

Two Inheritances

For years I misread [Romans 8:16-17](#). In my defense, I never heard it preached or taught correctly, that I can remember. But, to my shame, I fell into a trap—and the trap is making assumptions about Scripture passages rather than honestly interpreting the passages, even if the interpretation doesn't fit our theological grid.

I personally believe that is a major problem in Bible-believing Christianity—assuming, based on what we have been taught or always known. But what if our teachers were incorrect on a particular point? Are we obligated to perpetuate an erroneous tradition? God forbid! I appreciate my teachers, and learned much from them, but I am now convinced they missed some things, and I'm sure I have too—no one of us has all the answers. That is why having a teachable spirit is so critical.

Putting aside preconceived notions, let's approach this Scripture passage with an open mind.

The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together ([Romans 8:16-17](#)).

I always assumed all believers become both heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ at the point of salvation, as if there were a period at the end of that statement. However, I have since realized that, according to the verse, inheritance with Christ is conditional—**“if** so be that we suffer with him.” Somehow, I had missed that.

The point I desire to make in this article is that in the Bible, we find not **one** inheritance for Christians, but **two**. The first is an unconditional inheritance. It is guaranteed and bestowed on all saints based on our *position* in Christ—the inheritance is eternal life, because we are sons of God and, as sons, heirs of God.

Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ ([Galatians 4:7](#)).

The other inheritance is conditional. It is not guaranteed, but is awarded at the Judgment Seat only to those who qualify, based on faithfulness and perhaps other factors (i.e., how one progresses in sanctification). The inheritance is the privilege of ruling with Christ in the millennium as a co-heir with Christ. Notice the following chart:

Unconditional Inheritance	Conditional Inheritance
Guaranteed	Not guaranteed

Bestowed on all saints	Awarded to qualified saints
Based on position in Christ— “Heirs of God”	Based on faithfulness— “co-heirs with Christ”
Inheritance = Eternal Life	Inheritance = ruling with Christ in the Millennium

Our unconditional inheritance can never be forfeited, for it is based on sonship. However, our conditional inheritance can be forfeited, for it is based on qualifying as a firstborn son.

In Bible times, firstborn sons received a double portion. Nevertheless, while it was referred to commonly as the inheritance of the firstborn, the father was under no obligation to give it to the firstborn. He could choose to give it to another, if he did not deem the firstborn son worthy of the firstborn inheritance. In other words, if a firstborn son disqualified himself for one reason or another, he would lose the special inheritance for firstborn sons.

A classic example of this is Jacob and his firstborn son. Reuben was the firstborn son and normally would have received the double inheritance, but Reuben disqualified himself by taking his father’s concubine as his own. Thus, Jacob pronounced Reuben unworthy of receiving the double inheritance and, instead, gave it to Joseph, blessing Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Reuben still received the unconditional inheritance guaranteed to all sons, but he did not receive the conditional firstborn inheritance. That was given to another who was declared worthy.

God reminds New Testament Christians that *“all these things happened unto them [Old Testament Israel] for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come” (1 Cor. 10:11)*. In other words, what happened to Old Testament Israel is to serve as a spiritual example to us, so that we might learn and not repeat the mistakes of Israel.

Consider the Exodus. How many of the Israelites—at the point of the Exodus, when they left Egypt—were saved people? Every one of them! How do we know this? They *all* believed God, and they *all* applied the blood to the doorposts, as God had said. The angel of death passed over *all* of them, and they were *all* delivered from bondage in Egypt. Of course, the Passover is a beautiful picture of salvation in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world. Thus, we sing that wonderful hymn, “When I see the blood, I will pass, I will pass over you.”

Knowing the entire nation of Israel was saved at the Exodus, what does God have to say about their inheritance? First, they received an unconditional, guaranteed inheritance. Jehovah God declared Himself to be the God of Israel. Their inheritance was Jehovah.

And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the Lord their God (Exodus 29:45-46).

God says this long before Israel takes possession of Canaan land. His unconditional promise (their unconditional inheritance) is that He will be their God. Obviously, individuals born after the Exodus would have to decide whether to believe on God and thereby enter into the national promise. In like manner, individuals today need to make their own decision to depend on Christ alone for salvation and thereby enter into the unconditional inheritance of eternal life that He gives to all who believe.

What was their conditional inheritance? Israel could take possession of the land only if they would obey God and depend on Him for victory over the enemy.

For if ye shall diligently keep all these commandments which I command you, to do them, to love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, and to cleave unto him; Then will the Lord drive out all these nations from before you, and...every place whereon the soles of your feet shall tread shall be yours ([Deut. 11:22-24](#)).

The condition for inheriting (i.e., taking possession) of the land was obedience to God's Word and faithfulness (i.e., full dependence on the Lord for victory). Here's the point: saved Israelites unconditionally received God as their inheritance, but possession of Canaan land was conditional, depending on their obedience and faithfulness to Jehovah.

Reformed theologians make the mistake of equating Canaan land with heaven, but that is a hermeneutical error in my opinion. We believe Canaan land is a picture of two things: (1) spiritual victory in the present life, which leads to (2) inheriting Millennial rest in the life to come. Incidentally, even after taking possession of Canaan land the Israelites had the potential of losing it, if they became unfaithful—see [Deut. 28:58](#), [63](#).

As children of God, we are guaranteed eternal life; it is our inheritance as heirs of God. However, we are not guaranteed millennial inheritance; that is the reward for faithfulness. All believers will be in the millennial world, but not all will inherit that kingdom or enjoy the benefits of ruling and reigning with Christ.

I liken that condition to being a subject in a medieval kingdom, for example. The king would own and rule a vast territory. His subjects would benefit from living in the village, under the king's protection and bounty, but only those heirs living in the castle would be able to fully participate in reigning and enjoy the beauties and luxuries and opportunities of the king Himself.

There is a difference between merely living in the millennium and possessing it, just as there was a difference for Israel living in the promised land and possessing it (see [Deut. 11:31](#)). Abraham sojourned in Canaan land, but He did not possess it, according to [Heb. 11:9](#), [13](#). Furthermore, for many centuries of Israel's existence in the land, they did not possess the land, even though they lived there. Instead, foreign powers controlled the land and taxed the Israelites.

Incidentally, from my understanding of Scripture, possession of the promised land was God's gift to Israel from the very beginning of the nation's salvation. In other words, at the time of the Passover, I believe God granted the conditional inheritance to His people. For God refers to Israel not only as His son (unconditional inheritance) but also as His first-born son (conditional inheritance)—read [Ex. 4:22-23](#).

This is also conceptually true for the New Testament Christian. God assumes from the point of salvation His children are not only sons—due an inheritance—but first-born sons—due a double inheritance.

For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren ([Romans 8:29](#)).

However (and this is a big however), just as the disobedient Israelites disqualified themselves and were disinherited from possessing the promised land, so disobedient Christians whom Jesus deems unworthy are disinherited from taking possession of the millennial kingdom. They lose their status as first-born sons. Paul warns of this possibility in three of his epistles: [1 Cor. 6:9-10](#); [Eph. 5:3-5](#); and [Gal. 5:19-21](#). It seems to me God also uses Esau in Hebrews 12 as a warning to Christians to beware losing their inheritance. The loss of inheritance is not to be equated with the loss of salvation, for that is unconditional, but with the loss of millennial privilege, for that is conditional.

Now the warning of [1 Cor. 10:12](#) makes sense: "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." Israel's unbelief and repeated testing of God in the wilderness resulted in disinheritance. Even Moses disqualified himself because of disobedience! If this could happen to Moses, how much more should Christians beware?