

**Title:** Abba Father  
**Text:** Romans 8:12-17  
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Jesus reaffirmed Old Testament teaching when he said:

Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.  
(Matthew 4:4)

The Bible we have a repository of God's word. This is our spiritual food – the food by which we live.

Through this season we are inviting you to dine out on Romans 8 by reading it all the way through.

Every day we are inviting you to read the reflection on the assigned verse, applying its truth prayerfully to your life. If you haven't started yet, it's not too late – it's never too late. If you have started and stumbled, that is fine – just pick up from where you left off and continue on.

All the spiritual disciplines, like prayer, fasting, service, study, solitude - are important. But research is absolutely conclusive that the most catalytic discipline for spiritual growth, no matter where you are on your spiritual journey, is reading and reflecting on God's Word. Reading AND reflecting – that is, eating slowly – digesting carefully.

So far as we have read slowly through Romans 8 we have discovered some life-transforming promises. In the first week we discovered that:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.  
Romans 8:1

On the cross Jesus absorbed into himself all of the condemnation of our sin so that we no longer have to bear that burden. Our in was condemned in him, freeing us for eternity from the grip and curse of sin. But the good news gets even better when we found our last week that:

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.  
(Romans 8:11)

We are not just set free from the penalty of our sin; we are set free from its power in us as God's spirit lives in us – the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. This week we will encounter another great promise. Let's read this week's passage together:

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship (*adoption*). And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 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 8:12-17)

The key verse that I will be focussing on this week is verse 15:

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship (*adoption*). And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."  
(Romans 8:15)

Last week we identified the Christian journey has a beginning, middle and an end – a start line, a finish line and a race in between. In Romans 8 and elsewhere Paul uses three words to describe this journey:

Justification – Sanctification - Glorification.

Our journey begins when in response to God's grace, we confess Christ as Lord and are so justified – freed from the condemnation of our sin.

Our journey will end when we see Jesus face to face and we are glorified – made perfect as he is perfect.

We live in the time in between – the time of sanctification – when we are being purified and remade into the image of Jesus. In this 'in between time' there is a battle between our sinful nature, or our flesh, and the Spirit of God that is now resident in us. Mark Batterson speaks of the victory already won, and being won for us by Jesus:

Jesus broke the CURSE of sin so we can break the CYCLE of sin.  
(Mark Batterson)

From beginning to end, this journey is initiated and empowered by God – bracketed by Jesus. Tim Keller puts it this way:

Jesus is the author of faith, the provider of faith, and the object of faith.  
(Tim Keller)

We can say with confidence that:

It is through the Cross of Christ that we are justified.  
It is by the Spirit of Christ that we are sanctified.  
It is in the Presence of Christ we are glorified.

It is all Jesus from start to finish – from beginning to end. This is such a radical notion; it flies in the face of how things normally work. Let me explain.

We live in a cause and effect world – an 'if then' world.

No more is this the case than in the field of human effort.

If I work hard, then I will receive some reward.

For example, we say to our kids 'If you study hard, then you will get the best grades possible, or reach your potential.'

If I run every morning, then I will achieve a certain level of fitness.

Of course, it also works in reverse. For example, if I come home, sit in the couch and ignore my wife when she is talking to me, then I will reap the consequences. Man, I will reap the consequences.

We live in a 'if, then' world; a 'cause and effect' world. Steven Furtick calls ours an 'achieve and then receive' world. Achieve certain result and receive a certain reward. This is the way things work. At least most of the time. You see there are always exceptions to the rule. Thanks God there is one particular exception to the rule. Let me explain by way of analogy.

The English language is notoriously difficult language to learn. For every rule, there is often an exception. For example, when you were in school you may have learned this one with me, 'I before e...can you finish it for me.'

It's funny, but even now when I am typing on a computer that has perhaps one of the world's greatest inventions – spell-check – I still find myself mouthing the exception to the rule to myself. There are other exceptions – exceptions to the exception to the rule. Let me explain by way of a sentence:

I before e, except after c...or when you run a feisty heist on a weird, beige, foreign neighbour.

Our world works on the 'if, then' rule. If you work hard, then you will receive your reward; achieve and then receive. That is how our world works, and that is the rule we too often carry over into our relationship with God.

If I do the right thing, then God will love me.

If I keep out of trouble, sin less, do more good than bad, then God will be merciful - then God will forgive me.

If I give more, serve more, pray more, read my bible more, do more, then God will reward me – look after me.

But grace is the exception to the rule. Grace is the exception to the 'if, then' and 'achieve and then' receive rules.

Grace is the exception to all the rules. Grace makes all other rules redundant.

In our journey with God it is not 'achieve and then receive'; rather it is the exact opposite – 'receive and then achieve and then receive.'

When we are justified we receive the free, unearned, undeserved favour of God as a gift. Writing to the Ephesians, Paul says this:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.

(Ephesians 2:8-9)

We do not achieve salvation through our good works; we receive it as a gift. This is grace – the exception to all rules.

We are justified – we receive. We are then sanctified- we then, and only then, achieve as day by day we are changed into the likeness of Jesus – and then only through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, until one day we receive our reward when we see Jesus face to face and are glorified.

Here is the thing; it is not as neat and tidy even as that. When it comes to our relationship with God, we never, ever stop receiving – God is giving out of his Grace all the time. We sing about the amazing grace that justifies us, that sets us free from the condemnation of our sin. But we don't stop experiencing grace the moment we confess Christ as Lord – the journey into grace has only just begun. This week I was listening to an interview with one of my favourite authors, Dallas Willard. Amongst a bunch of great things, he said this:

We have shrink-wrapped grace to mean only the forgiveness of sins.

(Dallas Willard)

It is by God's Grace that I have been rescued from my sin. It is by God's grace that I have the power to overcome my sin. And its God's Grace that will lead me home to him. That is what so amazing about grace:

It takes a moment to experience grace and a lifetime to understand it.

Grace is no less amazing to me now than it was 33 years ago when I first decided to respond to it. In fact, grace is more amazing to me now than ever.

The choice I have, the choice you have is whether we will live in that grace or not. You see, tragically too many of us have experienced grace, but are not living in it. Instead of living in God's favour, we are still trying to earn the favour we have already received. You see, we turn away from grace not so much by the bad things we do, but the good things we try to do apart from God.

Let's go back to today's key verse. Paul says:

You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear

Implicit in Paul's statement is his understanding that a fundamental freedom we enjoy through our relationship with Jesus is freedom from fear.

The fears we suffer are many and various; for example, the fear of death. Woody Allen, the lovable neurotic, said this:

I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it by not dying.  
(Woody Allen)

In Christ, we are able to shake our fist at death and taunt it with the question 'Death, where is your victory, grave where is your sting?'

Or it could be the fear of being found out, or punished. Before encountering grace we carry our shame and our guilt around with us like a millstone around our neck.

In Christ, there is now no condemnation. We are set free.

It could be the fear of not measuring up, of being found out, of being exposed for who we really are. The fears and anxieties are many and varied. The common link between all of them is that they paralyse and cripple us and rob us of life. Fear is a symptom of our sinful nature. It is a deep seated spiritual anxiety and angst that will only be driven out by the love of God in Christ. John said this in his first letter:

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.  
(1 John 4:18)

When we say 'yes' to Jesus, his perfect love blows fear out of our heart like a fierce wind blows cobwebs out of a room. But here is the thing; fear has a way of sneaking back into the corners of our heart and, if left unaddressed, steals life from us. The British author PD James said this:

Perfect love may cast out fear, but fear is remarkably potent in casting out love.  
(PD James)

I have a deep seated fear of snakes. I believe it is a well-founded fear. Once when I was a boy I was playing on a friend's farm. We were kicking the footy and Phillip ran off to get it as it ran down a hill and rested up against a fence. As he was walking back, to my horror he had the football in one hand, and in the other hand he was holding on to a 3-4 foot snake by as it wriggled in his hand. As he came towards me I did what any reasonable, sane person would do in that circumstance – I screamed and I ran. I screamed loud and I ran hard. Eventually I found out that my 'friend' had picked up a recently shed snake skin and was jiggling it in his hand to give it the illusion of life.

You have heard this said before; fear is a powerful motivator. As such, fear can be helpful in keeping us from danger. But more often than not all fear accomplishes is making us run scared. Fear makes us run, often to the point of exhaustion.

Here is the sad secret of many Christians lives, perhaps even some of us here; we are running scared. We are running scared that we don't really measure up, that it's too good to be true - God doesn't really love us. We are running not for the joy that is set before us, but because of the fear that chases behind us. As a result we are caught in a performance trap – still trying to earn the favour and love of God we have already received as a gift. In this performance trap we suffer performance anxiety, always wondering whether we measure up, always castigating ourselves. When we run scared with fear chasing us rather than joy before us we end up, as I said last week, spiritually frustrated, tired and disappointed. We are running in our strength, not God's. It is a self-defeating spiral of misery.

Basil Hume makes this telling observation:

Christians find it easier to believe that God exists than that God loves them.  
(Basil Hume)

But Paul reminds us that we did not receive a spirit that makes us a slave again to fear!

It is for freedom that Christ set us free!

After Afghanistan was liberated from Taliban rule a reporter from the Chicago Tribune asked Afghani women why they continued to wear burkas, even though they no longer needed to. One woman, Nasifaz, tellingly said this:

We have lived in darkness for so long that now we are afraid of the light.

We live in the light when we learn to rest not in what we do, but in what has been done for us. We live in the light when we stop running from God and start resting in God. Paul contrasts the spirit of fear with the Spirit we inherit when we say 'yes' to Jesus:

You received the Spirit of sonship (*adoption*). And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."  
(Romans 8:15b)

To understand the significance of Paul's claim we must understand Roman adoption practices of the day.

Roman adoption was a formal, costly and significant commitment. When we think of adoption, we think of babies or infant children. In Rome, those adopted were often boys or young men. Adoption was used as a means to forge links between significant families, and on rare occasions, to include slaves or servants into the family line. In Rome, the father, the male head of a household had absolute control of all family members, including adult sons. A son, no matter their age, could do nothing without the father's permission.

Adoption was a two-step process. First, the father would symbolically sell his son to the adopting father three times using copper and scales, the first two times symbolically buying his son back. On the third time, he would sell, but not buy back – the son passing into the hands of the adopting father. In the second step, he would go before a Roman magistrate and sign papers legally transferring his son to the adopting father – then and only then would the process be complete. All of this would take place in front of at least seven witnesses who could later testify if necessary that all this took place.

The legal effect of adoption was immediate and profound.

- The adopted child lost all rights to his old family and gained all the rights of his new family. He effectively had a new family.
- He was immediately a co-heir to his new father's estate, equal with any naturally born children of the same father.
- The old life of the adopted child was literally wiped clean. If they had any previous debts, they were immediately extinguished.
- Under law, the adopted child literally and absolutely has a new father.

Paul emphasises the new identity we have in Christ by saying by the spirit of adoption we have received we cry out, 'Abba, Father!' For years I have preached the commonly held belief that it is an especially intimate name for father used by younger children – a bit like young children would say 'daddy' today in an trusting, almost unthinking way. This was based in part on the thought the origin of the word is in the babbling of infants 'ab,ab,ab...', a middle eastern version of 'da, da, da'. It's a nice thought, but doesn't hold up to scrutiny. It wasn't just younger children who called their father's 'abba', but adult children as well. It was a name that could only be used by a true son and heir. Rabbinic writings forbid a slave or servant calling their master 'abba'; it was only for true sons.

In using the Aramaic 'Abba' and then the Greek 'Pater', Paul is emphasising as emphatically as possible that when we are adopted into God's family we are a son or daughter with all the rights and privileges that come with being able to call God, 'Father'. Adopted into God's family, we are able to call the Creator of the Universe and our Creator, 'Abba, Father'.

Adopted into his family, our past debts are wiped clean.

Adopted into his family, we have new brothers and sisters in the church that bears his name – this one big, happy and sometimes dysfunctional family.

Adopted into his family, we have the assurance of our new identity not through the testimony of seven witnesses, but through the internal witness of God's spirit testifying to our spirit. Paul says:

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.  
(Romans 8:16)

Do you have that assurance? Do you have the assurance that you are God's child, held forever by him? Until you do you will forever be running scared – desperately trying to earn the love and favor of God that is yours as a gift. Life changes forever when you have that assurance, itself which is a gift of God's grace.

Finally, adopted into his family we receive an inheritance beyond our imagining:

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)

Adopted by our 'Abba, Father' we have a new brother, Jesus Christ. As his brother or sister, we have the promise of sharing his inheritance both now and forever. What does Jesus have that we will share? Above all else, he has a close, loving intimacy with God the Father. That relationship is now our relationship. We who were once a long way off from the Father have now been brought near and enjoy close, loving, intimate fellowship with him. His glory is our reward.

All that Jesus has is now, or one day will be ours. Get that into you head!

In a 'if,then' world we have a 'now, then!' God!

Fred and Cheryl went to Haiti 25 years ago to pick up a child they had adopted. Addie was five-years-old. Her parents had been killed in a traffic accident that left her without a family. As she walked across the tarmac to board the plane, the tiny orphan reached up and slipped her hands into the hands of her new parents whom she had just met. Later they told us of this "birth" moment, how the innocent, fearless trust expressed in that physical act of grasping their hands seemed almost as miraculous as the times their two sons slipped out of the birth canal 15 and 13 years earlier.

That evening, back home in Arizona, they sat down to their first supper together with their new daughter. There was a platter of pork chops and a bowl of mashed potatoes on the table. After the first serving, the two teenage boys kept refilling their plates. Soon the pork chops had disappeared and the potatoes were gone. Addie had never seen so much food on one table in her whole life. Her eyes were big as she watched her new brothers, Thatcher and Graham, satisfy their ravenous teenage appetites.

Fred and Cheryl noticed that Addie had become very quiet and realized that something was wrong—agitation ... bewilderment ... insecurity? Cheryl guessed that it was the disappearing food. She suspected that because Addie had grown up hungry, when food was gone from the table she might be thinking that it would be a day or more before there was more to eat. Cheryl had guessed right. She took Addie's hand and led her to the bread drawer and pulled it out, showing her a back-up of three loaves. She took her to the refrigerator, opened the door, and showed her the bottles of milk and orange juice, the fresh vegetables, jars of jelly and jam and peanut butter, a carton of eggs, and a package of bacon. She took her to the pantry with its bins of potatoes, onions, and squash, and the shelves of canned goods—tomatoes and peaches and pickles. She opened the freezer and showed Addie three or four chickens, a few packages of fish, and two cartons of ice cream. All the time she was reassuring Addie that there was lots of food in the house, that no matter how much Thatcher and Graham ate and how fast they ate it, there was a lot more where that came from. She would never go hungry again.

Cheryl didn't just tell her that she would never go hungry again. She showed her what was in those drawers and behind those doors, named the meats and vegetables, placed them in her hands. It was enough. Food was there, whether she could see it or not. Her brothers were no longer rivals at the table. She was home. She would never go hungry again.