed that this “all things” includes the right of “possession of the whole world,” which was given to but lost by Adam (Gen. 1:28; 3:24), promised to Abraham (Rom. 4:13), and repurchased by Christ “for himself and his brethren” (Ps. 8:6), so that now all things, both present and to come, are His people’s.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, believers are lords and possessors of all things, because they belong to Christ, who belongs to God (1 Cor. 3:21–23).<sup>17</sup>

Simply said, dear child of God, this means that your Father in heaven who owns every blade of grass in the world, all the cattle on a thousand hills, and all the galaxies in the universe, and has given it all into the hands of Jesus who died for you, makes you an heir and joint-heir with Christ of all things so that all things belong to you in Christ—who can comprehend that? As Eric Moerdyk says, “Every log you sit on is God’s couch. Every color you see was painted with God’s paintbrush. It is your Father’s world and one of the main reasons He made it was to make you a home to live in. He gave you senses so you could share His pleasure in His creation. In Jesus He has made you an heir of all this—and one day you will live and reign together with Him over all things, being made kings and priests unto our God! This is what it means to be an heir of God.”<sup>18</sup>

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15. Thomas Granger, *A Looking Glasse for Christians, Or, The Comfortable Doctrine of Adoption* (London, 1620), [26].

16. Herman Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 1:452–53.

17. Perkins, *Works*, 1:82, 369.

18. Eric Moerdyk, sermon no. 42 on Canons of Dort, Head V, art. 10 (part 5)—see [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com).

Nothing in this world can match the inheritance of believers. It knows no *corruption* (1 Peter 1:4)—not “by outward principles, as fire, violence, etc.; nor by inward principles, as sin and other taints which defile” (see 1 Peter 1:18). It has no *succession*. The heavenly Father and His children always live out of the same inheritance, so believers’ inheritance is as unchangeable as Christ’s priesthood is (Heb. 7:24). It faces no *division*. Every heir enjoys the whole inheritance, since God is both “infinite and indivisible.” “God gives his all, not half, but his whole kingdom” (see Gen. 25:5; Rev. 21:7).<sup>19</sup>

### Conclusion

Romans 8:12–17 makes clear that the witness of the Spirit is an important part of the believer’s life and assurance. It is a gift from the Father to assure His children that we truly belong to Him. Let us not be content with trite methods for procuring assurance of salvation. Let us see that God has given us the Spirit of His Son, so that we might cry, “Abba! Father!”

But what if my love for God is weak and faint, and I don’t have freedom to call God my personal Father with assurance? Go to Him anyway. Go to Him as your Creator and Sustainer when you are plagued with an absence of the comfort that he’s also your Father. Go to Him like the prodigal in humble ways, saying, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son” (Luke 15:21). Go to Him as your want-to-be-Father, crying out, “I believe, Lord; help my unbelief; I very much want to be Thy child, and for Thee to be my Father.” Above all, go to the Father in the name of the perfect Son of God. Use the Lord Jesus Christ. He

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19. Drake, *Puritan Sermons*, 5:334; cf. Owen, *Works*, 2:218–21, and Burroughs, *The Saints’ Happiness*, 196.

loves to be taken advantage of by us at such times! If you can't come to God as your Father, go to Him as the God and Father of the only Savior there is, your Lord Jesus Christ. Let Him bring you into God's presence and introduce you to His Father. He encourages you to come by the Son to the Father when He says, "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13).

Let these thoughts help you to keep coming to God even when you feel doubts about your sonship. Don't leave the heavenly Father alone—keep coming to Him by and through His Son, waiting on Him, until you, too, can freely cry out, "Abba, Father!" Amen.