

*Prior to implementing any orphan care strategy, it is important for us to reflect on why we care for orphans. Clearly Scripture calls us to do so, but our obedience is only part of the story. By God's grace and sovereignty, He has adopted us into His family, making it possible for us to engage and sustain orphan care initiatives. The following reflection on our spiritual adoption – and its implications for us personally and for our ministries - was provided by our friends at Together for Adoption.*

# The Theology of Adoption

What would you consider to be the highest blessing of the gospel? J.I. Packer, author of *Knowing God*, writes, "Adoption is the highest blessing of the Gospel, higher even than the gift of justification because of the richer relationship with God that it involves." He continues, "Justification is a forensic idea, conceived in terms of law, and viewing God as judge...Adoption is a family idea, conceived in terms of love, and viewing God as father. In adoption, God takes us into His family and fellowship, and establishes us as His children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the father is greater" (*Knowing God*, 186-188).

I agree with Packer, adoption is the highest blessing of the gospel, but it's also more than that. If you read the five Pauline texts where adoption occurs, you will observe that God's work of adoption has a clear "marking" function in the overarching story of redemption. It not only bookends the story of salvation (Ephesians 1:5 and Romans 8:23), as we will see shortly, but it also shows up at climactic junctures within the outworking of redemption within human history (Romans 9:4 and Galatians 4:5). In other words, adoption plays a key role from the beginning of the unfolding story of redemption (before God even created the world) all the way to the end (when all of God's adopted children enjoy the full privileges of their adoption in the new heaven and new earth).

The Apostle Paul's use of the term "adoption" in his epistles transports us to four epoch events within the grand story of redemption. Yes, adoption is the highest blessing of the gospel, but it also serves as a lens through which we can look at the entire story of redemption. One of the most wonderful truths we learn is that God's gift of adoption means that he does not merely redeem us, but he also brings us into the warmth and love and gladness of his own family. He redeems us so that he might treat us and delight in us just the same as he treats and delights in his eternal Son. This is the story of adoption...

## Epoch Event One

In Ephesians 1:4-5, Paul states that in love God the Father "predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will." This is really quite amazing: adoption's first epoch making event happened even before God created the universe. Paul takes us all the way back before the dawning of human history, before God even spoke His all-powerful, life-giving words, "Let there be!", and says that God chose us to be His sons through adoption. And God did this, Paul adds, "in love" (v. 4). Even before the earth existed God marked us out (i.e., predestined us) for the great privilege of being His children through adoption. Adoption was not a divine afterthought. It was in God's mind even before the first second of human history had even begun. One amazing truth we learn from Paul's words here is that adoption is higher, deeper, wider, and longer than the universe itself.

## Epoch Event Two

Given Israel's central role in the unfolding story of God's work of redemption, adoption's importance within the story of Israel is seen in Romans 9:4 where Paul identifies adoption as one of the great privileges that Israel enjoyed as God's chosen people. Paul writes, "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises." Scholars believe that Israel received adoption, becoming God's corporate son, when God constituted them a nation at Mt. Sinai, three months after He delivered His people from Egypt. It is very significant that adoption shows up at this key moment within the unfolding story of redemption. God's adoption of Israel was the result of His redemption of Israel. He redeemed them so that they might receive adoption.

## Epoch Event Three

In Galatians 4:4-5, referring to the wonderful climax of the story of redemption, Paul writes, "When the fullness of time had 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 sons" (emphasis mine). Paul identifies adoption as the grand purpose or objective of redemption. He could not have written it any more clearly. God sent His Son to redeem us so that we might be adopted! God the Father sent His eternal and natural Son so that we could become His adopted sons. Once again, adoption shows up at a key time—the climactic time—within the unfolding story of redemption. Just as God redeemed Israel in order that He might adopt them, so also has God redeemed us in order that He might adopt us!

## Epoch Event Four

As I have mentioned a couple times already, adoption plays a leading role from before the beginning of the story of redemption (Ephesians 1:4-5) all the way to the consummation of redemption's story when all of God's adopted children enjoy the full privileges of their adoption on the new earth. In Romans 8:23, Paul writes, "And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (emphasis mine). Paul identifies the glorification of our bodies as the consummation of our adoption. God, as it were, finalizes our adoption as sons when the story of redemption reaches its intended goal.

When you consider the central role that adoption plays within the overall story of redemption, you realize that it reveals the unfathomable: God actually cherishes and delights in us, His children—and he does so just as much as he cherishes and delights in his eternal Son! God is, as it were, moving heaven and earth to bring us to Himself for our eternal joy! Meditate on this. Let it work its way deep into the core of your being. It is this truth that will mobilize Christians to care for orphans with great joy and commitment.

If any group of people should be easily mobilized to care for orphans, it should be those whom God has adopted, those who were at one time without home and hope in this world. No community of people in this world should be more attuned to the cries and groans of orphans than the dearly loved, adopted children of God. Therefore, we, of all people on earth, should lead the way in caring for orphans in their affliction.