

Sermon 69: Romans 8:16: The Witness of the Spirit

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INTRODUCTION

Christianity is a supernatural religion! Perhaps when I say this you automatically think of the modern churches fixation on the gifts and miracle evangelism, but I mean something very different. Reformation Christianity has often been accused of being dead and unspiritual, but this is most certainly incorrect. It is true that we no longer believe in the ongoing need for the office of apostle or prophet because we no longer need any new revelation. It is also true that we do not think that the book of Acts is normative for the whole of the church age, because it was the beginning of a new era which is often inaugurated with an intense period of miracles, e.g. the Exodus and the Conquest of Canaan. We may disagree with our Charismatic brothers and sisters that we should see the same intensity of miracles in the church today, but this does not deny the fact that we believe that Christianity is first and foremost a spiritual and supernatural religion.

We believe that we are seeing miracles of greater power and consequence than even Jesus performed. We believe that when God causes someone to be born again that this is a greater miracle than Jesus walking on water, feeding the 5000 or raising the dead son of the Widow of Nain. When someone is born again they are being grafted into the new creation by participating in the greatest surge of power God has ever exerted, we are grafted into the new creation resurrection life of Christ. And now since we are filled with the Holy Spirit we believe that the very atmosphere of all of our lives is Spiritual, that is lived in the power of the Spirit. We experience a greater and more intimate experience of God's presence than when He was travelling with Israel as the Pillar of Fire. We are experiencing creation power like when the Spirit hovered over the waters in Genesis 1 because He is the one who is transforming the barren soil of our lives into the image of Christ. When we make progress in holiness, this is not the same as an athlete able to develop physical muscle but a miraculous Spirit enabled transformation is happening, an invasion of new creation realities in this present evil age which is fading away. When we read the Bible or sit under preaching we believe that God the Spirit who wrote those words in Scripture comes as an interpreter to illuminate our dark and ignorant minds. And the Christian life is now filled with numerous spiritual experiences. We experience a God given peace that transcends understanding. We experience joy that is inexpressible and full of glory, in other words it is seasoned with heavenly foretastes of the new creation. And the spiritual experience that we will be exploring today which the portion of every child of God is the witness of the Spirit with our spirits that we are children of God, this is the experience Paul describes in Romans 8:16. This is just one of the many supernatural things that a Christian experiences. Do not think that because you are not experiencing prophecy, trances, tongues, shadow healings and the other phenomena in the book of Acts that you are living a natural and not a

supernatural life. If you have the Spirit then you are in the Spirit and new creation realities are the things that you are tasting, one of which, perhaps one of the sweetest is the witness of the Spirit that we are in fact God's children. Today we are talking about a supernatural Spirit taught assurance that we are God's children.

The doctrine of assurance has been a controversial one to some. The Roman Catholics, for example, have felt that if someone knows that they are a child of God and can never lose their salvation, that this will produce moral laxity, that they will not strive for holiness. They believed that you justified yourself by your own good works, and that if you lived your life in perpetual fear of hell you would be good. They made fear and not grateful joy the basis of the pursuit of holiness. When John Wesley and George Whitfield began preaching the necessity of the new birth in England where the Anglican Church predominantly believed that we were made children of God by baptism, there was resistance. The Wesley's and Whitfield challenged this false Christianity by preaching on the assurance that a true child of God can have. This was the experience that many in the Anglican Church did not know because they were not born again, and as a result many were truly saved. The Anglican Bishops resisted the Wesley's and Whitfield by claiming that the experience of assurance was limited to apostolic times and not the birth right of every child of God.

The Bible clearly teaches that we can know that we are children of God by an inward witness of the Spirit. John 14:20, 'In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.' 1 John 5:10, 'Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son.' In fact the whole book of 1 John was written so that you could know that you were saved, 5:13, 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.' Galatians 4:6, 'And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"' Notice that in Galatians 4:6 the Spirit is the one who bears witness, and in Romans 8:16, it is our own spirits who also bear witness, no doubt this is on account of the ministry of the Spirit to us.

The level of assurance does differ from person to person. This experience of assurance can be lost due to sin, grieving the Spirit, trials changing our focus, or God withdrawing a sense of His presence in what the Puritans called 'the dark night of the soul.' However, every child of God should know to some degree that they are His child. In fact it should be seen as a duty to know that you are His, Peter tells us to make our calling and election sure, and this relates directly to assurance. It is possible to be a true Christian and not have this assurance, but it is not possible to be a Christian and not care that you do not have it. It is also possible that you can have someone who is not a child of God thinking that they are. It is possible to be self-deceiving on this question thinking you are saved when in fact you are not. Jesus Himself speaks of those who thought they were His but He never knew them, Matt. 7:21-23, "'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your

name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

So today as we explore this topic of the witness of the Spirit that we are God's children we are going to examine the two grounds of our assurance, the two types of proofs that we can have that we are His. We will look at the objective proofs, that is, those things that are outside of us that do not depend upon any subjective emotional ratification from us. And then secondly, we want to look into what the Bible says about subjective proofs; inward, felt evidence of our sonship in Christ.

Objective proof

Paul has been arguing that the very presence of the Spirit is a proof of our salvation, but has now moved into the area of arguing that not only is the presence of the Spirit an argument for our assurance, but the very ministry of the Spirit as the Spirit of adoption who causes us to cry 'Abba! Father!' and who also testifies to us in our inner most beings that we are children of God. We are concerning ourselves with this issue, how does the Spirit bear witness? How does He convince us at the heart level of our standing in God's family?

The first way in which the Spirit testifies to us of our adoption is through the Scriptures. The Spirit has recorded God's promises, and God can never lie. So let's envisage the familiar scenario and apply these cures to our condition. I am a convert to Christianity and have been following Jesus for about a year. Things started well, I gave up all the big sins, it was a wonderful quest of discovery, so many new and wonderful people in church, so many deep and fulfilling emotions. But the emotions have begun drying up, the old sins are beginning to make themselves felt, there is no longer any joy in reading the bible, hearing sermons, singing in church and questions and doubts are constantly going around in my brain. Based on what I am experiencing it would be very hard to say that I am God's child, I feel dirty, bored, attracted to sin and wonder whether I am even a Christian. This is our patient, and we need to now administer the first objective Spirit wrought antidote for such a condition.

The most sure way of knowing that you are in fact a Christian is on the basis of God's promises. Our assurance must not rest in our present emotional state but on a more sure footing of God's promises, and this is a sure foundation for He can never lie. So then let's look at some of the Gospel promises recorded for us by the Spirit.

John 3:16, "'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.' Notice the word 'whoever'. 'Whoever believes' in Christ as saviour will not perish but have eternal life. Have you believed in Christ for salvation? Have you looked upon Him as your only possible hope to be made righteous in the eyes of a holy God? Have you given up all your own cures and remedies to accept the one that God offers in His Son? If you have then believe His promise that you will not perish but have eternal life.

Some are of a very tender conscience and feel after every sin that God will most certainly cast them off. Then here is another promise, John 6:37, 'All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.' Do you hear those words, 'I will never cast you out?' Is God a liar? Are your sins bigger than the provision He has made in Christ? Of course not!

But you might think that your sins are very big indeed, and you are so depressed and crushed under the weight of their sinfulness that you cannot imagine that God has no wrath and anger towards them. Then we need to hear verses like Romans 3:22-25, 'the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.' Here we see that God provides a righteousness where we could not; a righteousness that we receive by faith in Christ; this righteousness is given to any who believe, and there is no other way that God saves; those who receive this righteousness by faith are justified, that is pronounced righteous; this was given by grace as a gift to the undeserving not to the good; and God has accomplished this by making Christ our wrath removing sacrifice, our propitiation, to take every drop of the wrath of God towards our sin. To refuse to believe that you are a Christian when you have put your faith in Christ is to call God a liar. To refuse to believe these promises is to imply that God has not provided a sacrifice sufficient for your sins; that Jesus was not enough and that you need to add more to God's insufficient provision. If you have genuinely trusted in Christ, either you are saved or God is a liar, there is no other alternative. This is not a weird spiritual experience that happens apart from the normal use of the bible, prayer and the means of grace, but the Spirit blessing these ordinary means of grace for our assurance. Outwardly they may appear unspectacular but they are blessed by the Spirit nonetheless.

The Spirit is the one who recorded these marvellous truths and teaches them to us by illuminating the Scriptures to us.

This objective promise based approach to assurance is vital. When you are in trials, when your emotions are not the highs but the lows, when you have just sinned, your only confidence will God and His truthfulness. You will not be able to trust in the appearance of your circumstances for assurances of God's love, you will not be able to trust to fickle and burdened emotions, you must trust in something outside of yourself that can never fail, the promises of God. You must trust in the sufficiency of Christ and the fact that His blood and righteousness are enough to cover even your worst sins. That He has suffered in full all that your sins deserve.

Every Christian can attain to a sure knowledge of their salvation by believing the promises of God. With a persistent searching into the Scriptures on these matters it is only a matter of time before the Spirit will bless the truth to you.

Subjective proof

When an atomic bomb has exploded it leaves certain evidence behind that it has in fact exploded. We will see people's shadows burned onto the walls and sidewalk, we will be able to measure the radiation levels and see the extent of the devastation in aerial photographs. Likewise when the believer experiences a power greater than an atomic bomb in their new births in which they participate in the dawning of the new creation in the resurrection of Christ, there is certain evidence left behind that such a monumental thing has happened. And as we turn away from the outward and objective proofs to the evidence of a new work within us there are several areas the Scriptures points us to find this proof of life. One of the most basic mistakes we can make is to look for the Spirit in our lives. He is Spirit and He is invisible and unreachable by the five senses. We cannot perceive His essence but only His operations, so we look not for the Spirit Himself but the effects that He has had upon us.

We have been talking about some of them already. In the first place holiness, where we bear the family likeness to Christ is proof of life. Paul has told us that if we are those who are mortifying sin and being led by the Spirit, that this proves we are in fact children of God (Romans 8:12-14). If we see that radical reorientation of our lives that we no longer want to live for self but are seeking to gladly surrender our lives to Christ. If we see that we have repented of the self-ruling lifestyle and have gladly defected to be a bondservant of Christ. This change in direction proves a change in heart and a change in status. It reveals that we are born again and children of God. In fact the book of 1 John points out that our family resemblance can be found in three particular areas. We love because God is love, we are holy because He is holy and we embrace the truth because we love truth and recognise our Father's voice. Our new family resemblance is not after Jesus divinity but humanity and we are being made more and more into His image by the Spirit.

Secondly, we can know we have the Spirit of adoption because we know the family language, we cry out as Christ did, 'Abba! Father!' When a child falls over and cuts their knee and the blood is pouring out and they instinctively cry out 'Mommy! Daddy!' it is this cry that the Spirit puts on our lips. We have a new desire for God, we seek a new intimacy where once we ran from Him, we have a new longing for more time with Him, and love to be dependent upon His strength carrying us. In becoming Christians we have come home and it feels like it.

Thirdly, we are homesick. Romans 8:23 tells us that if we have the Spirit we have a desire to be home in the new creation that we feel like strangers and pilgrims in this life, 'And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.' This fallen creation is empty and does not satisfy, our longings for satisfaction do not come from wanting this things of this life that we do not have but the things of the new creation order.

Fourthly, and added to that we hate our sin and even our present unglorified selves, Romans 7:23-24, 'but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man

that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?' We are those who are typified by a godly sorrow, a mourning over sin. We will find ourselves out of place in this self-congratulating world.

Fifth, like new born babies we have a hunger for spiritual things, for the word of God, for prayer, for fellowship with other believers, for church.

All of these things are indications of our sonship and subjective grounds for assurance.

Now there is another experience that is not universal that we have to handle carefully because some have made the mistake of identifying this last experience as the witness of the Spirit. If you read through church history you will encounter those who have had ecstatic experiences of God's love that have left them sleepless or closed up for days as they are overwhelmed with the strongest emotions. Many who read of these experiences feel that they have never experienced assurance because they have not known it to the same degree. I have hoped to show you that the witness of the Spirit is not a unique experience for the few but a universal experience that every Christian can taste. It is had by the use of the ordinary means of grace and should not be thought of as the once in a lifetime type experiences that we read of in church history.

As you seek to make your calling and election sure let me encourage you to seek to establish your assurance on both the objective and subjective proofs. Think of these as the two sides of the assurance coin. In church history you will see that anytime that only one side was emphasized to the exclusion of the other errors arose. If you emphasize only the promises and base ones assurance purely on the fact that you have believed and neglect the other evidences such as holiness then you will fall into objectivism and the trap of an easy believism. The danger is that there will be many who think they are Christians because of their head knowledge but who in fact have no true life in them. On the other hand whenever the subjective side has been overpressed, this has led to a subjectivism of morbid introspection. The necessary correction is not to look within but to look outwards to Christ.

So then, how do I know I am a child of God? I know I am a child of God because I have put my faith in Christ and been given as a free gift a righteousness that is sufficient to fully save me, and the proof of new life is evident in my ongoing desire for God and holiness. When I fall into sin and blur the new life I should be living I fall upon the promises as the surest ground to stand on.