

You Are Children of the Promise

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How do you get rich? You might say that you have to be smart, driven towards wealth, and work hard. You'd probably be right. However, sometimes you actually inherit it. In fact, three of the wealthiest people in the world actually obtained their position through an inheritance. They belong to the Walton family that is behind the Walmart company. Just three of Sam Walton's children have a combined net worth that is greater than the richest person in the world. And they all got it as part of an inheritance. That's sort of the way it is with spiritual riches and our position in God's kingdom. We don't work to acquire it. We actually can't. We must inherit it. But how can we be sure that the riches of God's kingdom are really ours and will remain ours? We find that answer to that today in the middle of Paul's letter to the Romans.

The people of Israel inherited so much but they lost it all. It's clear that Paul's heart was aching over their great loss. Regarding his fellow Israelites he says, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart." His concern is deeply felt. He even says that he wishes that he could be cut off from Christ and condemned instead of them. The fate of many Israelites was not only to miss out on their inheritance, they would miss out on everything as those who were enemies of God and doomed to suffer under his wrath. They were total outsiders, cut off from Christ and condemned to hell.

This terrible loss is one of history's most shocking. After all, the people of Israel were born into the wealthiest family in a manner of speaking. They were children of Abraham and held a great promise. Paul outlines their great family history: "Theirs is the adoption as sons." When God freed the children of Abraham from slavery, he could have chosen any other nation in the world. But he chose them in grace. He told them at their adoption, "The Lord your God has chosen you to be his own possession out of all the peoples on the face of the earth." (Dt 7:6) Paul adds, "Theirs is the glory." God revealed himself to the Israelites in a bright cloud of glory and pillar of fire. It was to them that he revealed himself as holy and glorious with signs and wonders. Israel heard, saw, and witnessed the glory of God. "Theirs is the covenant." God made a special covenant with Israel. Through Abraham, King David, and the prophets God made and repeated more special promises for them. "Theirs is the giving of the law." God himself spoke and wrote his commands for them. At Sinai they received the Ten Commandments. No other nation had such divine revelation in all of history like Israel did. They had the will of God written down. Israel also had the temple services and priesthood. They alone out of all nations had God's special direction for offering sacrifice and a family-line of priests. They had access to the very throne of God through this priesthood. God listened and God spoke to them. And through his prophets God repeated promise after promise, warning after warning, encouragement and hope for the future. The people of Israel could claim to have Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as their father. And ultimately, they could claim an intimate role with the greatest promise in all of history. From them came the promised one, the one called Messiah. Jesus, the Christ was born into this world to save them. And he, just as was promised, was born as an Israelite, to an Israelite mother, and lived in Israel, taught in Israel, and accomplished all his work in Israel. All that was given to the family and people of Israel. What people could ever claim to have such an inheritance passed on to them?

Yet, they lost it all. Many of the people of Israel have missed out on all the blessings given to them as a nation. The fact that they were born into a nation adopted by God doesn't mean they all belong to God. What happened to Israel? They received a great gift and inherited a priceless treasure, but they lost it. They lost it because too many of them assumed it was theirs by right and that their inheritance was something they deserved by right instead of by grace. They assumed it was irrevocably theirs because they were born into the right family.

Consider George. George was an art collector. He didn't have to work. He spent his days pursuing hobbies, entertaining guests, and finding new pieces of art for his collection. Where did he put his art? George didn't have any problems with that. He had constructed a 250-room castle-mansion for one of his homes. It was completed in 1895. It sits on a ten square mile estate and it is still the largest privately-owned home in the United States and regarded to be the second largest privately-owned home in the world. How could he do all that? He inherited it. He belonged to the right family. His full name was George Washington Vanderbilt II. He was actually the younger son of William Vanderbilt and a grandson of Cornelius Vanderbilt. In the mid to late 17th century belonging to the Vanderbilt family meant belonging to one of the wealthiest families in America. Many Vanderbilts lived in wealth and luxury far beyond others. But the Vanderbilt family fortune is mostly a sad story. Many children and grandchildren of Cornelius Vanderbilt seemed to assume they would always be rich. They slowly spent away their fortunes. It's true that they did good philanthropic things like gifts to charitable organizations and universities, but they also squandered a lot of wealth. They built enormous and expensive mansions, they paid divorce settlements, they gambled, and they hosted lavish social parties that cost millions of dollars each. Despite receiving such an inheritance as members of a wealthy family, within one or two generations most of the wealth was lost. When a family reunion was held in 1973, not one of the 120 attendees was a millionaire. Belonging to a rich family line doesn't automatically mean you will have lasting riches. Cornelius Vanderbilt even suspected many of his own children and grandchildren weren't worthy of receiving a full share of his inheritance because he knew they would squander it. He was proved right many times.

That's the attitude that can take over when people receive God's grace. Someone can begin to assume that because they inherited a treasure it will always be theirs because of their own self-worth as members of the family. Just belonging to the right family line, or having a strong and rich spiritual heritage, doesn't mean that you will always automatically possess it. God's gifts and his grace are a great treasure, but not automatically yours or mine. Nor do we deserve them. God's gifts are given in grace, and they can be lost by those who let it slip out of their hands.

Scripture makes it clear that God's blessings aren't received merely by inheritance because you belong to the right family. His blessings are promised to those who receive them in faith. "Not all who are descended from Israel are really Israel. Not all who are descended from Abraham are really his children." Jesus often expressed the same sentiment. He warned against ethnic pride and reliance on lineage or heritage for good standing with God. He told those who in pride assumed the inheritance was theirs, "You will weep...when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out" (Matthew 8:10) His forerunner John also warned to the proud who refused to repent and trust in Jesus, "Don't say to yourself 'we have Abraham as our Father,' for out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham." (Matthew 3)

Paul illustrates for us how God considers us his children through faith in his promises alone. Abraham had a son before he gave birth to Isaac. But this child was born by human decision and action. He wasn't born as promised through Sarah his wife. That child did not inherit the promised blessings. Only the child who was promised to be born through Sarah was the true children of Abraham. What ended up setting him and all who followed after is faith. So too with you. You are part of the family of God through faith in his promise. You, along with those in Israel who have faith, are children of the promise. You receive your inheritance because God considers you his own child through faith in his promise. Like the true children of Israel we are children of Abraham's promise through faith. We are born, but not into a people, race, or nation. We are born of God. All those who in faith believe in Jesus Christ are born again into God's family. "To all those who believed him he gave the right to be called 'children of God.' Children not born of human decision... but born of God." (John 1) And as people born into God's family we stand to inherit all his blessings through faith.

The promise we hold to in faith was given long ago to Abraham. God told Abraham that his offspring would become a great nation and be blessed. He told Abraham that through his offspring all nations would be blessed. That promise was fulfilled when an Israelite woman named Mary gave birth to her son, Jesus. According to his human nature, Jesus is a child of Abraham. He is also the one promised through Abraham to bless all nations. Jesus, who is God over all forever praised, came to fulfill God's greatest promise for Abraham and all nations. Our faith is in Jesus, the perfect and holy Son of God from eternity and Mary's son according to his human nature. He came to bring us all eternal and lasting blessing. Earthly inheritance and gifts can and will fade. But what Jesus gives us is everlasting life.

Jesus declared what God's family table would look like. "Many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 8:11) Through faith in Jesus' perfect life and death you belong to the family of God. You were born again with the gift and the Spirit by water and the Word. You have the gift of faith and adoption into the family of God. Jesus faced the rejection by the Father that we deserved. He suffered and died outside the family in our place once for all. Then Jesus rose to life. He calls us brother and sister -heirs with him in the riches of heaven. And you can be sure that inheritance is yours. Rising back to life he assured us that we have an inheritance which not even death can take away from us.

Who can say that they were born into a greater inheritance than us? Ours is the promise given to Abraham, ours is the rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ours is the gift of the Spirit in baptism, ours is the invitation to his table, the body and blood given with the bread and wine in his new covenant, ours is the promise of sins forgiven, ours is the treasure of the holy Word which stands forever, ours is the promise of a new heaven and new earth, ours is the inheritance kept in heaven for us which can never perish, spoil or fade. Through faith we are children of God and heirs of the greatest riches.

Yet we too can lose it all. If we, like Israel, put our focus in our own position, our heritage, our lineage, or the strength of our own blood we too will lose our inheritance. Just as it was easy for Israel to lose faith and lose their greatest treasure, so it is for us. How many Christians have become foolishly complacent because they were born into a Christian family? How many have wandered from the faith because they held a careless disregard for God's Word have lost their faith and lost their position as children of God? You and I could also be tempted to think that because we belong to a very conservative church and have a rich heritage in our church of holding the gospel promises that we'll always hold them. Too many Christians have begun down the path that relies on family history instead of God's salvation history. They have turned aside from faith in God's promises to faith in their own standing. Like many in Israel they were handed an enormous blessing and gift. Often, they received it because by God's grace they were born into a Christian home. But they lost the gift as they lost their faith.

Who is God's child? It is only the one who stand by faith in Jesus. Through faith in him you are children of the promise. Hold to his promises. Don't rely on merely your church membership, your family history, or anything else. Rely on the promise which gave you rebirth. Rely on that promise which all the children of Abraham hold to in faith. Through Jesus, the offspring of Abraham, you are blessed. And you will sit at the family table with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all of true Israel. You will see the inheritance which is yours as a child of the promise. We are children of the promise.