

Already; Not Yet

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 8:12-27

There is an awful lot of good stuff in this passage, enough for a file cabinet full of sermons, enough for a bookshelf full of learned theology. I can't possibly talk about everything in this passage in 20 minutes, so there are two verses I'd like to bring to the forefront here. Let's read verses 15 and 23 again.

Verse 15: "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship, and by that Spirit we cry Abba! Father!" This is a very positive, very hopeful verse. Paul is telling us about a great and glorious change that has taken place in our lives. We used to be slaves to sin, we used to have the status of a slave in God's household. But now we're children of God. We have the status of children and heirs within God's family. We even call God, Abba Father – literally, Daddy. This great change is something that has already happened to us. Paul is saying in verse 15 that we have already been adopted.

But now jump 8 verses ahead to verse 23: "Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we eagerly await our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies" Do you hear the difference? Doesn't that sound like the opposite? In verse 15 we were adopted, now we're still waiting for our adoption. In verse 15 we were sons and daughters of God, now we're still waiting to become sons and daughters. In verse 15 we were saying 'Abba father', now we're groaning and waiting. These verses seem to say exactly the opposite things. What's going on? Has Paul made a mistake? How can both these things be true at once??!! How can we be both adopted and not adopted?

This strange tension isn't just something you find here in Romans 8, it's something you find throughout Paul's writing. From one passage to the other Paul seems to flip back and forth between these two senses. Sometimes he talks as if we have already spiritually arrived: "If anyone is in Christ," he says in II Corinthians 5:17, "the new creation has come. The old is gone; the new is here!" It has already happened. But other times Paul makes it sound like we have a lot of work to do before we arrive, other times he makes it sound like we have miles to go before we sleep. In Philippians 3 Paul says about himself, "Brothers and sisters, I have not been made perfect, but I press on to take a hold of that for which Christ Jesus took a hold of me... I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward." Now it doesn't sound like he has arrived at all. It sounds like he is not yet done. It sounds like the new creation is still ahead of him.

Or look at the way Paul talks earlier in Romans 8: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for through Christ Jesus, the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death." We are already, right now free from the law of sin and death! It sounds like we've arrived! But then there's Romans 8:12: "Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation, but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it, for if you live by the flesh we will surely die; but if by the Spirit we put to death the misdeeds of the body, we will live." Now it sounds like we aren't completely free from the power of sin.

What's going on here? Is Paul contradicting himself? Is he waffling? No. The tension between verses 15 and 23 and the tension between these other passages points us towards one of the most important themes in Paul's writing. It's a theme that we all need to learn if we're going to be able to understand what Paul is saying about our lives, and about our God. I'm talking about the theme, the theological idea of "already, not yet." Already, not yet. All throughout his writings Paul holds two things in tension. He wants to say that two things are true at the same time: It is true that we have already been redeemed by Christ, that we are already his children, that we already are set free from the tyranny of the devil. It is also true that we are not yet free from sin, we still have a race to run, we are still working out our salvation with fear and trembling. In one sense our battle is already won. In another sense, we are still fighting.

How can both things be true at once? Theologians have often used a World War Two analogy to explain this already not yet sort of existence. In World War Two you have two important days: D-day and V-day.

You first have D-Day; the day the allies landed on the beaches of France and began their push toward Berlin. D-Day was a decisive turning point in the war, once the beachhead had been established and the Germans had been beaten back, it was pretty much a given who would win the war. It was only a matter of time before Berlin fell. V-day was the day the war finally truly ended, where the victory was complete, where the weapons were laid down and the swords beat into plowshares. Between D-day and V-day there was a sense in which the war was already won and victory was assured. There was also a sense in which the war was not yet over and there was a lot of struggle left; some of it quite horrific. The Battle of the Bulge for instance.

When he speaks in this already not yet sort of way, Paul is saying that we Christians live between D-day and V-day. Jesus has died and risen, the Holy Spirit has been given, we've won. The victory is assured. Our world belongs to God. But there's still a lot of fighting left. The devil still strolls around like a lion seeking whom he may destroy.

This isn't just a way to understand Paul, it's a way to understand yourself. A spiritually healthy person needs to have both a strong sense of the already in their life and a strong sense of the not yet. We need to have both. And when a person or a church lets the balance tip too much one way or the other, bad things happen. Years ago this subject came up in a Bible study where we were thinking about the balance between the already and not yet. A member of that Bible study, John Olthoff, remarked how we as a church used to be a not yet kind of church. There used to be such a strong emphasis on our sinfulness and our shortcomings. There used to be a strong emphasis on our wretchedness and misery and that all our works were as filthy rags before God. There used to be real anxiety during a person's lifetime about whether they were saved or not.

There's a modern day local Reformed denomination that still today has that 'not yet' ethos. (I won't name the denomination because I don't want to make this denomination bashing) The emphasis in that church is on how we have not yet accomplished salvation. Funeral directors have told me that the graveside services in this denomination have a Spirit all their own. Very seldom would a preacher ever say that this person was with Jesus. It was like they were never sure. And at least one preacher would look sternly at the young people gathered around the graveside and say, "There are some of you grandchildren standing here who will never see your Grandmother again!" The implication being that they better smarten up or they would be going to hell. By no means was their salvation already assured, very few of them were safe within the fold. I think it's fair to say that this church has the balance tipped a little too far in the not yet direction. They need a little already. Their lives ought to be a little more of a sacrifice of praise and a little less of a sacrifice of fear. They need to hear more sermons on Romans 8:15, and fewer on Romans 8:23. They need a few more joyful Abba Fathers! And a few less guilty groans.

Years ago, this was also the ethos of the Christian Reformed Church. We're not that way anymore. We are, I would say, much more of an 'already' bunch. We don't dwell on our sins. Preachers like me don't threaten hell much. If the image of God that pervaded before was God the judge of our sins, the new image of choice is God the Abba, Father who is infinitely loving and forgiving. Our favorite parables are the parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son. They certainly get more time than the parables of the wicked tenants or the wheat and the tares.

In my experience, our children tend to have an already mindset. They don't worry about whether or not they're saved; most of them assume that they are. Sure they're not perfect, but God's not a condemning sort, God's cool, he's forgiving, he accepts them as they are. It's like they've arrived. They don't have to worry about their salvation, they can simply focus on having a good time, doing whatever looks like fun because God wants them to have fun.

While I certainly don't want to return to the days of threatening children with hell at the graveside, I do wonder if our modern church has tipped the balance too far in favor of the already. There's a lack of desire to be changed. The passion for righteousness has waned. The passion for engagement in the work of the Lord has waned. The life of faith and the life of the church is not as central as it once was. I'm happy people feel assured of their salvation, but isn't there a way that we could have both the sense that we are God's children, that he is Abba Father and we are eternally safe, and a conviction of our sins and our need for change; a hunger to bring righteousness to ourselves and justice to the world? Can't we have both?!

Sometimes I think we need to add an apocryphal ending to the parable of the prodigal son. Let the parable stand with the full force of its grace. Let the parable stand with the full weight of its radical acceptance

and unconditional love, let it assure all of us that the father loves and accepts even the worst of sinners. Let the fattened calf be killed and let the party swing. But then let's imagine the father coming over to the prodigal after the party ended and saying, 'Hey son that was a great party! Great to have you back. I missed you so much, it just wasn't the same without you. But hey, time for bed, because tomorrow is a work day. We've got to be out in the fields at 6AM, because the fields are ripe for harvest there's a lot of work to do. And let's face it, it's been a long time since you worked in my fields, and I have some things to teach you.

That's the balance. That's the Spirit of already, not yet. That's why Paul writes both verses 15 and 23. Without the not yet, we become complacent, without the already, we despair.

It is not always easy to keep already and not yet in balance, so this passage ends with the promise of help for us as we try to keep our balance. Verses 22 and 23 try to capture the spirit of already not yet by using the analogy of a pregnant mother going into labor. Because labor is a sort of already not yet experience. When you start to go into labor there's a sense of, this is it! The day has arrived! There's a sense of already. But there is also a sense of not yet. There's a sense of some painful work ahead. Delivering a child is both painful and wonderful. It is both already and not yet. Paul says that we have help as we go through the painful labor of becoming Christians. We have the Holy Spirit. As we groan in the pains of our new birth the Holy Spirit groans with us. The Spirit shares our groaning. The Spirit is our labor coach! The Holy Spirit is like a midwife. That's the image Paul is leaving with us here. If we are in labor giving birth to our new selves, the Spirit is there helping us along.

A good labor midwife does two things. She has to encourage the patient, she has to tell her what a good job she's doing, she has to be a comfort to her. She must also challenge. There's a time when she must say "OK! Push push! Let's go! Keep going! You can do it!" There is both encouragement and challenge. That's how our labor coach works with us. The Spirit both comforts us with the already, and challenges us with the not yet. Sometimes the Spirit makes us say Abba, Father; content with the amazing blessing and grace we have received. Sometimes he makes us groan; full of longing for a new creation we have yet to see. And we need both.

The Spirit uses other tools to help us in our labor. This table for instance. This table is an already not yet kind of place. When we come here, we always say it as if we are travelling forward in time to the wedding supper of the lamb in the new creation where we will feast with Jesus. But it is also a temple where we confess our sins and remember what our sins cost Jesus. And here at this table the Spirit gives us food for the journey. This bread and wine helps us walk the road of salvation. This bread and wine strengthens us for the long labor that brings our new self to life. This bread anchors us in Christ.

So good people, you who are already God's beloved children, you who have not yet arrived at home, come to the table, and may the Spirit give you strength for another week of your journey of following Jesus all the way home.

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