

No one ever said that New Exodus was going to be easy: Reflections on Romans 8.1-17

by Brian Walsh

So over at Wine Before Breakfast we've been hanging out with Paul and his letter to the Romans again. And this morning I offered these reflections on Romans 8.1-17. My indebtedness to Sylvia Keesmaat's book *Paul and His Story: (Re)Interpreting the Exodus Tradition* (Sheffield, 1999) is clear.

I would recommend that you take a moment to read the Romans text (slowly and prayerfully) before launching into what I have on offer here.

No one ever said that this was going to be easy.
Not Paul's letter to the Romans.
Not the faith that he there proposes.
Not the Jesus he calls us to follow.

I know that this stuff isn't easy.
But if it were easy, it would be cheap.
Right?
I mean if it was any simpler,
then it wouldn't likely be any more true
to the lives of those early believers in Rome
then it would be true of our own conflicted,
compromised,
complicit,
and contradictory lives.

But let's pay attention to Paul's language here.

Remember last week's reading from Romans 7?

Who are we?
Folks who have been "sold into slavery under sin."
We are "held captive to the law of sin."
I am "a slave to the law of sin."

What's the problem?
Sin "dwells within me."
"Nothing good dwells within me."
"The law of sin dwells within my members."

Who are we?
We are slaves.
What's the problem?

The very sin to which we have been enslaved
has been so internalized,
that it has literally taken up residence in our lives.
It is not just that we dwell in sin,
it is much worse.
Sin dwells in us.

Sin, that homewrecking force,
that power of destruction,
that misdirection of human life
that can only bear the fruit of death,
is so internalized,
has taken so much power in our lives,
that all we can say is that it dwells in us.
Sin is so at home in us,
so much a matter of a distorted second nature,
that we can only sabotage all attempts at homemaking.
Sin dwells in us, and all of our dwellings are dwellings of death.

Some suggest that Paul is not trying to make any universal statements
in Romans 7.

But it sure looks pretty universal to me.
I mean, once we strip off that thin veneer of civility,
once we pop that balloon of liberal optimism,
once we take an honest look at ourselves and our world,
then this view of sin doesn't seem pessimistic, but realistic,
a devastatingly accurate portrayal
of the shit we're all really in.

Now if Paul, the Jew, is talking about slavery
and the longing for liberation,
if Paul, the Jew, is talking about a dwelling
that can only be false because it destroys home,
then what might be the background to what he's talking about?

Or let's move ahead and think about this morning's passage.

If Paul, the Jew, is talking about a salvation that entails
being led by the Spirit ...
out of slavery...
in which we will be adopted as children of God ...
receive our inheritance as true heirs ...
and be crowned with glory ...
all because in the midst of our slavery we cried out "Abba Father" ...
then what do you think he might be talking about?

I mean, when did anything like that ever happen?

Of course, this is all language that echoes the exodus from Egypt.

When a Jew talks about being set free from slavery,
exodus is the memory that echoes throughout that language.

When a Jew says that we have not received a spirit of slavery
to fall back into fear,
the story of fearful Israel in the wilderness longing to return
to Egypt resonates throughout these words.

When a Jew talks about being led by the Spirit,
the pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night
is the unmistakable reference.

When a Jew speaks of receiving a spirit of adoption,
wherein their bastard status is resolved through covenant
promise,

then that nation-constituting event of the exodus
is undoubtedly ringing in the background.

When a Jew refers to the Spirit bearing witness with our spirits
that we are children of God,
and if children, then heirs of God,
then that language of inheritance reaches back to Moses
leading the children of God towards their inheritance.

And when a Jew places all of this in the context of our crying out,
"Abba Father"
then it is impossible not to hear the Israelites
"crying out" to God from the midst of Egyptian bondage;
groaning under the weight of Egyptian brick quotas.
They groaned under their slavery and cried out.

If the problem is slavery,
then the solution is exodus.

And so Paul maps out in evocative and liberating terms,
a new exodus in Jesus Christ.

And just as Moses in the wilderness set before the people two paths,
blessing and curse,
life and death,
so does Paul insist that the same choice lies before us in Jesus Christ.

To set the mind on the flesh, he writes,
is death.

To set the mind on the Spirit,
is life and peace.

Imaginations held captive to enslaving visions of life,

or imaginations set free for kingdom life?

Imaginations preoccupied with the power games of the flesh,
or imaginations animated by the Spirit that sets the captives free?

Imaginations enslaved to the images of success and fulfillment
on offer by the economic, academic, and ecclesiastical
systems of the world,
or imaginations that can see just beyond the range of normal sight,
enlivened by a hope of homecoming in God's good kingdom?

How you imagine the world,
whether you have a mind of flesh or of the Spirit,
whether you want to remain in Egypt or take the risk of exodus,
whether you are comfortable in the empire or long to be set free,
depends on who dwells in your life,
depends on who has taken up deep residence in your hearts,
depends on who or what is the mostly deeply animating force
in your lives.

The problem is that sin dwells in us,
and that is why we are slaves to the empire of death.

But thanks be to God, there is now no condemnation
for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Christ has set us free from this God-damn law of sin and death.

You are not bound to the flesh,
no longer enslaved in the empire of sin,
because you are "in the Spirit"
and the "Spirit dwells in you."

You are set free from this
day-in-day-out,
boring-same-old-shit
power of death,
because the Spirit that rose Jesus from the dead,
this resurrection-power Spirit,
dwells in you,
and sets you free.

It is new exodus time, sisters and brothers.

It is liberation time.

It is time to be set free and come home.

It is time to put away the spirit of slavery that falls back into fear.

It is time to get out of the empire of death

and get the empire of death out of us.

It is time to cry "Abba Father"

and to hear the very Spirit of God pronounce us
children of God, no longer illegitimate bastards.

But there is a catch.

No one ever said that this was going to be easy.
You see, if we are children,
then we are heirs,
heirs of God,
and joint heirs with Christ
... if, in fact, we suffer with him
so that we may also be glorified with him.

No one ever said that this was going to be easy.

If we are heirs with Christ,
if we are set free to follow Christ on this new exodus,
if Christ has come to dwell in us,
then we will walk the path of this Christ,
we will leave the empire and embrace the kingdom,
we will follow the one who set us free on a cross,
we will suffer with him at the hands of the empire of death
and only then will we share in the glory
of a full and restored humanity.

No one ever said that this was going to be easy.

The Romans have to decide where they want to live.
In an empire of slavery,
subject to the vision of the good life of the empire,
subject to the hierarchy and elitism of the empire,
complicit in the violence and oppression of the empire,
or in the wilderness,
at the margins of the empire,
subject to the ridicule and persecution of the empire,
on an exodus journey with Jesus,
a path of suffering.

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Liberating,
exciting,
transforming,
but not easy.