

Sermon 70: Romans 8:17a: Our inheritance

OUTLINE

The background of our inheritance
The present possession of our inheritance
The content of our inheritance
The ethical implications of our inheritance

INTRODUCTION

Imagine for a moment that you were told that a long lost uncle that you never knew that you had was the richest man in the world and he had died childless leaving all his possessions in an inheritance to you. Well, imagine no more, and let me inform you that you have an inheritance that is greater than the richest human being could ever leave you. If you are a child of God through faith in Christ, then as Paul tells us in Romans 8:17a, 'and if children, then heirs---heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.'

And just to lay your mind at ease this is not a prosperity doctrine that is strangely coming out all of a sudden. The prosperity doctrine with its carnal focus on wealth has nothing on what the bible actually teaches about our riches in Christ.

Paul has been telling us that if we have the Spirit of holiness that we are children of God, it is this Spirit of adoption that causes us to cry out 'Abba, Father!' and who testifies with our spirits that we are children of God, but the riches don't stop there. Paul goes on to tell that if we are children we are not impoverished and unprovided for, but we are heirs of an inheritance. Verse 17 holds two aspects of the portion of every child of God, we have an inheritance and we suffer, this verse has the highs and lows of our sonship, we will deal with our inheritance in this message and our fellowship with Christ's sufferings in the next.

As we look into the issue of our inheritance we want to consider what is revealed about our inheritance in the OT, then we will look into our present possession and experience of it, then we will seek to examine its contents and then finally how we should live in light of this glorious grace.

The background of our inheritance

The Scriptures reveal to us that God had planned an inheritance from eternity past. That God sought to share His own riches with His creation as part of His self-giving grace in creation and salvation. Matthew 25:34 reveals this intention already enacted from before creation, 'Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.' It was this kingdom that Adam and Eve were within arm's length of when they were in Eden. It was all that was promised by the Tree of Life and what they fell short of when they sinned. Life with God in eternal fellowship, which is certainly the foundational benefit of the inheritance

we were to have if they had not sinned was lost. Life in a perfect world in fellowship and partnership with God, bound in loving intimate fellowship working together with Him to develop the world and subject it for His glory. That opportunity was lost when our first parents sinned. The world, the canvas upon which we were to work a masterpiece to the glory of God was cursed and corrupted with thorns and thistles. But all was not lost, God made a promise that the Seed of the woman would crush the seed of the serpent. But it was when God promised Abraham land, offspring and blessing that we begin to see a restoration of the inheritance that we lost when our first parents sinned. But the main concern of this promise was not the piece of land we now know as Israel over which the Arabs and Jews are contesting. That piece of land was a type, a shadow and a promise looking forward to the better inheritance of the New heavens and earth. The land of Israel was never intended as the end goal for restoring humanity back to Himself in eternal fellowship but a stepping stone foreshadowing the final goal of a renewed Creation under Christ's headship with all of saved humanity as His adopted children enjoying the fullness of His blessings to the praise of His grace.

The NT teaches us to see the land of Israel as a token of the fuller blessings that we will one day receive when Jesus comes again to give us our full inheritance. For example, in Psalm 37:11, David tells us that the 'meek will inherit the Land' referring to Israel, but already in Jesus ministry as He speaks to His disciples He points beyond Israel to the New Heavens and Earth and speaks about the meek inheriting the earth, not merely the land (Matt. 5:5). Abraham himself looked beyond the physical land of Israel to the city whose builder is God, Hebrews 11:10, 'For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.' It is this inheritance which Peter tells us about when he says in 1 Peter 1:4, 'to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.' The promise of the children of Abraham receiving Canaan was merely wax crayon shadow of the wonderful inheritance that we are going to one day enjoy through Christ.

This means that Israel were not receiving their inheritance when they returned to Palestine in 1948. The bible clearly tells us that the Jews inherit the promises in Christ in the church and not by being restored to the land. In fact Paul reveals to us that the intended recipient of the promises to Abraham of offspring, land and blessing was in fact not Israel, or even the church, but Christ, Gal. 3:16, 'Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ.' 3:19 confirms this notion that the promise was made specifically to Christ, '...until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made....' Christ the Second Adam succeeded where the first Adam failed. He was obedient unto death unlike Adam who did not even risk his life but risked his wife's instead. And to Christ has now been given all authority over all creation, to whom the nations/offspring have been given as an inheritance, and to Him the Spirit was given who He then in turn poured out upon the church. So Paul concludes that only those in Christ are heirs of the promise of Abraham, Gal. 3:26-29, 'for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in

Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.' Adam loses the inheritance by disobedience, but Christ wins it back through obedience, and all who are united to Him by faith are the ones who receive what the OT types were pointing forward to, restored fellowship with God in a perfect environment. This Paul tells us in the mystery of Christ, 'When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. 6 This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.' (Ephesians 3:4-6) That we are part of the commonwealth of Israel that receive the inheritance that was promised in types to Abraham, Ephesians 2:11-21 tells us that the Gentiles along with the Jews now receive the same inheritance through Christ. 'Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands--- 12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.'

The present possession of our inheritance

Although the larger part of our inheritance lies in the future in the restored creation, we do already begin to enjoy some of those new creation realities even now in this present evil age which is fading away. You will notice that in the context where Paul talks about our inheritance he also talks about the Spirit of adoption. This is an important connection because in Ephesians 1:13-14 Paul tells us that the Spirit is the down payment, the guarantee of our inheritance, 'In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.' And later on in Romans 8:23 he tells us that we have the Spirit who is the firstfruits. This means that we are already in possession of part of our inheritance, the Spirit who has been given to be with us forever. We are already eating the starter, and one day we will sit down to eat the main course at the marriage supper of the lamb, and eternity is desert.

The significance of this is monumental. The inheritance is already yours, you are already enjoying the first instalment. The rest is guaranteed, it is certain. You can now rejoice in hope with a certainty more certain than any human inheritance. There is no tax man to pilfer off part of it, there is no legal loophole that the devil can exploit to wrangle you out of it. If you are a child of God you have a richer inheritance than anything the world can offer.

The content of our inheritance

Lets think for a moment then about what we might receive. The first question after receiving the shock that we are entitled to a large inheritance is, 'how much?' Paul wants you to know how much and extrapolates in the following way, 'and if children, then heirs--- heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.' So benefit one, not only are we children we are heirs; benefit two, not only are we heirs we are heirs of God; benefit three, not only are we heirs of God but fellow/joint/co-heirs with Christ.

Friends it would take a series of sermons for us to explore the riches that are ours in Christ, we are blessed with every spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ. So let me not try and exhaust the list of all of our blessings but zero in on the most important descriptions in this verse. Firstly, note that we are heirs of God, now that certainly means that we are God's children and we are to gain a portion in His estate. However, greater than any part of the Father's estate that we will receive we inherit God Himself. The Puritans knew the value of having God as our portion and inheritance, Samuel Rutherford wrote several letters from prison, and in one of them that it is better to have suffering and God than to have comfort with no sight of God at all. He writes, '...I would not want all the sweet experience of the consolations of God for all the bitterness of affliction; nay, whether God come to His children with a rod or a crown, if He come Himself with it, it is well. Welcome, welcome Jesus, what way soever thou come, if we can get a sight of thee. And sure I am, it is better to be sick, providing Christ come to the bed-side, and draw aside the curtains and say 'Courage, I am thy salvation,' than to enjoy health, being lusty and strong, and never to be visited of God.'¹

God is our very great reward and inheritance, the psalmist writes, Psalm 73:25-6, 'Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.' But this is further amplified as Paul tells us that we are fellow heirs with Christ. We have already shown that our inheritance comes to us through our union with Christ, in fact every benefit of the Gospel comes to us through our union with Christ. But Paul is seeking to intensify the certainty and the magnitude of what we can expect by telling us that we are partaking of an inheritance that is not a reward for our efforts but Christ's, an inheritance that is not bestowed upon us according to our worthiness and performance but Christ's, an inheritance for a sonship not established by us but by Christ, the beloved Son in whom God is well pleased. Since we are co-heirs with Christ we can affirm that as certainly as He will receive His inheritance, so shall we. And more than that, not only will we inherit something but we will participate in Christ's inheritance. As the Last Adam He has conquered and has received all and more that the First Adam lost, and we are joint beneficiaries with Christ in what the

¹ The letters of Samuel Rutherford, p18-19.

Father gives to His Son. Paul tells us that we have all things, 1 Corinthians 3:21-23, "'21 So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future---all are yours, 23 and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.'" It is all ours precisely because it is all Christ's. We are His bride and just as any wife shares in the wealth of her husband so we share in Christ's inheritance.

In summary then what will we receive? The answer, everything! We receive God and all His benefits, and not in a world where we can lose any of it or it can be stolen by Satan, but it is kept imperishable and incorruptible for us.

The ethical implications of our inheritance

I have just told you that you are richer than the richest man on earth, and all of these riches are held for you in an unbreachable trust with a down payment already given in the person of the Holy Spirit, in light of this then how should we live?

I will give us two applications, joy and perseverance. In the first epistle of Peter, the Christians are beginning to experience Nero's hatred for Christians. In light of their suffering Peter opens his letter reminding of the reasons why they can rejoice even though they are being grieved by trials, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith---more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire---may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:3-8). He gives three reasons for rejoicing in the midst of trials, our new birth which guarantees a living hope, our inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, and the fact that our faith is refined through difficulty. No matter what we go through these are reasons for joy. The pain of this life is temporary and in God's hands works for our good, and it all ends with us seeing God face to face in a perfect world forever. Rejoice in hope! Paul gives this benediction in Romans 15:13, 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.' This hope gives fuel to our worship, fire to obedience, zeal to our love, fervency to our holiness.

The second application is perseverance. Because the end is so good, push through the pain without giving up. Hebrews 11 is given to a church experiencing the temptation of going back to Judaism to escape persecution. It is a long list of heroes of the faith, a list of those who persevered because of the hope that lay before them. This list reminds us of the many who suffered without enjoying the fullness of their inheritance now but waited for it with patience, willing to suffer even death. Moses is described, 'By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was

beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. 24 By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, 25 choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.' (23-26). At the end of the list we have this conclusion, 'And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets--- 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated--- 38 of whom the world was not worthy--- wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

³⁹ And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.' (33-40). At the beginning of chapter 12 we have the cherry on top and the exhortation to endure, 'Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.' Even Christ Himself endured the pain by reminding Himself of His hope, the hope that we now share in. Consider the joy that is set before you and endure.