

THE ORPHANAGE

In these marvelous twin passages from Romans and Galatians, Paul is repeating for the Roman Christians almost exactly what he had said years earlier to the Galatians. Since it is before the age of Xerox or even carbon paper, it is unlikely that Paul kept copies of any of his letters. Here, then, are themes and concepts that had stuck in Paul's mind. He must have used them often and felt they carried the Message well.

Jesus was a master of the parable. He told them to confuse people; to make them think; to get them to dig deeper within themselves. Paul's efforts are to explain, to declare, to clarify. Jesus' mind was far deeper than Paul's, yet to us Paul seems more complex, more difficult to follow. Ponder that someday when you have a little time. It will give you goose bumps.

In any case, Paul became famous for his analogies, as he labored to make it clear to people what Jesus had done and what Jesus' death and resurrection meant to them and to the world. His writings are full of these word-pictures about athletes and soldiers and warfare and building temples. "*Put on the whole armor of God.*" Be "*a living sacrifice.*" "*We even fight to capture every thought until it acknowledges the authority of Christ.*" Perhaps Paul's most famous analogy is the church as "*the body of Christ.*"

With few exceptions, Paul does not develop his analogies very far in his letters. He draws huge conclusions and makes sweeping statements from them, but he barely mentions the analogies themselves. It is as if he knows that his readers are already familiar with them. I suspect that in his letters, Paul merely alludes to analogies he had already preached about and discussed at length with people when he was with them in person. If that is true, then it is easy for us to miss a lot of the impact of what Paul is saying – unless we take the time to go back and develop for ourselves some of the meanings of the word-pictures he uses.

So I want to work on one of Paul's favorite analogies today. And I am hoping that you will put your minds to work on it and go on developing it long after I have finished a few of my own thoughts about it. These twin passages from Romans and Galatians give hints

all along the way, and hopefully many of us remember that they are talking about “Daddy” and the audacity of addressing God as *Abba*. I want to go on with that imagery, if I may, but the problem is that Paul’s imagery is so poignant, and so scary and troublesome in some ways, that we may try to minimize it. Or you may think this is just a Sunday-morning talk because that’s our custom and that’s what I am supposed to do. Whatever you decide to make of it, I can only tell you that I am in dead earnest. So is Paul. Lent is upon us, and I do not kid around very much during Lent. Wait until Mother’s Day.

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First a comment (and this is not a definition). Religion that is not counterfeit – religion that is genuine – *always* comes in real-life contexts and is a mixture of realism plus hope: the realism of our present situation, and the hope of God’s purpose and power that surrounds it.

Some backstory is necessary – the story of Adam, perhaps the most powerful and universal of all the stories in our tradition, and *the* most powerful and universal imagery in our tradition regarding the realities of life here. (Genesis 3:8-24) It predates history as we know it. We hear it echoing from some pre-Zoroastrian Persian culture that existed *before* Abraham – before Judaism. The story is asking and pondering: “Why is life so hard for Adam – for mankind: for every human who ever comes here ... for you and for me?” You *are* Adam. The story is about YOU. Adam *means* “mankind” (humankind) in Hebrew – all of us, and each of us. You cannot know or understand the story of Adam if you do not realize that it is your story too.

Why all the alienation? Why is it so hard here? And how come we all seem to know that it is not supposed to be this way – all the pain and suffering; all the people starving; all the cruelty and broken hearts and disillusionment and despair? Not remembering anything before this life, why do we still feel like we came from a better place or know of better patterns of life? Why do we so often feel that somehow we are lost or displaced here – that somehow this world is not our home? Why do we sense some inner identity we cannot quite grasp? And how can we recover from this strange amnesia, stop all the curses of separation, and find some way to *truly* repent – to TURN AROUND AND HEAD FOR HOME?

Our Bible begins with the declaration that *“In the beginning, God created ...”* Therefore all things have a design and purpose, a rhyme and reason, and everything is “good.” In the second chapter, however, we begin to realize that there is a problem. Things are not working quite as well as the design intends and makes possible, the principal reason being that one of the creatures keeps trying to act like the Creator. That is, humans keep trying to take things into their own hands and do things their own way. In short, the humans are disobedient and rebellious. Yet free will – choice – is necessary to the design, or there is no meaning. As a result, the blessings have reversed into curses: animosity or alienation between people and God; between people and each other; between people and nature; between men and women; between people and their work. I just gave you a summary of what you hear or read every day in the news, only it comes from Genesis, chapters two and three.

Sometimes we forget, but this is basic to all Christian perspective. The presupposition is that things are not as they should be. We are not perfect. We live in a place of brokenness and alienation. This world is a classroom or, some of us would say, a boot camp for souls. The reality here is incompleteness: Nothing lasts. Everything breaks down, deteriorates, gets old, dies. Anything that goes wrong is to be expected. Anything that is lovely or true or pleasant is something to call forth gratitude; we should be surprised – pleased, eager, receptive, but surprised – and therefore grateful. Of course, it will not last ... not here in this realm.

Never forget where you are. If somebody does something nice for you, rejoice and be thankful; that’s a miracle. If somebody does something rotten, well, WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT FROM AN ORPHANAGE?

Which brings me to the two main verses I want to highlight from today’s Scripture passages: *“And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as true and legitimate children, the redemption of our bodies.”* (Romans 8:23) *“But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as true and legitimate children.”* (Galatians 4:4-5)

How do you feel about being adopted by God Almighty?

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I once heard somebody say, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.” Out of Paul’s inspiration, I want to tell you that there is a reason for that. This whole world is just one great big orphanage! We live in an orphanage, and we are all orphans. To be sure, we are *spiritual* orphans, but that’s the most painful kind.

Open your eyes and look around you. What do you see? Orphans! Orphans for as far the eye can see and the mind can stretch. Orphans who do not know for sure who they are or where they came from. Orphans who are not sure they have any worth. Orphans who feel like they have been abandoned and who fear abandonment, even though they have never felt like they really belonged anywhere. Orphans who feel insecure, shy, tentative, afraid of rejection, even though they have never really felt acceptance. Orphans who feel half afraid or half guilty almost every waking moment of their lives. Orphans who wonder if anybody really cares about them, or if they really care about anybody themselves.

Have you ever noticed how the people of our world rush about trying to find and keep their supplies for survival? It’s like they do not know if there is any more where that came from. And some cheat, others steal, some lie, some kick or kill, and everybody hoards – or tries to. We do not even like people who do not know how to hoard. Or at least we do not respect them. We say they are irresponsible.

Oh sure, we *do* know a little about families; there are temporary parents in some individual households. But we know just enough to make us *really* lonely. For the most part, the world acts like there is no FATHER, and so the kids have gone wild. It’s not so much that we are “bad” kids; it’s more like we are all scared to death. No FATHER or MOTHER to keep order, to provide or protect, to care for us, to love us. No FATHER to make us behave either – to train us, to discipline us, to bring us up properly ... especially after the age of twenty-one, when we really need it the most. No FATHER to give us identity and purpose and standards to live by. We talk about a FATHER who “used to be,” but he is vague, and we can never seem to agree on what he was like or what he really would expect from us today.

Do you ever have trouble figuring life out – wondering why so many things go wrong and why people treat each other the way they do? Do you ever wonder why you get so lonely you can hardly bear it? Or why some days it seems like nothing in life is really very important? And why some days it hardly seems worth it to even keep going on?

Well, there is a reason for this: We are all orphans. And we live in one great big orphanage. And after all, **WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT FROM AN ORPHANAGE?**

Some orphans become so frightened that they just go off to some corner in the shadows and stay there all their lives. Some orphans turn into bullies and shove all the other orphans around. I guess on the inside they are just as lonely and afraid as the shy ones in the shadows; they just show it in a different way.

Some orphans spend their whole lives fighting over the toys. The toys are not really that great. They do not make anybody happy or anything, at least not for long. They keep breaking or getting lost, or somebody steals them. But there is not much else to do or play with in an orphanage (the boats go in and out ... la-de-da).

Some of the orphans band together for protection against the rest of the orphans. That is always a big deal: Who belongs to which gang, and what is your rank of importance? It's a substitute for the missing DADDY. We take over this one big building and call it "The United States." Then we make a lot of rules, everybody is supposed to keep them and swear allegiance to the group, and then everybody will be safe and happy.

Only, without a real FATHER around, orphans do not keep the rules very well. So smaller groups of orphans band together, and they take over one end of a hall and call it theirs. They name it AA or AT&T or Microsoft or Congregational or the Teamsters' Union or Corona del Mar or whatever. Then they try to let the good guys in and keep the bad guys out. They make rules and talk about loyalty, and everybody promises to help keep this end of the hall safe and pleasant and successful – an oasis or fortress in the midst of the orphanage.

Only, it never lasts. Nobody really knows what belongs to whom, or if anybody has a real right to anything, or which one has the right idea about what to do next. So even orphans who stay at one end of the same hall sometimes start to fight with each other. And sometimes, in fact all the time, orphan bands fight other orphan bands over who gets to have which hall, which room, which toys, which privileges, which positions. Sometimes they fight with knives and guns. Sometimes they fight with lawyers and judges. (Judges, by the way, are orphans who get paid to pretend that if enough people agree on something, it will be the same as if a real FATHER said it.)

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Anyway, it is a big, sad mess. And I have hardly begun to describe the truth of it. No real security anywhere. No future to hope in. But then, after all, **WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT FROM AN ORPHANAGE?**

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Some years ago, there was born into our orphanage a misfit, a weird One – an orphan who said He was not an orphan. He did not act like one either. He did not hide in the shadows. He did not fight over the toys. He did not bully the other orphans, and He would not be bullied. He did not care who lived in which hall or what their positions were. And He never seemed to worry about survival, getting His share, or who had a right to what.

He spoke of *the only kind of hope* there can ever be for orphans. He said: “Don’t you people know ... have you not heard ... has no one told you ... do you not understand: **YOU ARE ABOUT TO BE ADOPTED!** The FATHER who is adopting you sent me himself to make sure you would know. He is wealthy beyond your comprehension; kind beyond your understanding; purposeful beyond your imagination. Only, he runs his family in peace and love, and will thus expect your obedience and cooperation. The one thing he will not tolerate is children in his home who hate each other or try to harm or destroy each other. Aside from that, you can expect endless blessings, gifts, opportunities – and love and challenge and purpose – that will keep you excited and joyful for EVER.”

Well, you can imagine what the other orphans thought about *that*. Some said He was just plain crazy. Others said He was an outright liar. Most said, “How can we play Fight-Over-The-Toys and Who-Owns-The-Hall if that weirdo keeps telling everybody they don’t have to play and that there are no winners in our kinds of games? Somebody get Him out of here!”

Naturally it was the orphans who had the best positions – the ones who controlled the halls – who were the angriest. They told everybody that the weird One was dangerous. They said He was upsetting everything and breaking all the rules (which, in one sense, He certainly was). They sent some of the bullied orphans – ones they knew they could bully and who were too afraid to disobey them – to drag the strange orphan outside and kill Him. And, to discredit Him so that nobody would ever pay attention to what He had said,

they made sure it was done in the most disgraceful way the orphanage had yet devised: crucifixion – death on a cross. Then they went back to their usual, familiar games, saying, “That’s that.”

Only, it was not!

Three days later, the weird One was back. Boy did that shake things up! That was not supposed to happen, especially not in an orphanage. In fact, the orphans did not even know that such a thing *could* happen. But now that it *had* happened, His friends began to realize that what they had suspected was really true: He was not weird or crazy. In fact, He must be the only one in the entire orphanage who was *not* weird or crazy – the only one who really knew the TRUTH. How else could He have come back?!

Of course, they always knew that what He had been preaching and proclaiming was beautiful. But that doesn’t cut any ice in an orphanage. “Too good to be true,” false hope, lovely but impossible dreams – orphans dread that kind of thing more than a beating. Now they were struck with the realization that what the weird One said was not only beautiful, but true. If the adopting FATHER did not exist, how could the strange One have come back? Who but a FATHER – a *true* FATHER – could come up with power like that? And so it hit them like a ton of bricks: THEY REALLY WERE GOING TO BE ADOPTED! That was what He had come to tell them. And it turned out that His authority was real – His word was GOOD. Everyone who would let themselves be adopted was going to be adopted. Wow! *Oh my God!*

Exactly.

Well, you know what happened next. His friends became believers. When that happened, they became very nearly as weird as the weird One. They stopped fighting over the toys, which suddenly looked as drab and dull as they really were. They stopped caring about who ran the halls. They stopped climbing over other orphans to get their share. In short, they stopped acting like orphans. They did not *feel* like orphans anymore. They were about to be adopted! The old ways were ridiculous. Who needed all that fear and guilt and hatred and shoving and despair anymore?

Soon ... any day now ... in essence, it had already happened, it was that sure – only a few days more and the whole orphanage ordeal would be over forever. The FATHER was real! They were going to be adopted!

It was marvelous. They could not keep quiet about it. It felt so good to *know*. It *changed everything* to know. But so many orphans were still hurting others or being hurt by others because they did not know or understand yet. So the friends began to tell others. They went into the shadowy corners and told the bewildered, frightened ones. They picked the hurt ones up out of the dust, shared whatever they had with them, and told them about the coming adoption.

They lost all fear of bullies and hall leaders. It would only be a few more days now. They said, “You can hit me if you want to, but you don’t have to anymore. I don’t want anything you have. We are going to be adopted! There is nothing in this whole orphanage that’s worth anywhere near as much as the cheapest piece of junk in our new FATHER’s home.”

Sure they got into trouble, just like the weird One had – imprisoned, beaten, robbed, kicked, thrown out, cursed, killed. WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT FROM AN ORPHANAGE? Only, that was not the big truth anymore. So they sang about adoption, talked about adoption, and told others about the coming adoption. Pretty soon there were weird ones everywhere – orphans who did not believe they were orphans anymore. So they stopped acting like orphans.

In the few remaining days they had left, they spent their time trying to make life a little better for each other. They looked inside themselves for whatever special skills they had, then tried to train those abilities and use them. After all, they were going to meet their new FATHER soon, and everybody knows that fathers like to see their children growing and learning and developing their skills. They wanted to make a good impression if they could, even though they knew it was small and silly in the face of the FATHER’s love. And of course, there is no fooling a real FATHER. On the other hand, what’s more important than trying to please DADDY?

They also worked hard at an altogether new concept of life: They had to learn about “loving.” That was the big problem – that was going to be the big change. The true FATHER was going to insist on it, they had been told. They needed to learn about “loving,” and they needed all the practice they could get.

You can still find them today, the weird ones. Sometimes they gather in places like this, but not to get walled-off or secure or so they can hoard all the toys. They come to help each other; to get affection

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and to give it; to get strength and to give it; to keep practicing more and more on their loving; to let the Message sink deeper; to prepare to let more orphans know. And they still carry the Message: “We are about to be adopted! All of us. Not just the good ones or the special ones or the ones with the most toys or the best credentials. All of us.” We are about to be adopted. Hallelujah! We are going to be adopted!

JESUS CHRIST IS RISEN!
THE FATHER IS REAL!!
WE ARE GOING TO BE ADOPTED!!!
WE ARE THE CHILDREN OF GOD!!!!

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