The Father's Business

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On Romans 8's Vocation of Groaning, the Word That Is Not Too Far Off, and the Boundary of Darkness Where God Asks Us to Stand

From Exodus 34 to Hebrews 4

I loved the journey through Scripture earlier in our service: Exodus 34, Isaiah 6, and Hebrews 4, all moving toward the same central observation about the access we now have to the throne of grace through Jesus.

Exodus 34:6-7 is where God declares himself to Moses at a time when the children of Israel did not deserve mercy. They had just constructed a golden calf and worshiped it at the base of Sinai. They deserved judgment. But God revealed himself to Moses with the words:

"And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin'" (Exodus 34:6–7).

Merciful, gracious, longsuffering, abounding in goodness and truth. That is the divine self-disclosure to a people who had just earned the opposite. And it sets the pattern for the rest of Scripture's revelation of God's character.

And then Isaiah 6, Isaiah's experience before the throne of God. Isaiah encounters the glory and immediately sees himself as a man of unclean lips, dwelling among a people of unclean lips. The contrast between the holiness on the throne and the uncleanness in Isaiah's

mouth is unbearable. And what does God do? He sends an angel from the heavenly realm to take a coal from a spiritual altar, touches it to Isaiah's lips, and purifies him. Gives him a voice. Sends him out to speak words that will eventually call Israel back from idolatry into wholehearted devotion to God. The same God of mercy from Exodus 34 is the God who cleanses the prophet's mouth in Isaiah 6. The vocation that follows is a vocation of speaking, of becoming a voice for the kingdom in a culture that has not yet heard.

And then Hebrews 4 brings the same pattern forward into the new covenant:

> Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14–16)

Come boldly to the throne of grace. That phrase rewards careful attention. The Mosaic tabernacle and the Solomonic temple were structured around three concentric zones of access: the outer courts, where the worshipers could enter; the holy place, where the priests could enter; and the holy of holies, where only the high priest could enter, and only once a year, after substantial ceremonial preparation, to make atonement. The architecture itself communicated the social geometry: the holier the space, the fewer the people allowed in.

And the writer of Hebrews is announcing that Jesus has dissolved the architecture. We come boldly, without any of the ceremonial preparation that the old high priest required, directly to the throne where God himself sits. Without restriction. Without intermediary. Without the once-a-year limitation that the old system maintained. Come boldly. In your time of need. To obtain mercy and find grace.

At Sinai, when Moses was up on the mountain receiving the law, the people at the base would not approach the holiness of God. They turned, instead, to the golden calf, because the actual holiness was too overwhelming to draw near, and an idol was a more manageable alternative. But now, in the new covenant, the holiness has been made approachable through the mediating work of Jesus. Come boldly. The Sinai-fear that produced the golden calf has been answered. The grace and mercy God declared to Moses in Exodus 34 has now been completely revealed in the body of Jesus Christ.

The Vocation of Groaning

And this access to the throne is not given to us as a private comfort. Access is given to us so that we can participate in the work the Father is doing in the world. And the work the Father is doing turns out to be a work of groaning alongside a groaning creation.

Listen to Romans 8 carefully:

> For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. (Romans 8:22–23)

The whole creation groans. We ourselves groan. And the Spirit also groans within us with groanings which cannot be uttered (Romans 8:26). That is a lot of groaning. God is groaning. We are groaning. Creation is groaning. The vocation of the people of God is to enter into the travail of humanity, to enter into the groaning and the suffering of the entire created order as a vocational responsibility, not as an interruption of the kingdom-work but as the kingdom-work itself.

And this hearkens all the way back to the slavery of the children of Israel in Egypt. When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, he said:

"I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows" (Exodus 3:7).

I have heard their groanings. The Father's first move toward Israel was to enter into the groanings of the enslaved. And our vocation, as children adopted into the Father's household, is to do the same thing on his behalf, to hear the groanings of all created order, and to enter into them as the family business we have been adopted into.

This is, as the old television show used to put it, Sanford and Son. The Father has a program of redemptive work, and his children are enrolled in the same work. The kingdom is a family business, with adoption papers issued at the moment of new birth.

The Pendulum That Swung Too Far

And let me name something that has been one of the standing problems within Protestant Christianity across the last several centuries. In our legitimate rejection of works-righteousness, the medieval Catholic theology that suggested human merit could earn salvation, Protestant Christianity swung the pendulum so far the other way that we sometimes claim, by misreading Paul's words, that the people of God have nothing to do at all.

"It is not of works lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:9). True. We do not earn salvation. Salvation is a gift. Read carefully Ephesians 2:8-9. But read the very next verse:

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

We are his workmanship, created for good works which God prepared beforehand. The very verse that follows the do-not-boast-in-works verse turns around and says we were created

for good works God has already prepared for us to walk in. The two verses belong together. The Protestant tendency to amputate verse 9 from verse 10 has produced a strain of Christianity in which the kingdom is reduced to a private spiritual transaction with no vocational implications for the wider world.

There is, in fact, an adventure God has called us to. A collaborative effort in the Father's redemption of the whole created order. The original command in Genesis 1:28 was "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it." The garden in Eden was meant to expand until it filled the whole earth. Sin interrupted that expansion. Cain was driven east of Eden into the land of Nod, the land of wandering. Beyond the land of Nod lay the wilderness, where chaos dwells, where monsters live, where the medieval mapmakers wrote "here be dragons" at the edges of what was known. And the human task, interrupted by sin but reauthorized in Christ, is to push the boundary of the garden outward until the dragons have been displaced and the whole earth has been brought back under the gardener's order.

Crowned With Glory

Listen to Psalm 8, which catches exactly this vocational anthropology:

> When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet. (Psalm 8:3–6)

Have you ever stepped outside on a clear night and looked up at the moon and stars? The sheer vastness can leave you feeling very small. What is man that you are mindful of him? The cosmic scale of what God has made is genuinely overwhelming when you let yourself feel it.

And the Psalmist's question, what is man that you would visit such a creature, is the appropriate response to that scale.

But then the answer. You have made him a little lower than the angels, and you have crowned him with glory and honor. God is not the only being with glory. Humanity was created in his image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27), crowned with glory and honor, given dominion over the works of his hands.

And there is a careful distinction between image and likeness that is worth pausing on. We are created in his image as a default condition: There is nothing we can do to become more or less in his image, because the image is the structural fact of our humanity. But likeness is something we collaborate in. We become in his likeness when we begin to be obedient to the Father in all that he has called us to do. Image is given. Likeness is lived into. And the likeness is the vocation. We can choose whether to be in his likeness or not. We can choose to live into the cruciform pattern that conforms our humanity to the Father's character. Or we can choose to remain in the default-image condition without ever advancing into the likeness-vocation.

Psalm 72:8 picks up the same vocational theme:

"He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Psalm 72:8).

From sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth. That is the Messianic scope of dominion the Psalm anticipates. And Israel, reading these texts, naturally expected the Messiah to accomplish the worldwide dominion through power, through military domination, through crushing the heads of their enemies. That is the expected mechanism. Cosmic-scale dominion delivered through cosmic-scale force.

But the mechanism turned out to be something else entirely.

The Armor of God

And Ephesians 6 names the actual mechanism. The dominion-language of Psalm 8 and Psalm 72 gets translated, in the apostolic teaching, into the armor-of-God language of Ephesians 6:

> Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. (Ephesians 6:10–13)

We do not wrestle against flesh and blood. That is the structural reorientation Paul is performing. The Messianic dominion that Psalm 8 and Psalm 72 had anticipated is real, but the wrestling-target is not flesh and blood. The wrestling-target is the principalities, powers, and spiritual hosts of wickedness operating in the heavenly places. And the equipment for that wrestling is not the equipment of conventional warfare. It is the armor of God, which turns out to consist almost entirely of defensive equipment.

The old song catches it: “it is a battleground, brother, not a recreation room.” It is a fight. It is not a game. But the equipment for the fight is structurally different from the equipment any conventional army has ever carried. Watch Paul list the equipment:

> Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery

darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:14–17)

The girdle of truth. The article of clothing pulled tight around the waist to keep extraneous fabric from flapping while fighting. In the new kingdom, that constraint-instrument is truth itself. We bind ourselves with truth. We constrain our lives by living truthfully. The unconstrained behaviors that produce relational chaos get gathered in by the discipline of truthful speech and truthful conduct.

The breastplate of righteousness. Covenantal faithfulness protecting the heart and vital organs. Our faithfulness to God through the Spirit becomes the shield over the parts of us that are most vulnerable to penetrating attack.

The feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. Mobility for the message. Equipment for the journey. The footwear that lets us travel into hostile territory while announcing peace.

The shield of faith, quenching the fiery darts of the wicked. Defensive equipment for the inevitable assault from outside.

The Helmet of Salvation

And then the helmet of salvation. Notice the location. The helmet protects the head, which is to say, the mind. Salvation, in Paul's framing, is a mindset before it is anything else. And the mindset of salvation is the specific mindset Jesus articulated repeatedly across the Gospels:

"Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35).

That is the mindset the helmet protects. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5). Do not love your life unto the death. He that tries to save his life shall lose it. The mindset of salvation is the cross-bearing mindset. It is the willingness to lose what we have been clinging to because we have been promised something larger that we cannot acquire while we are still clinging.

And this mindset is not a mindset of retreat into protective spaces. That is the constant temptation, to take the helmet off and decide that everything we do now has to be an act of power, authority, or domination over somebody. To try to control situations rather than to bear them. When we draw back into safety, there is no growth there. Growth happens on the edge of the unknown. At the boundary where God dwells. And the helmet of salvation is the mental equipment that lets us stay at the boundary instead of retreating into the safe interior.

The mindset that seeks to bear our cross for others. The mindset that embraces suffering as a road to glory and not domination as a road to glory. The nations do not become the inheritance of the saints because of domination. The nations become our inheritance through suffering and service. And the helmet protects the operating principle.

The Sword of the Spirit

And then the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. This is the only offensive weapon in the entire armor inventory. And when we see Jesus in Revelation, a two-edged sword comes out of his mouth (Revelation 1:16; 2:12; 19:15). The sword is words. That is the only weapon we have. Words.

And the words turn out to be remarkably effective at accomplishing what no conventional weapon could accomplish. Watch the Luke 1-2 pattern with the Spirit-filled people. When Zechariah does not believe the angel’s announcement that he and Elizabeth will have a son, the

angel makes him mute. Lack of belief and lack of faith will close the mouth. But when John is born, the Spirit enters Zechariah, and he begins to prophesy (Luke 1:67-79).

When Mary greets Elizabeth, the Spirit fills Elizabeth, and she prophesies (Luke 1:41-45). When Elizabeth has finished, the Spirit fills Mary, and she prophesies the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit enters the 120, fire sits on their tongues, and they prophesy the wonderful works of God in every language of the surrounding world (Acts 2:1-11). And when Jesus says (stay in Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high, and you will be witnesses to me) the power he is giving is the power to witness. The power to speak what God has done in your life.

And somehow, and this still blows my mind, the testimony of what God has done in our individual lives is the very thing that brings down the principalities and powers Paul lists in Ephesians 6:12. The cosmic-scale spiritual wickedness in the heavenly places gets defeated by the small-scale personal witness of what God has done in this particular human life. Words change worlds.

Sometimes I get going with the self-talk, the negative interior monologue, and the self-talk constructs a world that is not the world God wants to create. But when I start to speak the words of life, when I begin to witness to what God has actually done in my actual life, the powers of darkness begin to quake. Words have a kingdom-effect that exceeds what their syllabic weight could account for.

Children of Light

And the result of the Spirit-empowered speech is described later in Ephesians:

> For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth) . . . Have no

> fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. (Ephesians 5:8–9, 11–13)

You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Notice the formulation. Not "you were once in darkness" but "you were once darkness." The transformation goes deeper than situational. People who once were the substance of darkness have become the substance of light. And the function of light, when it enters a space, is to expose what was hidden in the darkness, to render visible what had been operating invisibly.

And Jesus had said both halves of this. In John 8:12, he says, "I am the light of the world." And in Matthew 5:14, he says to his disciples, "You are the light of the world." The same light. Resident first in him, then transferred through union with him into us. We become the visible manifestation of his light in whatever rooms we enter.

We Are Debtors

And this transfer of light brings us back to Romans 8. *Listen carefully*:

> Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. (Romans 8:12–14)

We are debtors. The NIV translates the same phrase as "we have an obligation." We have been given something so large that we are now under obligation to live out what we have received.

The story-pattern is familiar. Have you seen the 1995 film While You Were Sleeping? Bill Pullman's character runs his late father's moving business. He never wanted the moving business. He had other dreams for his life. But the family business has been handed to him, and he feels the obligation to keep it running because it is his father's business and he is the son. That is the family-business obligation. You did not pick it. You inherited it. And the inheritance comes with the obligation to operate the business the family has been running.

We have been given the Spirit. We have been given an obligation. And Romans 8:17 names the obligation explicitly:

"And if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together" (Romans 8:17).

Heirs of God. Joint heirs with Christ. And the obligation we have inherited is the obligation to operate the Father's business across the world, every day getting up to expand his kingdom to the ends of the earth. That is the job. We were enrolled in it the day we were adopted into the family.

The Word Is Not Too Far Off

And the equipment for the job has been delivered. Listen to what Moses said to Israel just before they entered the promised land:

> For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it.
>
> (Deuteronomy 30:11–14)

The word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it. You do not have to take a hero's journey to find the word. You do not have to ascend up to heaven like some Greek odyssey, climbing the cosmic ladder. You do not have to descend into Hades, cross the river Styx, do amazing things like Hercules. You do not have to go beyond the sea. The word is right here. In your mouth. In your heart. Already available to you for the doing.

> And Paul quotes this exact Deuteronomy 30 passage two chapters later in Romans 10:
>
> But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down from above), or, "'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach). (Romans 10:6–8)

The word is near you. Just speak the word. Live faith. Change the language and the words you speak, not by mere mental effort, but by the power of the Spirit who enables you to live the thing you know God has called you to live.

And the passage continues: "I have set before you life and good, and death and evil . . . choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19). Choose life. Have you been filled with the Spirit? Is God dwelling in you? Do you feel an unction to be something in this world that just separates you from the darkness of the surrounding age? If you feel the slightest unction, choose life. Move into it. Live into it. That is the Father's business. The business of bringing righteousness across the world. That is what he has called us to.

Numbers 14 and the Edge

And the historical moment that Deuteronomy 30 is preparing Israel for is the moment they had failed at the first time. *Numbers 14*.

Israel has just completed the wilderness journey. They are standing at the border of the promised land. Twelve spies have been sent in to scout the land. Ten come back with a fear-report: the land is good, but the inhabitants are giants, the cities are walled, we cannot take it. Two, Joshua and Caleb, come back with a faith-report:

> If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, 'a land which flows with milk and honey.' Only do not rebel against the Lord, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the Lord is with us. Do not fear them. (Numbers 14:8–9)

They are our bread. Their protection has departed from them. The Lord is with us. That is the Joshua-Caleb diagnostic of the moment. The giants who looked like dragons to the other ten spies looked like bread to Joshua and Caleb. Same giants. Different way of seeing them.

And the people refused to enter. They wanted to go back to Egypt. They wanted slavery instead of the risk of the inheritance. And God responded with a judgment-pronouncement that is worth pausing over:

> I have pardoned, according to your word; but truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord . . . because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times, and have not heeded My voice, they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it. But My servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit in him and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land where he went, and his descendants shall inherit it. (Numbers 14:20–24)

All the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord. That is the scope God is announcing. Not just the eighty-mile-wide strip of land Israel was looking at: the entire earth. The promise of God is much larger than the geography Israel could see from the border.

The Father's business plan is ten-thousand-year in development. Satellite locations in every hamlet. Representations of him in every village, on every craggy rock, in every corner of the surrounding world. The whole earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord because the kingdom-business has been authorized to expand without geographical limit. And every time we choose to stand at our particular boundary with darkness and speak the word of life into it, we are participating in the satellite-business expansion that started when the Father authorized the original commission.

If you want to know what it means to blaspheme the Holy Spirit, Numbers 14 is the diagnostic. They saw God's glory. They saw what he was doing in real time. And they chose to rebel anyway. To call the work of the Spirit something else. To attribute his work to false sources. To call the act of God a danger to be avoided rather than an invitation to be accepted. That is the deep diagnostic. And it is one of the few patterns Jesus warns will produce judgment without remedy.

Caleb's Spirit

"But My servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit in him and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land." Different spirit. Followed fully. Those are the two clauses that distinguished Caleb from the rest of his generation. He was operating on a different interior energy than they were. And he was following the Father without holding anything back.

And Paul, in Romans 8, picks up this exact contrast:

> For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. (Romans 8:15–16)

You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back. That is exactly the Numbers 14 contrast. The spirit of slavery is the spirit that wants to retreat to Egypt rather than enter the inheritance. We have not received that spirit. We have received the Spirit of adoption (the Spirit that produces the cry “Abba, Father”) the Spirit Jesus himself spoke from in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion (Mark 14:36).

And Jesus’s prayer in Gethsemane is the prototypical adoption-spirit prayer. “Abba, Father. Let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). Jesus’s temptation in that moment was real. The wilderness-temptation he had faced at the beginning of his ministry resurfaced at the end. “All the kingdoms of the world will be yours if you bow down and worship me” (Matthew 4:9). The devil had offered Jesus a route to the Psalm 2:8 inheritance (“ask of me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance”) that bypassed the cross. Be a Caesar. Be an Alexander. Be a Xerxes. Take the kingdoms by domination rather than by suffering.

But that was not how Psalm 2:8 was going to be accomplished. On the road to Emmaus after the resurrection, Jesus walks alongside the two disciples who had not yet recognized him, and asks what they had been discussing. They tell him about the crucifixion of the one they had hoped would deliver Israel. And Jesus responds:

> Then He said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into

> His glory?" And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory? The suffering was not a detour from the glory. The suffering was the road to the glory. And the cross was the place where the powers of darkness were defeated, not by superior force, but by sacrificial love that the powers could neither comprehend nor counter.

This is where Catholicism and its Protestant daughters have sometimes gotten it wrong. The cross is not principally a place of shame and humiliation and torment to be pitied. The cross is the place where God gained victory over the powers of darkness. The crown of thorns that the soldiers placed on Jesus's head was intended ironically, they thought they were mocking him as a fake king. The placard above his head that read "king of the Jews" in three languages was intended as ironic indictment. Pilate said, "What I have written I have written" (John 19:22), thinking he was authorizing one final humiliation. Little did they know that their mockery was ringing throughout the heavens as the actual victory of God was being executed in the world. The powers of darkness were shattered. The throne was secured. The crown of thorns turned out to be the actual crown. The shame turned out to be the actual glory. The crosses turned out to be the chariots that lead to the throne.

Caesar-Style Adoption

And Paul's framing of adoption in Romans 8 needs to be heard against the political-cultural backdrop of the Roman Empire of his day. Because the prevailing model of "adoption" in the first century was specifically Roman imperial adoption. Watch the imperial succession from Augustus forward:

Julius Caesar died and adopted Augustus. Augustus, after his death, was deified, declared a god by the Roman senate. Augustus then died and had adopted Tiberius. Tiberius died and was deified, and he had adopted Caligula (his great-nephew). Caligula died, assassinated, and Claudius (his uncle) was acclaimed. Claudius adopted Nero (his great-nephew). And Nero, of course, was the Caesar reigning when Paul wrote the letter to the Romans. For about a century, the Roman imperial succession had operated by adoption-of-the-heir, with each emperor being deified upon death and the next emperor inheriting the title "son of the deified one."

So when Paul writes, "you have received the Spirit of adoption," and "you are children of God," his Roman audience would have heard the imperial overlay immediately. To be adopted as a son of God was not, in their cultural ear, a private spiritual transaction. It was the imperial succession pattern transposed into a divine register. And the substance of imperial adoption was vocational, the adopted son was expected to execute the empire-vision in his new role as emperor. The adoption came with the assignment of running the family business.

And Paul is announcing exactly that pattern for the believers in Rome. You have been adopted as sons of the actual deified one: God himself. And the adoption comes with the obligation to execute the family vision. To run the family business. To carry the kingdom-vocation forward as the legitimate heirs of the actual emperor of the cosmos. The glory we will receive at the end is the glory of having lived as sons of God in the present: having run the Father's business while we were here, having pushed the boundary of his kingdom into the surrounding darkness, having spoken the word of life into the rooms we walked through.

The Battle Cry of the Fruit of the Spirit

And here is one of the most disorienting elements of the Father's business plan. The equipment for the battle turns out to be a list of qualities that do not, on their face, look like battle-equipment at all. Listen to Galatians 5:

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law" (Galatians 5:22–23).

Does that sound like a real battle cry? Picture Robert the Bruce in Braveheart, lining up the Scots for the climactic battle, and the war-cry running down the line is: "I love you! May your joy be full! Have peace among you! Oh, we long-suffer you! May the kindness of God overshadow you! Be gentle! And self-controlled!"

That does not sound like the battle-cry of any army that has ever charged into battle. And yet in this inverted kingdom, those are the qualities that constitute our actual weapons. Love is a battle-cry. Joy is a battle-cry. Peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are battle-cries. The fruit of the Spirit is the offensive arsenal of the kingdom, deployed against the principalities and powers that the surrounding flesh cannot defeat by conventional means.

And notice, "against such there is no law." When we are pursuing love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, we do not need an additional list of prohibitions to keep us from murder and envy and idolatry. The pursuit of the Spirit-fruit naturally displaces the works-of-the-flesh that Paul listed in the verses immediately preceding. You do not have to remind yourself not to envy today, not to murder today, not to commit adultery today, if your interior is being actively reorganized around the fruit-of-the-Spirit

qualities. The fruit displaces the works by occupying the soul-space the works would otherwise inhabit.

The Spirit That Groans

And Romans 8 closes its argument with a return to the groaning-vocation it had opened with. *Listen*:

"Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Romans 8:26).

The Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. We do not know how to pray. The Spirit prays through us. And the Spirit's prayer-language is groaning, a wordless travail that aligns our interior with the creation's groaning that we are vocationally called to enter into.

Have you had this experience? You are going through your ordinary day, and a thought arrives unsolicited, "I wonder how so-and-so is doing," about a person you have not been thinking about. Five minutes later you see them at the gas station. Or you wake up early in the morning with someone from the assembly on your mind, and you pray for them, and later that day you discover they were going through something desperate at that very moment. That is the unction of the Spirit. The interior nudge that does not arrive through conscious effort, the alignment of our prayer with the actual situation of someone we did not know was in crisis, is the Spirit groaning through us into the situations that need intercession.

Our vocation, at its deepest level, is to be available to that unction. To live with enough interior space that the Spirit can groan through us when the surrounding groanings require intercession. To pray when prompted. To act when the nudge surfaces. To trust that the

alignment of our interior with the Spirit's interior is producing real intercession-effects in the surrounding world, even when we cannot see the connections directly.

The Boundary of Darkness

And so this is where the chapter lands. We have been given a vocation by God, a job to do. What was impossible for Israel without the Spirit has now been made possible for us through the Spirit poured out at Pentecost. God's own Spirit, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, now dwells in us and empowers us to be faithful to what God has commanded.

And the dwelling-place of God is no longer made with hands. It is in human bodies: yours, mine, the brother across the aisle, the sister three rows back. The Spirit has relocated from buildings to people. And what God now expects from us is the ordinary human-scale work of being his presence in whatever rooms we enter.

The job is not safe. It involves standing at the boundary between God's order and the surrounding chaos. It involves pressing into territory that has been previously occupied by darkness. It involves the slow expansion of the garden into the wilderness that surrounds it. And we cannot do it from inside the safe interior of religious habit. We have to live at the edge, at the frontier where the next conversation, the next relationship, the next workplace situation, the next family-table encounter could go either toward the kingdom or away from it.

And the equipment for the work (the armor of God, the word that is in our mouth, the fruit of the Spirit, the groanings of the indwelling Spirit) is sufficient. We have been adopted as sons. We have been enrolled in the family business. We have been authorized to expand the satellite operations of the Father's kingdom into our particular geographical region of darkness. And the glory at the end, the inheritance Romans 8:17 names, will be the glory of having lived as sons in the present, having operated the family business across whatever years we were given,

having pushed the boundary of the kingdom into the surrounding world by the same cruciform pattern Jesus operated by.

This is dense material. But if we can figure out how to be the people of God and live at those edges (not afraid, not drawing back into sin, not weakening but being courageous and pushing the boundary of darkness) then the family business will continue to expand exactly as the Father has been planning for ten thousand years. It starts in our life. It starts in our homes. And from our homes it goes outward, satellite by satellite, into whatever portion of the surrounding earth we have been authorized to occupy. Until, at the consummation, the whole earth is filled with the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14). Amen.