

Participation in God

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[0 : 00] Good morning. I'm Dan. I'm Dan Bielman. I'm an associate pastor here at Church of the Advent. Also with us this morning is Jeff Simpson. He is our pastoral intern. He's a pastor too here at Church of the Advent. Next week we welcome the return after a much-deserved rest, our senior pastor, Tommy Hinson. Hey, Tommy. And this morning we have Dr. Anwar Otley who led us in worship. We're so glad you're here with us, Anwar. Can you welcome Anwar and thank him for leading us in worship?

So this morning we're going to look at the passage that Ellen read from Romans chapter 8. And if you've been a Christian for a long time, you've probably recognized a few of those phrases or a few of those verses. Perhaps you even have one of them memorized. And when we put all of those phrases and verses together from Romans chapter 8, a few things stand out. The first, I don't know if you noticed, the first is you hear all three persons of the Trinity invoked. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Another thing that stands out in that passage is the tone. This passage in Romans 8 is thick with relationship.

I like the very simple expression in verse 31 of God being for us. God is for us. I'd like to start there. And I'd like to ask you, what is it like for you when you know somebody is for you? When somebody is 100% for you, no matter what, no matter how many mistakes you make, no matter how fouled up or insecure you come across, this person is for you. Perhaps you couldn't name anybody.

You're not alone in this room, but I would like for you to imagine what that could be like. Would you want that? Would you want somebody to be 100% for you?

Now for all of us, whether we have somebody like that in our lives or we can only imagine it, let's consider now the king and maker of the universe in control of all things, perfectly loving and good, being completely without reservation for you.

[2 : 48] Some of you may not believe that to be true. I'm asking you to imagine it's true. What would that be like? Let's pray.

And as we pray, just take one more minute in quiet to consider the God of the universe is for us. God, if you are for us, who can be against us?

We definitely delight in this part of your word. We delight in it more than riches. Thank you for being for us. And now open our hearts to your word and open your word to our hearts. In Jesus' name, amen.

Amen. All right. So we have a passage where all three persons of the Trinity are invoked, and it's thick with relationship language.

One commentator in looking at this passage observes that believers are caught up in the inner life of God. Christians, by virtue of being united to Jesus, are caught up in the inner life of God.

[4 : 26] We're going to use that as our lens to read through this passage. But before we do, I'd like to address the children. Now, children, hopefully you have paper with you, a pencil or a pen.

I'd like you to draw a scene. Are you ready? Here are your instructions. I'd like you to draw a scene of yourself in a situation where you felt you completely belonged.

Among people where you felt completely belonged. It could be, for instance, at a dinner table with your family, or it could be with your friends.

It could be in a classroom where you felt completely belonged because the teacher was very welcoming and affirmed you. It could be on your birthday, or at Christmas.

So draw the scene with all of the parts. All right? If it's a meal, draw all the food. If it's a Christmas, draw all the gifts. All right, you got some work to do. We'll come back to this scene in a minute.

[5 : 29] All right? But that's where you're going to start. Now, let's turn to the adults. I'd like to consider this phrase, the inner life of God. What is the inner life of God?

What is it like on the inside of the Trinity? Kind of hard to fathom and imagine. And as many of you are probably aware, theologians have wrestled with the idea of the Trinity since the earliest days of the church.

Deliberation over the nature of the Trinity in particular. The second person, how these three interrelate, have been at the center of the early creeds, councils of the church.

The church has known it is a matter that is not fully knowable by the finite minds of finite creatures. The best we can do is to say what is true based on what has been revealed to us in Scripture.

The danger has always been going too far in what we say. Now, Tommy preached a very good sermon about the Trinity on Trinity Sunday back on June 3rd.

[6 : 39] I highly recommend going back and listening to it. For now, I will just summarize here that we can say that the Trinity is one in essence and three in person.

One in essence, three in person. In the Trinity, there is both unity and distinction. The unity is without confusion of the three persons.

And the distinction of the three is such that the three subsist within one divine nature. And just to get a little academic, I'd like to read from the writings of the 8th century theologian, John of Damascus.

He writes this. The abiding and resting of the persons in one another is not in such a manner that they coalesce or become confused, but rather so that they adhere to one another.

I just want you to key in on those two words, mutual indwelling.

[7 : 43] We'll come back to that. For the Son is the Father and the Spirit. I'm sorry. Whoa, that's heresy. Strike that from the recording. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit.

And the Spirit is in the Father and the Son. And the Father is in the Son and the Spirit. And there is no merging or blending or confusion like I did earlier.

And there is one search and one movement of the three persons. It is impossible for this to be found in any created nature. Okay.

There's a lot there. But I'd like to focus on the term mutual indwelling. It is a translation of the Greek word perichoresis.

It's a helpful word. It gives us a glimpse into that inner life of the Trinity that I referred to earlier. It comes from two different words. The first being para.

[8 : 41] And you might recognize that word from the word periscope, right? It means around. And the word choresis shares the same root as the word choreography. And it refers to movement.

Like dance. It does not mean literally to dance around. Just as the English word understand doesn't mean literally to stand under.

Under. However, dancing around could serve as a metaphor to help us fully grasp the meaning of the word perichoresis. Perichoresis or mutual indwelling involves intimacy and relationship.

Unity. Movement. Dynamism. This mutual indwelling has existed from eternity past and extends into eternity.

And a person is so epped up into this perichoresis, this mutual indwelling, when he or she becomes a Christian. And this is because when we put our faith and trust in Jesus and are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we become united with Jesus.

[9 : 54] Paul presents our salvation, our status as Christians, primarily in terms of union with Christ. And it's really easy to miss as you read through his writings.

Because it pops up all the time with little phrases like, in Christ Jesus. So, for instance, in Romans 8, chapter 1, he writes, There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are what?

Together? In Christ Jesus. This little phrase, in Christ, easily overlooked, appears all over the book of Romans, and especially chapter 8. And it has profound implications.

If we are in union with the Son, we participate in the life of the Trinity. And in Romans chapter 8, Paul highlights some of the benefits of this heavenly participation.

We're going to look at three benefits. Prayer, mission, and hope. So, this is my goal. All right? That when we read a passage like Romans 8, we can view this through the lens of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[11 : 00] Before we do, I'm going to ask the kids to add something to their drawing. Are you ready? There wasn't much time. All right? But can you add something else? What I want you to do is, just on the outside of the scene, I want you to draw one more person.

Okay? And they feel outside of your sphere of belonging. Okay? They feel alone. They're not on the inside. They're on the outs.

And then I need you to write. Now, some of you, I think, can write and spell and write words. I want you to write words all around this person about how this person feels. Okay? I'll get you started. This person is probably sad and lonely, etc. You can ask your parents, if you're next to them, for help for more words. Okay.

While you're doing that, the adults are going to move on to Romans 8 with perichoresis in mind. How does this help us understand, for instance, prayer? Well, we read in verse 26, Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

[12 : 04] For we do not know what to pray for as we ought. But the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit.

Because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And later, in verse 34, Christ Jesus is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

So here we find prayer to be participation in a conversation among the persons of the Trinity. God the Spirit groans for us.

God the Son intercedes before God the Father for us. This means that prayer, in a sense, is God praying to who?

God prays to God. That's comforting, isn't it? One philosopher put it this way. You cannot pray without God himself praying with you.

[13 : 16] Who will refuse you if the one who grants is the same as the one who asks? Isn't that beautiful? Who will refuse you if the one who grants is the same as the one who asks?

Who will refuse you, Church of the Advent, if the one who prays is the one who grants? Who will refuse you, brother, sister, if the one who prays is the same as the one who grants?

Who will refuse you, kids? The one who prays is the same as the one who asks.

Excuse me, the one who grants is the same as the one who asks. So do you see how we're brought into the inner life of God when we pray? Prayer gives us a glimpse of that perichoresis, that mutual indwelling of the Trinity.

Now does this mean that God gives us whatever we want? It's a good question. No, it does not mean that. But he does answer every prayer. Now think about it this way.

[14 : 26] We all have inner conversations, right? So I think, all right, I'm going to do this one thing. And then I think to myself, eh, no, no, no, no, wait, maybe that's not a good idea.

Why don't you, self, weigh the pros and the cons of this idea? Okay, I think the cons outweigh the pros, so I'm not going to do that. Now I imagine this is what it's like in prayer, right?

Sometimes my prayer doesn't always align with what is best for me, what God wants for me. It doesn't align according to his will, so the answer is going to be no, right? But when my will aligns with God's will, yes.

The answer is yes. As we participate in God, we are slowly transformed to ask the things that God wants.

What does God want? That brings us to the second benefit of being united with Jesus. We participate in God's mission to the world.

[15 : 28] We participate through our union with Christ in the life of the Trinity and God's mission to the world. Earlier in Romans 8, we read that creation is groaning, waiting for the healing and redemption of the world.

And then we read the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings. One commentator puts it this way. He puts these two together and writes, The point Paul is making is that the Spirit's own very self intercedes within the Christian precisely at the point where he or she, faced with the ruin and misery of the world, finds that there are no words left to express in God's presence, the sense of futility and the longing for redemption.

In other words, over time, we are transformed into the image of Christ. We become Christ-shaped. And that means we share Christ's determination to see the world transformed. We see what looks like futility. We see injustice, suffering, poverty, and war.

And our prayers become transformed. And both our words and our actions become intercessions on behalf of the world that Jesus is determined to heal and renew.

[16 : 59] As we participate in that mission, we don't despair. We don't despair for ourselves. This is the third way that we participate in the life of the Trinity.

According to these verses. There's other ways. But Paul writes in verse 28, and many of you might know this one by heart. We know that for those who love God, all things work together for good. For those who are called according to his purpose. The whole letter of Romans is about God's unshakable and sovereign love.

God's purposes for us. His love for us. Is grounded in his eternal will and his eternal decree from eternity past.

If we're united to Jesus and we participate in his life, how could it be otherwise that not only has he known us from eternity past, but he has chosen us.

[17 : 59] Paul writes this. Those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Our union with Christ did not come as a surprise to God. It's not like the Trinity was a whale swimming in the wibbly, wobbly waters of space-time.

And then we, like a sucker fish, bam, latched on to the Trinity. Whoa! What just happened there?

Oh, I'm so glad you're along. For the ride. Let's take you somewhere you need to go. No. That's not like that.

If the three persons of the Trinity are co-eternal, existing in perichoresis since eternity past, then our union with Christ has been a part of that eternal conversation since before the foundations of the world.

Perhaps some of you are wondering, what about free will? And to that, all I have to say is it's a misconception that God's sovereignty and free will are opposed and exclusive of one another.

[19 : 19] This misconception is based on, I would suggest, a rather two-dimensional, rather than a three-dimensional understanding of how God's actions and human actions relate to one another.

Okay? That misconception sees if God is doing one thing, that means humans aren't. Or if humans are doing one thing, that means God isn't. Those aren't opposed to each other.

As Charles Spurgeon said, when asked if he could reconcile God's sovereignty with man's responsibility, he said, I wouldn't try to reconcile the two. Because the two are friends.

I never reconcile friends. And the point that Paul is making here is that the fruit of justification, that is the fruit of being found in Jesus, of being seen as fully righteous, as being welcomed as God's sons and daughters, the fruit is rooted in eternity past.

That's what Paul wants us to see. That's what Paul wants us to see. He wants to bring comfort to a congregation that's going to face the violence of Rome. You are known and chosen from eternity past.

[20 : 40] From eternity past to eternity future, you are on his heart. To drive this point home, Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions.

So kids, I need you to put your paper away. I need your help with this. I'm going to have you stand up. If you're a kid, elementary school age or younger, stand up. Kids, do you know what a rhetorical question is?

Rhetorical question, when somebody's making an argument, they ask a question and assume you know the answer. All right? But some of us actually don't know the answers to these questions.

So we need you to answer the question for us. I'm going to ask the same questions that Paul asks, and you are going to yell out, nobody! Let's practice.

Ready? Question, question, question. Question mark, go! Yes! Thank you. Thank you. All right.

[21 : 42] Starting in verse 31. Ready, kids? If God is for us, who can be against us? That's right. Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?

That's right. Who is to condemn? Who can accuse us? Can anybody separate us from the love of God? No.

Who can separate us from the love of God? Nobody. Thank you. Thank you. Why don't you have a seat? Let's all answer that question together. Ready? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Together? Nobody. Well, let's put this all together, starting in verse 31. If God is for us, who can be against us?

That's right. He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

[22 : 41] Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God. Thank you. It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?

Christ Jesus is the one who died. More than that, who was raised. Who is at the right hand of God. Who indeed is interceding for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ. Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

No. In all these things we are more than what? Conquerors. Through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, neither angels, nor demons, neither the present, nor the future, nor any powers, neither height, nor depth, nor anything in all creation, could separate us from the love of God.

That is in Christ Jesus our Lord. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Let's pray. Thank you.

[24 : 01] Thank you, Father, for loving us. Jesus, thank you for saving us. Holy Spirit, thank you for renewing us.

Amen.