

The Beauty of Our Adoption into God's Family

Galatians 4:6-7

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Introduction

In his classic work *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer poses and answers a very simple, yet profound question that gets to the heart of our faith. He writes:

"What is a Christian? The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God as Father...[He continues] If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father."¹

Now, within this room we have various experiences concerning fatherhood; experiences that will influence how you approach the topic of fatherhood. Some of us have had wonderful fathers and see that God is like that, only more so. Some of us would say: my father disappointed me over and over. But, I pray, you will see that God is very different. Some of you in this room have never known what it is to have a father on earth. Hopefully, after considering the doctrine of adoption you can have a renewed thankfulness to God that you have a Father in heaven. In many ways the doctrine of adoption is one of the great theological categories that has been ignored in recent church history. For this reason, I would suspect that many Christians have at best a weak sense of their own sonship. Or, as puritan pastor Thomas Manton said, "years may transpire before the believer who is adopted by God may know that he is adopted, have a deep sense of feeling of it."² Perhaps far too many people experience a relationship with Father God that seems somewhat remote and distant, failing to realize the intimacy and freedom we have in the gospel.

A Story of Adoption

I will always remember the moment that Laura and I received Selamu into our care. We were in the city of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Our driver came and picked us up from the guest house we were staying in and drove us through the city into the hills and up to a gated house. It was a house full of orphaned children and infants. Laura and I stood outside the gate while one of the agency case workers went inside, walked up to the second floor, and picked Selamu up out of his crib. He was in a room with about 6 other babies. Over the next few moments we could hear all of the women behind the gates kissing on and saying goodbye to little Selamu. Our worker opened the gate, walked out into the street, and handed us our son, Solomon. For what would happen next, I was woefully unprepared.

We turned and got back into the van. We got situated. Laura was holding Solomon. And as the van pulled off, Solomon started screaming and crying frantically. This little child had no clue what was going on. We were pulling baby Solomon away from everything he had ever known. But after a few minutes, he reached his little arms around Laura's neck and tightened his grip, holding on for dear life. Sure, Solomon was holding on to Laura, but what really mattered, was Laura who was holding on to Solomon. And Laura and I knew where we were going. We also knew that he was our son. It's been a year now since Solomon was placed in our arms and the stranger he wrapped his little baby arms around in that frightening moment in a van in Ethiopia, he now knows

¹ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 200-201.

² Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, 12:116-17. Quoted in Joel Beeke, *Heirs with Christ*, 51.

as “mommy.” That is the beginning of Solomon’s story with us. There is also a beginning to our story as a people.

A Biblical Theology of Adoption

If we start at the very beginning of creation, you know that God lovingly creates Adam and Eve. They were created in the image of God and thus were the living images of God on earth. Adam bore a relationship to God much like a child to a parent, begotten by the Father. Yet when Adam and Eve sin and break fellowship with God, they are cast out of God’s presence and away from his care. In essence, Adam and Eve orphaned the whole human race. Yet, we are not merely orphans, our plight is much worse, we were orphaned into slavery under sin.³

Ever since then, the human race has not intimately known the love of the Father in the purest sense. And yet, even though the relationship was broken at the fall, very quickly we see the adoptive love of God. Several generations later God chooses Abraham and proclaims, through your offspring I will make you a Father of a mighty nation, a nation that will be a blessing to the whole world. As the story continues, people are fruitful and multiply. Out of the many nations there is one nation that is small and weak, from the seed of Abraham, Israel. God adopts Israel as “son” through a covenant relationship, and redeems Israel from slavery. Several times in the Old Testament God calls Israel “my son.”⁴ The imagery is that of a tender and loving father raising his child, disciplining his child, and showing mercy to his child.⁵ Out of Israel God raises a King, David, to whom God promises “I will be a Father to him, and he shall be my son to me,” speaking of David’s offspring.⁶

Seen here, the promise made to Abraham is set by the adoption of Israel, narrowed by the lineage of David, and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the true son of God that will succeed where God’s first son, Adam, failed. Jesus is the one who is from the family of Abraham who will be the blessing to all nations. Jesus is the one from the royal lineage of David who will reign on the throne forever. Now “adoption is never used of Jesus because he had always been a son of God by nature, and unlike us, he does not need to be adopted...into a new relationship with God as Father.”⁷ But we do. Our first parents orphaned us. In the New Testament it is very clear that when you repent of your sinfulness and place your faith in Christ, you are adopted. You are brought into the family of God. As Paul writes in Galatians 3:26, “...in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.” As Children of God we find our identity from the Father, our intimacy from the Father, our imperative from the Father, and our inheritance from the Father.

Galatians 4:1-7

[1] I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, [2] but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. [3] In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. [4] But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, [5] to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

³ I am indebted to Robert Peterson for making this point in *Adopted by God*, 29.

⁴ Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 32:10; Hosea 11:1.

⁵ Deuteronomy 32:10-14; Hosea 11:1, 3-4; Isaiah 64:6-12.

⁶ 2 Samuel 7:14.

⁷ Trevor Burke, *Adopted into God’s Family*, NSBT, 106.

[6] And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" [7] So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Our Identity from the Father (4:6a)

You often hear people say things like "all people are children of God". However, "the idea that all are children of God is not found in the Bible anywhere."⁸ Now, there is a sense in which all human beings are God's offspring by virtue of being made in his image,⁹ but the language that Paul uses here in verse 6 reveals a much deeper kind of relationship. The Greek verb translated *adopt* literally means "to place as a son." According to Paul, sonship to God is a gift of grace.¹⁰ It is not a natural, but an adoptive sonship.¹¹ We are made sons through the work of the unique son of God, Jesus Christ, because he came, as we just read in verse 5, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. So the gift of sonship to God becomes ours not through being born, but being born again. As John 1:12-13 tells us,

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Do you see why this is important? What we see in verse 6 is a declarative statement: "You are sons!"¹² In the ancient world, if we were to look at adoption from a legal context, most cases would be that a "wealthy childless man might take into his family a slave youth who thus, by a great stroke of fortune, ceased to be a slave and became a son or an heir."¹³ Slaves are bound to work for their master; sons are free to serve the Father. Either we are serving our flesh, and we are slaves to sin, or we are serving our Father, and we are slaves to righteousness. So, the "image of adoption [here] is a particularly well chosen one because it illustrates, in a way nothing else can, the nature of our relationship to God in Christ. As an adopted child is not the natural offspring of his adopted parents, but neither is his/her presence in the household an accident. His parents have deliberately chosen him and made him a member of their family. [That child is brought into the family by an] act of will that is sealed in love and self-sacrifice."¹⁴

There is such assurance and security in the Father's love for us because adoption is a declaration God makes about us. It is irreversible, dependent entirely upon his gracious choice, in which he says: 'You are my son, today I have brought you into my family.'¹⁵ So we have absolute security and stability in the family of God. We see that our identity is found in our position before God. We have been made sons. "Just as a child does not worry about getting fired for disobeying the rules...so we know that God's affection for us is deep"¹⁶ and abiding. If adoption is about anything, it is about belonging, a belonging where God as Father pulls you into his loving household and declares *you are mine!* This should give us a secure identity in who we are. We are the children of God. There is no need to define ourselves because we are not our own creators. The creator alone has the right to define his creation. Our identity is something given to us from the father. So, if our

⁸ Packer, 201.

⁹ Acts 17:29.

¹⁰ See Timothy George, *Galatians*, NAC, 307.

¹¹ See Curtis Vaughan, *Galatians*, Founders Study Guide Commentary, 77.

¹² See Richard Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC, 173.

¹³ John Stott, The Message of *Galatians*, footnote 1, 106.

¹⁴ Gerald Bray, *God Is Love*, 643.

¹⁵ Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*,

¹⁶ Tim Keller, *Galatians*, 85.

identity is set, how do we experience our identity? “God the Father sent the Son in order that believers might have the position of sons and He sent the Son in order that believers might have the experience of the same reality.”¹⁷

Our Intimacy with the Father (4:6b)

Some pastors and theologians have argued that adoption is the highest privilege that the gospel offers, namely because of its relational context. Consider it this way, “...in a court of law a person may be acquitted by the judge of all charges against him; but this acquittal does not make the person a member of the judge’s family.”¹⁸ So, yes – when God justifies us and forgives us of sin, he also gives us the identity as a child of God, but “he [also] sends his Spirit that we might have an experience of sonship.”¹⁹ Interestingly enough, ancient “adoptions required a witness of the transaction.”²⁰ Paul is arguing that the Spirit gives witness to our adoption in Christ. The Spirit of God confirms and authenticates. He gives us a deep-seated persuasion of our identity as sons and daughters of the living God.²¹ How does the Christian experience this security of relationship with God the father? Paul suggests that one of the ways a Christian experiences this reality is through prayer. In verse 6 the verb “cry out” denotes a loud or earnest cry.²² Based on the construction of the Greek it seems that it “...is the Spirit who cries out to God the Father on behalf of the believer,” or better yet, through the believer.²³ It is the indwelling Spirit of God that teaches the believer to come to God as Abba.²⁴

Not too long ago, Laura and I were sitting in our driveway as Solomon was outside playing. All of the sudden, Solomon let out a glass shattering scream, the kind of scream that every parent dreads. Within seconds, he was in my arms – whimpering and shaking. Oh, by the way, he had seen a worm. Dads know these moments all too well. Children can remember these moments also. When the thunder and lightning is too loud. When the child falls and gets hurt. When your child wakes up from a nightmare. Who do they cry out for?

The word ‘Abba’ is “an Aramaic expression that may have been derived originally from the first syllables uttered by an infant.”²⁵ It is the term of familial intimacy, endearment, used by children towards their Fathers. Moreover, Abba is the term that Jesus, the unique son of God, himself used²⁶ in addressing God.²⁷ I think “...something of shock is implied in using this word as an address for God Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth...The sense of awe and holy wonder that accompanied the praying”²⁸ in this manner. It’s almost as if when saying Abba, one is to experience the joy of sonship, a feeling that God was drawing him into an almost frightening intimacy.²⁹

We do not serve a distant God. There is free access to our loving Father through Jesus Christ. Our adoption is the basis of Christian prayer. The Father is always accessible to his children and is never too preoccupied to listen to what they have to say. Because of the personal nature of the

¹⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *Galatians*, EBC, 473.

¹⁸ Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 376.

¹⁹ Stott, 107.

²⁰ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 529.

²¹ Romans 8:15-16..

²² See Thomas Schreiner, *Galatians*, ZECNT, 272.

²³ Longenecker, 174.

²⁴ Ronald Fund, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT, 185.

²⁵ George, 307.

²⁶ Mark 14:36.

²⁷ See Schreiner, 272.

²⁸ George, 308.

²⁹ See J. Bligh, *Galatians*, 355.

relationship, prayer should be free and bold. Most of the time, children do not prepare speeches to their parents. There is a spontaneity and freedom to express themselves transparently because of the security of the relationship. When Solomon talks to me it is not mechanical or even formal, it's warm and free. And trust me, the boy likes to talk. Even though he can formulate well-articulated sentences, he feels secure enough to just ramble – because he knows I care. Just as a child calls out automatically to the nearby daddy when there is a problem or a question, so shall we, as children of God, call on our heavenly Father. Just as a child does not doubt the security and openness of daddy's strong arms, so we, as God's children, have an overwhelming boldness and certainty in our Father's loving care.

Far too much we stand back "at a distance [and are] very formal; but the little child comes running in, rushing right in, [and grabs ahold of his father]. The child has a right that no-one else has...it is instinctive."³⁰ Perhaps we should "imitate the...child who is not afraid to ask his parents for [things openly], because he knows he can count completely on their love."³¹ We are free to take our problems and desires to him without fear of being ignored or rejected. We also know that the Father will answer us according to our best interest. See, this is a total experience, embracing every aspect of our lives and filling us with the joy of knowing that we are loved, and that we can rest in his presence knowing that we are safe in his everlasting arms. Moreover, we have a new authority over sin and the evil one, our adoption removes the fear that is at the root of much of our disobedience.

Our Imperative from the Father (4:7a)

God's purpose was both to redeem and adopt; not just to rescue from slavery, but turn slaves into sons. No longer are believer's "relationships determined by...race, rank, or role."³² They are secure in the family of God. Now, "in the ancient world family membership was the primary context of social, religious, economic and political security and fulfillment. To move from one family system to another was an event of life changing importance."³³ By implication, when brought into a new family – new expectations were placed on you as a son or daughter. So what is Paul saying when he argues that we are no longer slaves but sons? In verse 3 he argues that all of orphaned humanity is enslaved to the "elementary principles of the world." In other words, we are enslaved to the broken and evil worldly philosophies, legalistic ethical systems, and distorted freedoms of the flesh. When you were enslaved to these things you worked for them. They held you in bondage, you did their bidding.

Essentially, as sons and daughters of Eve you are born into a family of orphans who by their very nature are enslaved to the depraved systems of the world. Therefore, it is quite natural to act as one far from God. But something happens when one is adopted into the family of God. See, adoption brings with it benefits as well as responsibilities of family membership.³⁴ When an orphaned child is placed into a new family, "the adopted child inherits a new family narrative and is expected to live and act in accordance with that story and its ancestral heritage."³⁵ As believers we have all been given the status as God's sons³⁶, and thus have been granted the freedom and power to use sonship responsibly. Just because God adopts you freely by his grace, it does not mean that

³⁰ D.M. Lloyd-Jones, Romans 8:5-17.

³¹ Packer, 212.

³² George, 309.

³³ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Adoption, 15.

³⁴ Romans 8:11-15; Ephesians 1:4-5.

³⁵ DOBI, 15.

³⁶ See Schreiner, 272.

you can abuse his grace and behave anyway you want. Remember Romans 6:1-2: *What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!* Paul also writes in Ephesians 5:1; *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

"If the church is the family of God's adopted sons and daughters, then it is they more than all people in earth who ought to reflect and mirror"³⁷ a likeness of God before the watching world. "As witnesses to his grace and beneficiaries of his love"³⁸ we are to respond in worshipful obedience. In Matthew 5, Jesus teaches that children of the Father are called to reflect their family likeness in their conduct. How we behave, what we say, and the things we do all advertise who we are.

Consider Solomon. Solomon loves to please Laura and I. He is a picky eater, and by picky he always wants cookies and candy for dinner, much like his father. Not too long ago Laura made his dinner and he would not touch his peas. I didn't get it. He has eaten peas before, and told us how much he liked them. But there in that moment he decided that he didn't want them. Once he realized that Laura and I wanted him to eat his peas because they are good for him and because it would make us happy, he ate them with joy. He even said "Daddy, Mommy, watch me!" Solomon's obedience does not make him more of a son, but he loves for us to delight in his loving obedience. His obedience is nothing more than trusting us; that we know what's best for him.

What motivates us to live like a son of God? I think Jonathan Edwards was very wise when he argued that the root of all human action is the affections. "By affections he meant something deeper than feelings. He saw them as the fundamental loves and hates of the whole person."³⁹ The affections are the source from which our behaviors flow. If the love of the Father will not make a child delight in him, and delight in pleasing him, what will?⁴⁰ We are not to behave as slaves, but as sons. If we are children of God, there should be a family resemblance. We should take great delight in living in a way that pleases the Father. And when we don't, his love also allows us to accept the Father's discipline and change accordingly.

In Paul's world, royal children had to undergo extra training and discipline which other children escape, in order to fit them for their high destiny. It is the same with us as children of the King of Kings. The clue to understanding the Father's discipline is to remember that in our lives you are being trained for what awaits you; you are being molded into the image of Christ.⁴¹

Our Inheritance from the Father (4:7b)

In the time Paul wrote this letter, it was the firstborn who inherited the Father's "estate," and it was his right to determine how much each of his brothers and sisters would get. In Colossians we read that Jesus is the image of God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible...all things were created through him and for him.⁴² In this way, Christ, as firstborn, holds all the rights to His Father's kingdom. He owns everything! Everything was created for him. What does Christ do for us as fellow children of the living God? He lovingly and graciously makes us co-heirs with him.

³⁷ Burke, 81.

³⁸ Bray, 645.

³⁹ Tim Keller, *Galatians*, 88.

⁴⁰ This idea was taken from John Owen, *Communion with God*.

⁴¹ See, J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*.

⁴² Colossians 1:15-16

Being in Christ makes one a son of God and thus an heir of God. How often do we reflect on this glorious truth? When one is adopted in Christ, they cease to be a slave and receive all the legal and financial privileges within the Father's estate as a result of God's grace.⁴³ This is why Peter writes in his first epistle, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."⁴⁴ How often do we set our hope on the grace that is to come when Jesus returns? When Jesus returns he will overwhelm us with his grace. As the Father's beloved children we will enter into our inheritance and that of our co-heir, Jesus Christ. In the new heavens and the new earth God will be fully ours to enjoy and be satisfied forever. But for now, it is clear that our sonship is just beginning. It is evident in the Bible that although believers already experience an official status as sonship in Christ through the Spirit...such sonship has not been revealed publically to the cosmos.⁴⁵ As Paul writes in Romans 8:15ff,

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.

Church, there will come a time when our sonship is declared climactically through the resurrection of our bodies.⁴⁶ Just as we read in 1 John 3:1-3:

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

There will be a day when our status as children of God is evident to all creation; a day when we experience our sonship in purity and fullness, much like what our first parents experienced in the presence of God before the fall. Why do we allow our lives to be so dominated by our problems, temptations, and sins? Why do we often forget what lies ahead? Why can't we, like Paul, proclaim *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.* I pray that God would teach us to look upward and forward to our final adoption. This is not merely a possibility or likelihood, but a guaranteed certainty, a promised inheritance. Since Jesus rose from the grave this promise was made secure. As we look forward we long for the experience of heaven, a family gathering. On that day a great host of the redeemed meet will together in face-to-face fellowship with the Father-God and Jesus. If you are a believer, and so an adopted child, this should satisfy you completely beyond anything in this world.⁴⁷

⁴³ Longenecker, 175.

⁴⁴ 1 Peter 1:13-16.

⁴⁵ G.K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 499-500.

⁴⁶ See Thomas Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 32-33.

⁴⁷ See J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 218.