

If somebody asked you to describe paradise on Earth, how would you answer? What would that look like for you? Would it be a relaxing 2-week vacation on a tropical island? How about a fishing or camping trip up north for a week? Or maybe it's just having your whole family, grandkids and all, home safe and sound for a day-long or even weekend-long Christmas gathering?

Or, how about the following scene for paradise on Earth? A beautiful home, a nice neighborhood with an amazing view, and four hundred little eggs? Yes, you heard me right. This particular setting is paradise to Marlin and Coral, two clownfish living on the Great Barrier Reef in the Disney/Pixar's classic movie *Finding Nemo*. But all too soon paradise is lost. A hungry fish attacks the neighborhood, knocking Marlin out. When he wakes up, everything is gone except for one slightly damaged little egg, which he names Nemo, as his missing wife had wished. Nemo is born with an underdeveloped fin and a burning desire to prove his worth. Marlin is a good father and, considering all that had happened, Marlin is a very **protective** father. On Nemo's first day of school, despite his father's warning, or maybe **because** of it, Nemo disobeys and swims too far from the school. Nemo is captured by a deep-sea diver, a mild-mannered dentist who happens to keep fish in his office aquarium. So begins the adventure of *Finding Nemo*, where Marlin, the loving father, goes to the end of the ocean, **literally** (!), to find his beloved son and bring him home. Along the way, Marlin travels with a sidekick: a hilarious, little blue fish with short-term memory loss named Dory. Their adventure includes encounters with an anglerfish, some jellyfish, pelicans, whales, sea turtles, sharks, and humans.

In many ways, you and I are a lot like Nemo. All of us are children. We all have a father, even though some fathers have passed on. Those of us who still have fathers that **are** here are called on by God to 'honor your father and your mother.' What does this mean? The Small Catechism tells us: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them." It was when Nemo disobeyed, that is, dishonored his father that he got in trouble in the first place. He hated the fact that his father was so protective of him. To despise and anger his father, Nemo defiantly swam away from his father, even as Marlin warned him, "No!" This single act of disobedience and its consequence set in motion the rest of *Finding Nemo*. It's astonishing how one little sin—not listening to your dad—leads to so much trouble, more than you can imagine.

It was that way for the first children of the first Father, the Maker of heaven and earth. They lived in **true** paradise, even more magnificent than the beautiful Great Barrier Reef in *Finding Nemo*, much more perfect than our own ideal get-away. But true paradise was **lost** when Adam and Eve, in disobedience to their heavenly Father, ate of the forbidden fruit. Now they would die. They were slaves of sin, captive to death. Today you and I still suffer the effects of that sin. The effects of that original sin with which we are born will lead us into committing many actual sins; things we say, think, and do against God's holy Law as summarized in the Ten Commandments.

In today's text, two possibilities are laid before us, along with their results. "If you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live" (v 13).

If, as a child, you obeyed your father and mother and your heavenly Father, things in your life would go smoothly, or in Nemo's case, "swimmingly." But as you well know, you often sinned, like Nemo did, and you did what God has commanded you **not** to do. If we are honest, we all still sin every day, even as grown-ups. That sin causes all kinds of problems, difficulties, and pain. The truth is, God the Father has every right to disown us as His children for our sins. In fact, that is exactly what the devil wants us to believe has already happened. Because of your sin, the devil claims you as his child, his captive slave. But God doesn't want you to be claimed by the devil. That's why your heavenly Father, just like earthly fathers, warns you of the danger of living according to the sinful nature and commands you not to do certain things. He knows that sin leads you into a much worse fate than being held captive in a fish tank. Sin makes you a slave of the devil and will ultimately end with you, not in the waters of an aquarium, but in the fires of hell. "If you live according to the sinful nature you will die."

But Paul says in verse 15, "you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear." Your heavenly Father wants the best for you, His beloved child. His love is greater and more sacrificial than even that of Marlin.

All throughout the movie, Marlin desperately seeks to rescue poor, lost little Nemo. Marlin's quest to find and rescue his son comes with a great deal of danger and sacrifice. He and his forgetful blue friend, Dory, are chased by three sharks through a minefield, they dive to the darkest depths of the ocean where they're almost eaten by an anglerfish, only to then have to maneuver through a large group of jellyfish where at the last second Marlin saves Dory's life. Then they ride the rapid East Australian Current, and even get swallowed by a whale. What amazing love this father showed for his son!

God the Father has done better; much better! As you were caught as a slave in the net of sin, death, and the devil, He sent His Son to rescue you. Jesus didn't just travel to the end of the ocean; He left heaven itself and came into this sinful world. He subjected Himself to pain and trouble He did not need to bear. Jesus faced disciples who tried to stop Him, Judas who betrayed him, soldiers who arrested Him, ruling authorities who put Him on trial, and then more soldiers who mocked, beat, and nailed Him to the cross. The Son of God, your Lord Jesus Christ, did all this for you so you could be released from slavery and made God's son or daughter. As today's text says, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" (v 15). You have received the Spirit of sonship that the Son of God earned for you when He died. You have been adopted by God the Father. Please note: God says, "**received**" a Spirit of sonship. This isn't something you or I can **earn**. You don't earn a place in a family. You can certainly **lose** a place in a family by turning your back on it. But you have been received into God's family. As Paul says in verse 16: "The (Holy) Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

And being a child of God carries with it many special privileges and blessings. Not only have you been rescued from slavery to sin, death, and the devil and adopted into God's family; you also are going to receive a wonderful inheritance. "If children," Paul says in v 17, "then **heirs**—heirs of God." That special inheritance is yours because the perfect Son, Jesus Christ, remained in the family, He never rebelled, He never turned His back on the Father, and He has given you His inheritance. "If children, then heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ," Paul goes on to say.

Our inheritance is the inheritance of the **Son**, Jesus. It's a gift that you receive in your Baptism through the working of the Holy Spirit, when you are born again and adopted as the Father's child. "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (v 14).

What else is involved with this inheritance you receive? You get all that belongs to the Son and especially the land—the promised land of heaven. 1 Peter 1:3–5 describes it this way: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time."

Usually, inheritances are a ***family thing***, given to the children. That's why God calls us children. You are His. You bear His name. In your Baptism, He placed His name on you and made you His. You died to sin and were born again. As our text says, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (vv 16–17).

In our text today we have seen how living according to the sinful nature is rebelling against God the Father and makes us captive slaves to sin. But, God the Father has sent His Son to rescue us and give us all both the Spirit of sonship and an inheritance. Eternal life in heaven, which is true paradise restored, is now ours as a family inheritance from God the Father for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Today we have also heard the tale of Nemo and how he relates to our lives as God's children. While, at the end of the movie, Nemo was saved from the dentist's aquarium, in the waters of Holy Baptism ***you*** have been rescued and have received what Jesus earned for you on the cross: The Spirit of sonship ***and*** an inheritance; eternal life in the paradise of heaven. They are God's gifts to you, His dearly loved child. And that's no fish story! Amen!