

Romans 8

Romans 8:14-17 and **22-25** are the passages that this sermon is based on. However, other passages you may choose to use are:

Exodus 22:22,23

“Never take advantage of any widow or orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, you can be sure that I will hear their cry.”

Proverbs 21:13

“If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.”

Isaiah 58:6-9

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.”

Sermon learning goals:

- 1. Inspire** Christians to value their adoption into God’s family as the highest privilege imaginable.
- 2. Underline** that our adoption into God’s family is due to his grace and compassion – not because we have deserved it or because He needs us.
- 3. Encourage** Christians to see adoption and fostering of the children in our community as a living parable of God’s gracious adoption of us.
- 4. Challenge** the couples, families and individuals to see if God might be asking them to step up to the challenge of adoption or fostering vulnerable children.
- 5. Envision** the whole church that we all have the opportunity and the responsibility to support and encourage those that step forward in fostering and adoption and the children that come into our church family as a result.

“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. 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 8:14-17)

1. God chooses to adopt you

The story is told of a little girl being teased in a playground because she was adopted. The little girl responds: “At least my parents definitely chose me, they knew all about me and chose to be my parents, while your parents didn’t know anything about you.”

God’s choice to adopt us into His family is one of the most precious truths of scripture. God knew all about us, all the things we had ever done, all the things that we failed to do. God knew all about us and yet still wants us as part of His family. If you are someone here who doesn’t yet know God, this morning we want to tell you that God knows all about you – He knows you better than anyone else on the planet, He sees behind the façade we present to the world, beyond the smiles and the keeping up appearances, He sees you as you really are and still chooses to invite you into His family.

Paul uses the family structure of the ancient world to help us understand the incredible change that occurs when any of us becomes a Christian.

In the ancient world slaves were always second class, outsiders. They brushed shoulders each day with the family who had bought them. But they were never to think they belonged there.

New Testament scholar James Dunn explains: “The idea of slavery... focuses on the slave’s lack of freedom, as one who orders his life at another’s behest, who must live within the terms of a code which restricts him firmly within servitude, and who as a slave is divided in status from members of the family by an unbridgeable gulf.”¹

But what if this ‘unbridgeable gulf’ could be bridged? What if outsiders can become insiders? What if strangers can become family? What if slaves can become sons and daughters?

2. Earthly adoption and foster care is a living parable of God’s love for us

There is something about the gospel that is implicit in every adoption. There is a mini-parable of the grace of God demonstrated every time a genuine adoption occurs. The outsider becomes the insider. The transient relationship becomes permanent. The fear factor is replaced by an intimate, loving relationship.

The respected Bible commentator FF Bruce comments that in the Roman world “of the first century an adopted son was a son deliberately chosen by his adoptive father to perpetuate his name and inherit his estate; he was no whit inferior in status to a son born in the ordinary course of nature, and might well enjoy the father’s affection more fully and reproduce the father’s character more worthily”.²

What a transition.

From affliction to affection.

From outsider to insider.

From servitude to security.

From fear to family.

1 Dunn, J. D. G. (1998). Vol. 38A: Romans 1–8. Word Biblical Commentary (460). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

2 Bruce, F. F. (1985). Vol. 6: Romans: An introduction and commentary. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (167). Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press.

What are the fears we used to live in? Fear of death? Fear of not measuring up to other people's expectations? Fear of failure? Fear of letting someone down? Fear of getting caught out? Fear of financial ruin? Fear of the future? Perhaps those things still haunt us.

To us Paul says that the Holy Spirit in our life will remind us that we are adopted. When push comes to shove knowing that we have a home with God, a heavenly Father who loves us makes even the most difficult situation a little more bearable.

Maybe most of us have suffered at the hands of bullies at school. It can be painful just thinking about it. Even though we grow up, those memories and feeling can still sting. But when people are bullied if they can go home to a loving and secure family it is a lifeline.

Similarly, knowing now that I have a secure home to go to when I die has helped me through many dark and fearful moments.

Home is a very powerful place. When that home is a place of safety and love, we can become what we are designed to be. Perhaps most of us can think of times of instability, when we were afraid... and then the real relief of getting home and feeling safe.

The antidote to fear is knowing that we belong somewhere safe. This gives us hope, even in our darkest moments.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (Romans 8:22-25)

Hope. Hope. Hope. Hope. Hope. Hope.

Paul can't say it often enough. Six times he repeats it in this short passage.

Adoption can change fear to hope.

3. We need to offer hope to the vulnerable children in our town

Our culture loves and longs for this kind of turnaround.

The orphan-hero is a much-loved character in our films and literature. You can't miss it. Luke Skywalker, Batman, Spiderman, Superman, Harry Potter, Frodo Baggins, Dick Whittington, Pip from Great Expectations, Jane Eyre, Henry Fielding's Tom Jones, Romulus and Remus, Huckleberry Finn, Oliver Twist, Cinderella, Snow White, Mowgli, Paddington Bear, Tarzan. To name but a few. The idea of a foundling alone in the world that is taken in, fostered or adopted and then makes good is a dominant theme in many of our most-loved stories.

Why is this such a strong recurring theme?

Perhaps it has to do with the romantic rags-to-riches dream we tend to aspire to. Perhaps we all secretly want the underdog to win occasionally.

Perhaps it is because being faced with vulnerable children we cannot help but become emotionally engaged.

Perhaps the idea of being alone haunts us, and no one is quite as alone as an orphan.

Literary scholar Melanie Kimball argues:

“Orphan characters in folk tales and literature symbolize our isolation from one another and from society. They do not belong to even the most basic of groups, the family unit, and in some cultures this is enough to cut them off from society at large... Orphans are a tangible reflection of the fear of abandonment that all humans experience.”³

The orphan-hero stories that fill our culture should inspire us, and vulnerable children everywhere, that change and hope and success and acceptance are possible, whatever our background. The real-life stories of orphan-heroes even more so, for example journalist Kate Adie, model-turned- TV-chef Lorraine Pascale, and footballer Mario Balotelli who show that their early experiences have not stopped them finding their potential.

Statistically, however, it is true that kids in care are most likely to end up on the streets, in the prisons, and in refuges. There is a mismatch between the romantic notions on the silver screen and in our literature, and the stories we read in our newspapers.

What does come across loud and clear is that our culture is in search of hope. The hope that things could be better. The hope that in the world it is not just the strong that survive, or the rich that make good.

There is a hope that kindness, compassion and mercy could win out.

There is a deep-seated longing that abandonment, murder and malice need not have the last word.

There is a fascination with adoption, because it symbolises that possibility of turning deeply instilled fear to a life-changing hope.

4. Call to action

As Christians we have experienced this. We have the ultimate death-to-life, rags-to-riches story. We were lost and alone and now belong to an eternal family. We have seen that life is not about the survival of the fittest, but about the salvation of the most unlikely. We have lived in fear, and now we “eagerly await our adoption” in great hope.

There are children living in this town who don’t know this kind of hope.

There are children who don’t know that their future can be better than their past. They don’t know that the abuse and neglect they have experienced doesn’t need to be their future. There are children who are wondering if anyone will love them. There are children in this town with broken bones because a parent has attacked them. There are children with broken hearts because their parents have never told them that they loved them. There are children in our town who are wondering if their learning difficulties will mean no one will want to be their mummy or daddy. There are children in this town who are wondering if they will have to be separated from a sibling; the only person in the world they know that loves them. There are children in [name of your village, town or city] who have never been to the seaside, never been shown how to ride a bike, never had someone sit and read a book with them. There are young children in [name of your village, town or city] who if no one adopts them are likely to end up homeless or in prison because once they age out of the care system this is the most common future for them. Can we give hope to the children who have been neglected or abused in our town? Can we play our part in offering the children in care in [name of your village, town or city] a better future?

3 Melanie A. Kimball, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois, 501 E. Daniel Street, Champaign, IL 61820LIBRARYTRENDS, Vol. 47, No. 3, Winter 1999,pp. 558-578

Where would you and I be if it wasn't for God seeing our need and choosing to adopt us into His family? How different our future has become because of God's compassion and kindness to us. Having received this kind of love, having experienced this kind of adoption – is God calling us to show His love to the most needy children in our town?

Is God calling some of us here to step forward and become foster carers? To help children in transition who have been removed from their families to experience a safe home while their future is decided by the law courts and social services?

Is God calling some of us here to adopt the children in our town that nobody wants? The children who have all sorts of additional needs?

Is God calling us as a church to be a big adopted family and to stand alongside and offer genuine practical help to those that choose to open their homes and their hearts to the needy children in our town?

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