

# *Waiting for the Sequel*

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

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Romans 8:12-25

*“For all who are led by the Spirit are children of God.”*

What are you expecting right now? What do you want me to preach, how, and in what way? If you could tell me, if you could somehow give me a clue, it would make my life a lot easier. That way I would know what to do, how to do it, and in what way. Tell me what your expectations are, and I will try to meet them.

Life would be easy if we knew what everyone expected, wouldn't it? But it isn't that easy. We aren't forthcoming with all of our expectations that we may have of each other, are we? We hedge, we waver, and sometimes we never share what we may be expecting. And when you don't know what one expects, then you have to perform some miraculous mind reading, and hope you get it right. More times than not, we all would miss the mark, and that could be disastrous.

The difficulties with expectations are that even if someone does a great job, if we don't get what we expect, we will be disappointed. I could preach a whole sermon in iambic pentameter, but if you were expecting something in more of a free verse, then you would be disappointed. A large part of my work with couples intending to get married is focused on expectations, and the first one two three years are so difficult because expectations are not met, or they just aren't realistic. More often than not, one person in the marriage says, "I didn't expect it to be like this."

Expectations are a major part of our lives. We all live with some kinds of expectations. We may refuse to acknowledge the expectations in our lives, or we may decide to embrace them; regardless our expectations are there. So what do you want, what are you expecting?

In early Christianity, neophyte followers were wrestling with expectations. Expectations on how to live, expectations on how to worship, and expectations concerning the person and mission of Jesus all plagued the consciousness of the community. Paul was wrestling with vying expectations in many of the letters he wrote. Were new converts expected to live a Jewish life, even if they weren't originally Jewish? This was a major question, because the social part of the Jewish community in which Paul had grown, had high lifestyle expectations. Live according to the law! Don't stray from the path, don't perform the wrong action, and don't sin according to the law! Rules based on precepts, based on ideas, formed from reading the Jewish law was imposed upon the Jewish community in a dictatorial way. These were rules of right and wrong, clean and unclean, and these rules were spilling into this new community of followers - these Christians. Were Christians expected to live by the Jewish law? And to what degree? These were the rules which Jesus was challenging in his ministry, these are the rules that tore at Peter's mind when he was called to minister to a Gentile, one considered unclean, and these are the rules that plagued the Jewish perspective of Paul's ministry as he tried to reach out to the Gentiles. The expectations imposed upon Christians by the law were affecting the life of the community. The law was being used in such a restrictive way, that life could easily have been like living in front of a judge who was always sitting and watching you, waiting for you to slip, so he could point out all of the laws you have broken. Can you imagine the pressure, the stress, and the anxiety from such high expectations? Can you imagine the expectation of living a perfect life?

Maybe you can imagine, because I think we are still living with these expectations. I think we are still expected to be perfect, holy, sinless people. As a pastor, I am constantly struggling with the expectation thrust upon me that I am perfect. Now you all know the truth, but what about the rest of the world. I do not represent the best of Christianity; I only represent the slightly more neurotic.

We all still live as if a judge were watching us, condemning us, labeling us a fallen and sinners. We live with this angry God, who demands perfection and offers horrible retribution if we do not follow all of God's commands! This idea of a God who judges is steeped in our Western consciousness. Immanuel Kant portrayed God as a divine judge who offers the categorical imperatives as our ethical maxims. Jonathan Edwards, a theologian whom I greatly admire, famously described God as angry and vengeful holding us as sinners over the flames of hell. To be fair, Edwards was making the point to show how powerful the grace and mercy of God is for us; a point we often miss. We walk away with the idea that those who live their lives well, in a righteous, sinless way will be rewarded and those who don't will be punished – at least this is the message. And in some churches, you will find watch groups, waiting to point out when some people fall short of expectations. In some churches, there are always a group of people who take it upon themselves to illuminate faults and failings. Can you imagine living under such expectations? Can you imagine living under such pressure? I have a friend who greatly admires Christianity but won't become a Christian because he claims he is not ready for the perfect life. Well, if all Christians had to be perfect, then this church would most likely be empty (or you would at least be without a pastor). Who was it that once said, "If I wanted to know how bad a person I am, I would go to church"? I can't tell you how many times I hear people say that God led them into bad times because they sinned? Does God really punish people in such direct ways, because I don't know how to be in a relationship with a condemning God?

So this is how we live. Living with expectations to be perfect by the world's standards and living with expectations to be perfect by religious standards is not living at all. We are going to wear ourselves out. We are pulling a sled in life, and our sled is getting heavier and heavier, as the rules mount up, the expectations mount up, and that golden ring of success moves farther and farther away. But we keep on smiling, we keep on smiling, we keep on smiling while inside we are dying, crying, and wanting to be free. In the movie *The Sound of Music* the Van Trapp children find themselves in a situation of strict rules and stricter expectations before the nun comes in to free them. They have so many rules, so many expectations, and life is so strict that they begin to act out in different ways. And this is the life that many of us have envisioned we have to live.

My own fear is that the more we place on ourselves, the more we try to be perfect, the higher the risk for destructive behavior. A church that demands perfection, a church that expects a pastor without sin (the search committee never asked) is a church that is setting up the pastor to engage in some kind of sexual misconduct. A family that demands perfection is a family that is asking for trouble. Because we are suffering inside as we smile outside, and eventually the steam will be released. The social and religious expectations are weighing us down, and killing us.

When I first read the passage from Romans, and read about living according to the flesh, I thought, "Oh no, another one of Paul's 'sin not' sermons!" I read of living in the Spirit, and I wondered, what now are the expectations, which are going to be placed upon us? What now are we going to be expected to do? But I read this passage, I prayed with this passage, and I studied this passage, and I don't think Paul was calling the people to live strict, moralistic lives based on rules, codes, and by-laws. I think Paul was calling the people to reject the life of the world and take the life of Christ, and for us that is, in part, rejecting the life that says we must be successful, we must be perfect, and we must meet everyone's expectations.

Through Christ, those expectations are cut! Christ is sitting at a table, and calls us to sit with him just as we are. We don't have to sit in the other room, we don't have to serve Christ as a servant, but we sit with Christ as a brother or a sister, with God our divine, our holy parent. This is the grace of justification that Christ reaches out to us and says, stop trying to be perfect, stop trying to be special, you already are loved. Christ reaches out to us and says, come and sit next to me, call to God as your Abba, your holy parent, and let go of any expectations, which are weighing you down. It is like we are walking with a balloon, and with every expectation, with every demand the balloon gets stronger and we have to tighten our hold. But then Christ comes to us; he puts his hand on our shoulder and says, "let go." Let go of the desire to be perfect, and fall into the desire to be loved by God – and you will receive it. Let go of the desire to follow all of the rules and fall into the desire to be a child of God – and you will achieve it.

Let go of the desire to succeed and fall into the desire to be forgiven by God – and know that you are. Forget about what others expect, and know that you are loved.

You see, when you say yes to Christ, you are saying yes to the Holy Spirit and to God, and yes to a love, which is divinely given. This is what Paul is talking about when he is urging the Roman community to live in the way of the Spirit. We die to the way of the world, the pressures, the expectations to be perfect, and we are born to the way of the Spirit. We are given new hope, a new life, and a new way to live. The composer, Gustav Mahler, in his second symphony captures this transformation. He took an old melody, which signified death, and by the last movement, Mahler transformed the melody of death to a melody of hope and life. In just the same way, our lives are transformed through Christ, from death to life. Through the Spirit our lives which by the world and by the flesh are lives leading to death are transformed into new lives of hope and life. Or think of the movie *Field of Dreams*. Remember that Ray was building a baseball field in the middle of a cornfield. He was crazy to the world. Ray's brother-in-law was visiting and trying to offer some hope, but Ray wouldn't hear of it. The brother-in-law was becoming angry and incensed until, because of some other events, he could see people playing baseball on the field. At that moment, the brother-in-law's eyes were opened, his life was changed and he saw things differently. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. Our life is changed, and we see things differently, and we live differently.

It is freedom and it is life. The theologian, Daniel Migliore says that through the justification of the Holy Spirit, we are freed from ideologies, from expectations, and from the worldly pressures of the flesh. We are freed from living a hyphenated Christianity (liberal-Christian or Conservative-Christian) and free to just be a Christian. Christ will set us free.

And we are free to go into the world transformed and justified with our eyes opened, with our hearts full, and with our minds looking at that, which is yet to be. We have seen how things can really be, we have experienced what it really means to be loved and to live through the Holy Spirit, and now we wait for the rest of the story of Christianity. We wait for the next chapter, the sequel to our salvation – the salvation of the world. Isn't that what we hope for? Isn't that what we are waiting for? We are waiting for the time when all things will be fulfilled through Christ, when all people will know what it is to be loved and to live through Christ. We wait for that time, we wait for that blessed time spoken of in Revelation 21 – a time when all is made new, a time when tears are only for joy, when pain is but an afterthought, and when death is no more. We wait for that time when righteousness will flow like streams and when mercy will fall with the gentle rain. We wait for the sequel of salvation. The life we receive is a life that lives towards and for this time. It is not a life that lives in moral perfection under the eyes of a divine judge, but one that lives in a divine love through the creator and the cross. This is what God calls us all to be, and how God calls us to live. We walk in the world, and we look for love and hope, and we can see the groaning of creation because we know that the time is not yet there and creation is not yet fulfilled. We walk in the world and we look for peace and mercy and we can hear the groaning of God's children because we know that creation is not yet fulfilled. We are not expecting things to change; we know things are going to change.

And so we hope. The early Church Father, John Chrysostom wrote that hope is that thing which we can offer to God. We offer God our hope in that which is going to happen. And we live it. We offer our hope through our works as the Holy Spirit guides us. There are some two churches in downtown Baltimore who share a parking lot. They are in a neighborhood, which is full of despair, violence and hatred. Drugs, gangs, and crime are all that is known in that neighborhood. But those people in those churches have hope. They could look through the stained glass window and know that one day God would bring creation to its fullness. They knew this hope and wanted to offer it to the neighborhood. So they built a labyrinth – a place to walk, to pray, to meditate and to try to find some peace. They built it in the middle of their parking lots, and not one mark of graffiti, not one sign of vandalism has yet to occur. Hope was offered, and hope has been received.

We live our hope, and we share our hope with the world. We work to bring a community to the world through the church that frees us from the expectations of the world. We work to end poverty in the world because we know someday poverty will be no more. We work to bring reconciliation to the world

because we know that someday all relationships will be made whole.

Do you see what has happened? We are free from the judging, expectations of the law, of the arbitrating God constantly pointing out what we could do wrong, and how we could make a mistake. But the grace, justifying and sanctifying offers to us ways, which we can be good, ways to live right. This is living in the Spirit, living each moment and saying, what can I do that would be good with this moment. We no longer look at others and ourselves for things, which are wrong, but instead for things which are right!

We will seem odd. We will stick out when we say “no” to the rat race, the fast-paced lifestyle of the world and yes to the justifying grace of Jesus Christ. Like a butterfly breaking out of the cocoon we will soar through life instead of trudging, truly living because we know that in Christ we are made free and through Christ we will be home. This isn't a life that holds rules, but holds hope and then calls you to act on it. This isn't a life that forces expectations, but offers possibilities and calls you to live into them.

And the ultimate grace is that I don't know where we are going. I don't know what it will look like, I don't know whom we will encounter, I don't know where we will be, but I'll know when we get there. Ask me what I have envisioned for this church, and I will tell you hope. Ask me where I see this church going and I will tell you into the arms of God. Ask me for something concrete and I will tell you nothing. For all we have is a hope in what we can't see, what we can't know and that is what we offer from God. We live into that hope without the pressures, without the expectations and full of grace.

And so I leave you with the challenge. Accept the grace of Christ, accept Christ as your Lord and Savior, and know that you are loved. No expectations, no judging, just love. And then live the good in each day. Look for the grace in each day. Live out the sequel of the Kingdom of God that we are all waiting for. And your lives your actions will be graced.

AMEN