

Bethany Bible Church; AM Bible Study; May 9, 2018
The Holy Spirit—Our Helper; Lesson 27; His Helping

THE HOLY SPIRIT'S AFFIRMING WITNESS

Theme: One of the Holy Spirit's ministries to the believer is that of affirming his or her identity as a full child of God.

In our last lesson, we began the closing section in our study of the ministry of the Holy Spirit—a section in which we will explore some of the wonderful ways He serves as the divine “Helper” of all the saints that He indwells. In this lesson, we’ll take up a very precious work of the Spirit toward us. It’s one that is expressed for us in the words of the great old hymn:

*Under His wings I am safely abiding,
Though the night deepens and tempests are wild,
Still I can trust Him; I know He will keep me.
He has redeemed me, and I am His child.¹*

What a comfort it is to know that—in some of the deepest moments of trial—we are God's beloved children! It is the Holy Spirit who affirms this to us. We take up today the subject of the Holy Spirit's witness to His people of their identity in Christ—that they are God's children by faith and that they forever belong to Him. The Bible hints at this ministry in several places; but the clearest scriptural statement of it would be the one we find in Romans 8:15-17;

For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together (Romans 8:15-17).²

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In these words, we can see ...

I. THE THEOLOGICAL BASIS OF THIS AFFIRMING MINISTRY OF THE SPIRIT.

- A. To fully understand the basis for this ministry, we need first to understand what our condition was apart from it. Paul wrote that, in having received the Holy Spirit, we have not received what once characterized our condition before God. “For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear ...” (v. 15a). The word “spirit” that is used here is the same word that is also used in reference to the Holy Spirit Himself (*pneuma*). But in this case, the word refers to an attitude, or a feeling, or perhaps even an actual experience, of “bondage ... to fear”. That bondage, according to this context, comes from that sense of condemnation that resulted from our failure to keep God's law perfectly by the power of the flesh. That condemnation in turn led to the constant fear that we were unacceptable to God and were under the threat of His wrath and righteous judgment. Paul wrote in verse

13 that “if you live according to the flesh you will die”; and as Hebrews 2:15 teaches us, that ‘fear of death’ can keep someone in bondage all their lifetime. In this “bondage”, someone constantly feels driven to perform in obedience to the strict requirements of the law. And they also will constantly fail and incur further guilt before the holy Law-Giver; because “by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified” (Galatians 2:16). What a horrible cycle of fear, and bondage, and condemnation! But praise God!—“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1). This “spirit” of bondage that once dominated us is taken away from us in Christ; “For God has not given us a spirit of fear ...” (2 Timothy 1:7). And in its place, we have this precious ministry of the Holy Spirit; without which we would not know the blessed freedom from bondage to fear—a freedom we now enjoy as full sons and daughters of God in Christ by grace.

B. The theological basis of this ministry, then, is that the ‘spirit of bondage’ has been taken away and replaced with “the Spirit of adoption ...” (v. 15b). Because the same word is used here (*pneuma*); and because the original language does not set this word off by a capitalization (as is done in most of our English translations), this word—by itself—can refer either to the Holy Spirit or to an attitude or experience. But because the work of the divine Person (the Holy Spirit) is described in the next verse, the word “Spirit” in verse 15 can safely be taken to refer to Him. He Himself not only brings about the experience of adoption, but is Himself the affirming seal of it. Because of His presence in His redeemed saints, they are objectively identified as those who are adopted by God—those who were once “not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy” (1 Peter 2:10).

C. Just as is true in any adoption, ours was an act of grace on the part of our divine Father. We can see this adoption assured to us in three time frames:

1. In eternity past, our Father “predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will” (Ephesians 1:5).
2. In our present experience, His Son Jesus “has redeemed those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:5).
3. With respect to its full future fulfillment, “we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body” (Romans 8:23).

Because of our having received the Spirit of adoption, we are now justly free to refer to the almighty God—the Maker and Sovereign of all—in the most intimate terms of love; that is, we may call Him “Abba, Father”. We are adopted in the fullest sense! What a blessed “identity” we now have! And what a blessing it is that the Holy Spirit affirms this to us!

We can also see in this passage ...

II. THE EXPERIENTIAL WAY THIS MINISTRY IS ADMINISTERED TO US.

A. Our new identity as adopted sons and daughters of God could not—in any way—be something that we would know or discover simply on the basis of our own unaided rational processes. And what's more, it would be the greatest presumption imaginable for sinners such as us to simply 'declare' ourselves to be the adopted children of God—or to even assume it to be true on the basis of our own desire. But as Paul writes, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God ...” (v. 16). Could there

be any higher authority to go by than that?—or could we receive any greater assurance? As Samuel Ridout has written of the Heavenly Father;

*He does not leave the child's feeble voice alone. We might often be tempted to doubt the testimony of our own renewed hearts, for the testimony is oftentimes very feeble; sometimes it is but the cry of the child—"an infant crying in the night, and with no language but a cry." But the Spirit unites His mighty testimony with the feebleness of ours. He bears witness with our spirits that we are the children of God, and gives His value to both testimonies. Can we then doubt?*³

- B. Such a witness from the Holy Spirit is powerfully authoritative. We readily receive the testimony of frail and fallible men; but as the apostle John wrote, "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater ..." (1 John 5:9). And the Holy Spirit truly does bear witness to our spirits (not just our minds, or our feelings, but—at the deepest level—our spirits) of our identity in Christ. As Paul wrote elsewhere;

For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God (1 Corinthians 2:11-12).

- C. How does this happen? Certainly, there is a subjective experience of the Spirit's witness—when the Spirit bears His witness directly to our spirits. But there is also an important objective experience of His witness; and that is through our faith in the "exceedingly great and precious promises" (2 Peter 1:4) that the Spirit Himself has preserved for us in the pages of Scripture. The witness of Scripture is an objective testimony to which the Spirit—subjectively—also whispers affirmation to our hearts.

And finally we should note ...

III. THE SPIRITUAL REALITIES THIS MINISTRY AFFIRMS TO US.

- A. One of the great spiritual realities affirmed to us by the Spirit's assurance of our adoption is that which was mentioned in the verses that precede our passage above. We are now, as God's children, led by the Spirit and thus set free from that binding, death-producing "law of sin and death" that we spoke of earlier (Romans 8:2). Paul wrote,

Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God (Romans 8:12-14).

Because of the Spirit's testimony of our identity, we are motivated to truly behave as those who are confident that they are children of God—not ever in order to become God's children; but rather because that's what we already most assuredly are!

B. Another spiritual reality that the Holy Spirit's ministry affirms to us is the promise of of the prospect of complete conformity to the image of Christ in heavenly glory. As John wrote,

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure (1 John 3:1-3).

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Now; whenever a child feels fearful or insecure in a hostile world, it's a great comfort whenever he or she is lovingly scooped up into the arms of a parent and tenderly assured, "I love you and will never stop. Don't be afraid. No matter what, you are my child—and you will always be my child."

That's what the Holy Spirit has been sent to do for us on behalf of our Father. When Jesus rose from the grave, He declared, "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God" (John 20:17); and it is the gracious ministry of the Holy Spirit to remain with us, and assure us—whenever we need it—that Jesus' words regarding our identity remain true until the day when we finally are with Him in His Father's house forever!

*Still I can trust Him; I know He will keep me.
He has redeemed me, and I am His child.*

¹"Under His Wings", by William O. Chushing, public domain.

²All Scripture readings are taken from the Holy Bible, New King James Version; copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

³Samuel Ridout, *The Person and Work of The Holy Spirit* (John Ritchie, Kilmarnock, n.d.), p. 56.