

# **Together *for* Adoption**

A photograph of two young African children, a girl on the left and a boy on the right, both smiling broadly at the camera. They are wearing light blue and white striped school uniforms. The girl is holding a small object in her hand, and the boy is also holding a small object. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The image is framed by a decorative white floral border in the bottom right corner.

**Our Adoption in Christ:**  
*What It Means for Us and for Orphans*

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# 1

## **The Prodigal's Suspicion and the Global Orphan Crisis**

**Dan Cruver**

There are a number of challenges within the evangelical church that would be greatly helped if our churches recovered afresh the beautiful truth of our adoption in Christ. Here are two of those challenges. The first relates to the Christian's own state of mind and heart; the second relates to the church's calling to care for orphans (James 1:27). As we will see, both of these challenges are connected to each other.

### **The Internal Challenge of Prodigal Suspicion**

There's a great little book by Sinclair Ferguson called *Children of the Living God*. Fairly early on in the book he talks about the prodigal son in Luke 15 to help us understand a little more about ourselves and how we often perceive our relationship with God. He notes that when the prodigal son finally decided that it was time to return to his father, his plan was to tell his father that he was no longer worthy to be called his son. The prodigal son's thinking was, "I really messed up. When I asked for my inheritance and left with it, I dishonored my father profoundly. I've blatantly squandered and belittled his love. So, when I return, I'll return as his slave not his son. It's the right thing for me to do." The prodigal is suspicious of the father's love for him. "He certainly cannot treat me or love me any longer as a son."

Sinclair Ferguson sees something in the prodigal's thinking that parallels how we as Christians often think of God and His fatherly love for us: "Jesus was underlining the fact that - despite assumptions to the contrary - the reality of the love of God for us is often the last thing in the world to dawn upon us. As we fix our eyes upon ourselves, our past failures, our present guilt, it seems impossible to us that the Father could love us. Many Christians go through much of their life with the prodigal's suspicion. Their concentration is upon their sin and failure; all their thoughts are introspective" (*Children of the Living God*, 27).

When the prodigal son says, "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants'" (Luke 15:18-19), he is thinking in terms of wages earned rather than extravagant love and grace received.

When we as believers relate to God like this, we are slow to return to the Father after we have sinned against him. We don't anticipate, let alone expect, His fatherly embrace. And when we do return to Him, we think of Him primarily as our master and not Father. As a result, real Christian joy is absent and passionate Christian living is lacking. It's almost impossible (if not impossible) to mobilize Christians who doubt God's love for them to care for orphans over the long haul, or at least to mobilize Christians who will serve orphans with great joy and freedom. We'll look more at this towards the end. This leads us to:

### **The External Challenge of Church Practice**

God has called the church to care for orphans. But the practice of caring for orphans is fraught with massive challenges. Allow me to overwhelm you with some staggering numbers.

There are 143 million orphans in our world. If all the orphans in the world were moved to the country of Mexico,

Mexico's population would more than double, growing from 108,700,000 to 251,700,000.

Over 16 million children were newly orphaned in 2003.

There are approximately 17.5 million orphans who are ages 0-5.

There are approximately 47 million orphans who are ages 6-11.

There are approximately 79 million orphans who are ages 12-17.

87.6 million orphans live in Asia.

43.4 million orphans live in Sub-Saharan Africa.

There are as many orphaned and vulnerable children in Ethiopia as there are people in greater NYC.

12.4 million orphans live in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Almost 1.5 million children live in public care in Central and Eastern Europe. That's our world.

### **What about the United States?**

More than 800,000 children pass through our country's foster care system each year. There are over 500,000 children in our foster care system right now. 129,000 of those children are waiting to be adopted from foster care right now. That's how many people live in the capitol of South Carolina. Approximately, 25,000 children age out of the foster care system each year; many with no support system and little to no life skills. There are currently over 5,400 children in South Carolina's foster care. Over 1,500 of them are waiting to be adopted. So far this year only a couple hundred of them have been adopted.

This brings us to this question: How many children are adopted each year? Between 118,000 and 127,000 children have been adopted every year since 1987. More than 50 percent of all adoptions are handled by public agencies or come from countries outside the United States. More than one-third of Americans have seriously considered adopting, but no more than 2 percent have actually adopted. Only 4 percent of families with children (1.7 million households) contain adopted children.

**When you're not convinced that the Father delights in you even as He delights in Jesus, you don't have the emotional capital necessary to visit orphans in their distress over the long haul.**

With this many orphans in the United States and in the world, the church has a monumental task before it if it is to practice true religion. James 1:27 says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction." Clearly, the church has its work cut out for it.

But as I noted in passing earlier, Christians who are not confident of God's love and delight in them as His dear children will find extremely difficult to care for orphans when it's hard, really hard. When you're not convinced that the Father delights in you even as He delights in Jesus, you don't have the emotional capital necessary to visit orphans in their distress over the long haul.

### **Why do I believe this to be the case?**

The only people who are truly able to turn their eyes outward to care for the world's most needy are those who

knowingly live within and enjoy the loving gaze of their heavenly Father. If we are not confident of His love, our eyes will turn inward, with the result that we will primarily be concerned with our needs, our lack, our disappointment, rather than the needs of orphans. As a result, we'll be afraid to risk or do the hard thing if it needs to be done. Or we will give our lives to care for orphans as an attempt to earn our heavenly Father's love. We will serve orphans as an attempt to earn God's delight. We may not know that this is why we're doing what we're doing, but it is what drives us deep within. Our hearts may be secretly ruled by thoughts like this, "I will pour myself out to defend and care for the orphan. Maybe then, if I do that, God will be pleased with me." Neither of these ways of thinking or living flows out of the gospel. The gospel is good news. It's joy-news because it speaks to us of the Father's love that has come to us in Jesus Christ.

Both of these challenges, the internal challenge of prodigal suspicion and the external challenge of church practice, would be greatly helped if the beautiful truth of our adoption in Christ freshly gripped our hearts.

So let's step back and ask this two-part question: Why is it important that the doctrine of adoption be recovered within the church, and how would its recovery help us with these two challenges in particular:

### **The truth of adoption showcases God's saving activity within the grand story of redemption.**

Adoption is the highest blessing of the gospel. J.I. Packer 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).

### **Adoption was not a divine afterthought. It was in God's mind even before the dawning of human history.**

I agree with Packer, adoption is the highest blessing of the gospel, but it's also more than that. Paul's use of the term "adoption" transports us to epoch events within the grand story of redemption.

#### *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 marking function began before God created the universe. Paul takes us all the way back even before the dawning of human history, even before God spoke His all-powerful, life-giving words, "Let there be!", and says that God marked us out to be His sons through adoption. And Paul states that God did this "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 dawning of human history. One amazing truth we learn from Paul's words here, as John Piper has said, is that "adoption is greater than the universe."

#### *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 salvation can be inferred from Romans 9:4 where Paul identifies adoption as one of the great privileges that Israel enjoyed as God's chosen people. He 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 (See "Understanding the Love of Adoption" for more on Israel's adoption). It is very significant that adoption shows up at this key moment within the unfolding story of redemption.

*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.

*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! He is, as it were, moving heaven and earth to bring us to Himself! 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.

**The truth of adoption cultivates a deep longing for the consummation of God's redemptive purposes.**

"And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:6).

"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!'" (Romans 8:15).

What is the "Abba! Father!" cry? Though I do believe "Abba! Father!" is an inner cry of familial intimacy ("God, you are my Father!"), I do not think that its primary significance lies in its familial intimacy. Rather, it is primarily a hope-filled cry for deliverance—a cry grounded in the reality of Jesus' redemptive accomplishment.

Ultimately, we should understand the "Abba! Father!" cry as the intense expression of our deep inward groaning for the completion of our redemption—the renewal of our decaying bodies. It is the Spirit's work to make us long for the full realization of our adoption (Romans 8:23). Let me explain.

Jesus, our Elder Brother, is the only one on record in Scripture who ever cried, "Abba! Father!"; and he cried it in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of his wrath-bearing work on the cross. When "Abba! Father!" came from Jesus' sinless lips, it was a humble yet impassioned cry for deliverance: "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). Although Jesus prayed for the removal of the cup of his Father's wrath against our sin, he humbly submitted to his Father's will and drank every last drop that he might deliver us from what we justly deserved.

The good news of the gospel is that the Father's all-wise and all-gracious decision not to grant Jesus' "Abba! Father!" cry, coupled with Jesus' humble submission to his Father's will, resulted in an indescribably good gift to us—the gift of sonship through adoption (Galatians 4:4-5).

For the joy set before him (see Hebrews 12:2) Jesus submitted to the will of his Father and, as a result, eternally secured our adoption as sons; and, as Paul goes on to say, because of what Jesus accomplished in his life, death

and resurrection, and because of our subsequent status as sons, God "has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:6).

Here is what we must keep in mind: "Abba! Father!" was first cried by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was a cry for deliverance. The Spirit now places that same cry within our hearts **because** we have become God's sons through adoption. This means that "Abba! Father!" has become our cry for deliverance. But we cry not for the removal of the cup of wrath against our sin—no, our Elder Brother already drank that cup in our place—but for the consummation of our adoption, that is, for the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23).

Through his life, death, and resurrection Jesus has transformed the "Abba! Father!" cry into a cry for deliverance that is grounded in the hope of the gospel, and it is the work of the Spirit to place it in our hearts. Therefore, to cry "Abba! Father!" is to cry for the glorification of our decaying bodies and for our deliverance from this present "time of affliction and suffering" and our intense struggle with indwelling sin (see Romans 8:18 & 23). After all, it is in Christ Jesus that God justifies and glorifies all whom He has predestined to adoption as sons (Romans 8:30 and Ephesians 1:5) in order that the resurrected Christ might be "the firstborn among many brothers" (Romans 9:29).

What, then, is the Spirit of Adoption's ministry? It is to bring the fact of our future experience of glorification to bear upon our present internal experience so that we might increasingly long for the day when we are revealed to be the true sons of God (Romans 8:19). Galatians 4:6 and Romans 8:15 teach us that the "Abba! Father!" cry comes from a heart that is eagerly anticipating the great day when we will live on the New Earth as glorified children of God.

**Those who are longing for and are confident of that great day are people who are willing to pour their lives out in service to our world's most needy, orphans.**

Those who are longing for and are confident of that great day are people who are willing to pour their lives out in service to our world's most needy, orphans. Knowing that God will one day completely deliver us from our affliction in this fallen world motivates us to mirror God's delivering work by serving orphans and seeing them placed in loving Christian homes.

### **The truth of adoption empowers God's people to practice true religion.**

No one should be able to hear the orphan's cry like those who cry "Abba! Father!" The Spirit of Adoption, who is the down payment of our future completed salvation, places this deep groaning within our hearts for our final deliverance so that we may increasingly live as "children of that consummated kingdom" now. Because of this, let me suggest that this "Abba! Father!" cry should serve as the lens through which we read, interpret, and apply James 1:27.

"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows *in their affliction*, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" [emphasis mine].

If any group of people should be inclined to visit orphans in their affliction in order that they might remove them from it, it should be those in whose hearts the Spirit has placed the "Abba! Father!" cry. It should be those who, through their adoption as sons in Christ, have the sure hope of final and full deliverance from "the sufferings of this present time" (Romans 8:18). If there is anyone who should deeply empathize with the orphan's cry, it should be a person who has the firstfruits of the Spirit and who, as a result, groans inwardly as he "waits eagerly for adoption as sons, that is, the redemption of [his] body" (Romans 8:23). **If any group of people should be easily mobilized to care for orphans, it should be those in whose hearts God's love has been poured out through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5).** No community of people in this world should be more attuned to the cries and groans of orphans than the dearly loved children of God. Therefore, we, of all people on earth, should lead the way in caring



for orphans in their affliction.

When we consider all that God has done to bring us into His family through adoption, we realize that it reveals the unfathomable: God actually cherishes and delights in us, His children! He is, as it were, moving heaven and earth to bring us to Himself! The love of God as revealed in the gospel replaces the prodigal's suspicion with joy in the Father's delight!

Let's all commit to meditating on this great truth. Let's pray that it works its way deep into the core of the corporate consciousness of our churches. It is this truth that will mobilize us to care for orphans with great joy and enduring commitment.

# 2

## **Adoption in God's Story of Redemption**

**Dan Cruver**

What's the big deal about adoption? Let me begin to answer this question with an analogy.

I'm no photographer, but I have a couple cameras and enjoy taking pictures. Sometimes I even take a good one. Back when I used a camera that actually had film (if you remember those), I would not take the finished roll to the developer and tell him, "Hold the prints, all I want are the negatives because I really like the way they capture reality." I've never said that because negatives do not give us reality. They actually give us the reversal of reality. Think about it: what in reality is light is shown as dark, and what in reality is dark is shown as light.

Popular culture, like film negatives, provides us with a reversal of reality. It essentially tells us, "What really matters is the here and now. What really matters is what you can get out of this life right now." We must admit, too, that popular culture's take on reality can be very tempting. After all, the here and now is tangible. It's what we experience everyday, sometimes powerfully.

But what's beautiful about Scripture's teaching on adoption is that it provides us with a clear picture of what reality actually is. The film negatives of popular culture tell us that "what really matters is the pursuit of the American dream." Scripture, on the other hand, shows us the way things actually are.

### **It is But a Shadow**

One of my favorite scenes in Peter Jackson's cinematic adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is a brief conversation that Aragorn and Eowyn have on the eve of the decisive battle for Middle-earth.

The armies of Middle-earth have gathered in preparation for the Battle of Pelennor Fields, and Aragorn, heir to the throne of Gondor, has to go out on a secret mission that will prove crucial to the success of this battle for Middle-earth. As Aragorn is leaving late at night, Eowyn (niece to the king of Rohan) comes to him in hope that she might be able to express her love for him. Aragorn, realizing what she is trying to do, stops her before she can really say anything and makes this poignant statement, one that serves as a window into our fallen condition:

"It is but a shadow and a thought that you love, I cannot give you what you seek."

God created us in His image, we are His image bearers, but popular culture tells us that we were created in the image of financial success. You would think, looking at the way we human beings live, that we were created in the image of vocational achievement. You would think that we were created in the image of sexual fulfillment. We pursue these things because we believe that they will actually give us what we seek, that they will ultimately give us ultimate significance and satisfaction.

This is where Scripture's teaching on adoption is so massively helpful. It awakens us to the fact that we were not created in the image of those things. It tells us that we were created in the image of the Triune God Himself. To be God's sons through adoption is to love and be loved by the One who is not but a shadow and a thought. He alone can give us what we seek. True satisfaction, significance, and belonging are found only in the God who has

adopted us through Jesus Christ by the Spirit of adoption.

### **Who Invented Adoption Anyway?**

In Ephesians 1:3-5, Paul writes, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before Him, (now get this) in love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of His will." Paul couldn't be more clear: before Adam took his first breath, before air filled the lungs of Adam, before God spoke His first "let there be," before the very dawning of human history itself, he says that God predestined us for adoption as sons, that He marked us out for adoption as sons.

Man did not invent adoption, God did! Adoption was in the mind of God before man even had a mind! Adoption was a vertical reality (i.e., God's decision to adopt us) long before it ever had a horizontal expression (i.e., couples adopting children). Therefore, the reality of vertical adoption, should influence how we think about orphan care and horizontal adoption.

**The more we understand what it means for us to be adopted by God, the more free will we be to embrace children who are without father and mother.**

In order for this to happen, we need to hear the truth about our adoption by God again and again: "You have been wonderfully, amazingly adopted by God. This is the greatest gift that you could possibly receive!" The more we come to joyful grips with our adoption by God, the more it will shape and inform the way we think about adoption horizontally.

I'm not saying that every Christian couple must adopt. Scripture does not command us to adopt, but it does expect God's children to care for orphans in their affliction (James 1:27).

For some that will mean adoption.

For others that will mean serving adoptive families in numerous ways.

For others still, it will mean giving their lives to serve children in a church-based orphanage.

We could go on and on.

Whatever form our care for orphans takes, what we do know is that God has called His people to care for them. Since those whom God has called to care for orphans are those whom He has brought into His family through adoption, the reality of our adoption by God should influence and shape how we even think about orphan care and the earthly practice of adoption. The more we understand what it means for us to be adopted by God, the more free will we be to embrace children who are without father and mother, and the more will we be enabled to care for them over the long haul.

The vertical priority and reality of adoption should be the thing that moves us outward to children in need. Just as the thing that should move us out to forgive one another is the forgiveness that we have received by God (Ephesians 4:32). Just as the thing that should move us out to love one another is the love that we have first received from God (1 John 4:19). In much the same way, our adoption by God should influence and shape how we think about orphan care and how we think about horizontal adoption.

### **Only Five Times?**

This may surprise you, but the word "adoption" occurs only five times in all of Scripture, all in the New Testament

and all by Paul. But what establishes the importance of Paul's use of adoption is not the number of times he uses it. Do not allow yourself to think, "It's used only five times in Scripture. It must not be that important." What establishes the importance of adoption is not the number of times it occurs, but how Paul actually uses it. The five occurrences of adoption in Scripture actually serve as markers along the timeline of the story of redemption. If you print out all five references that contain the word adoption, you will find that they are easily arranged chronologically without doing any violence to the text whatsoever, and they walk us along the timeline of salvation's story.

"In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will" (Ephesians 1:4b-5).

"They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises" (Romans 9:4).

"But 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. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:4-6).

"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!'" (Romans 8:15).

"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" (Romans 8:23).

Since a close look at the above verses shows that God's work of adoption breaks vertically into human history at climatic junctures and affects it at deeply profound levels, let's take a closer look at them.

### **Humanity's Catastrophic History**

I think all of us would agree that the effect of human sin upon human history has been catastrophic. Instead of living on this earth as sons of obedience, we became sons of disobedience (Ephesians 2:2). Instead of living on this earth as children of love, we became children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3). Instead of being God's image bearers on this planet, we choose to be bearers of our own image. As Paul says in Romans 1:23, we exchanged the glory of the immortal God, the infinite God, for the finite glory of creaturely things.

The effect of sin upon human history has been nothing short of catastrophic; and as the consequence of our rebellion, creation itself was subjected to futility (Romans 8:20). As a result of our disobedience, our unfaithfulness, our rejection of the Fatherly love and care of God, creation was subjected to the bondage of corruption.

Think about it this way. Creation is a beautiful thing, but creation, as beautiful as it is, can turn on us in a second. Hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, and tsunamis can wreak serious havoc on us, and they are not a respecter of persons. All of creation has been subjected to this kind of bondage because of our rebellion. It was not created to be at odds with humanity. It was created to be in harmony with humanity and our God-given role on earth.

Though the effects of our sin upon the world have been catastrophic, God has broken into our tragic history with His work of adoption. The good news of the Gospel is that God has broken into our catastrophic history with the gift of adoption.

## God's Eucatastrophe

J.R.R. Tolkien coined a word that wonderfully captures what God's gracious work of adoption has accomplished by breaking into human history. It's the word "eucatastrophe." As a compound of the word "good" (eu) and the word "catastrophe," the meaning of the word "eucatastrophe" is rather transparent: It means good catastrophe. What?! How can a catastrophe possibly be good?

According to Tolkien, a eucatastrophe is the sudden, unexpected turn for joy in a dire, hopeless circumstance. He considered the Gospel to be the eucatastrophe of all eucatastrophes. When circumstances looked their darkest, when life seemed most hopeless for humanity, the Gospel broke in and changed everything. Notice how Tolkien uses the word "eucatastrophe" when writing about the Gospel story:

"The birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of man's history, the resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy" (Tree and Leaf, 62-63).

What does "the birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of man's history" mean? When Jesus was born, mankind's long history had been littered with sin, rebellion, and death. There was not one man prior to Jesus' incarnation that brought the hope of cosmic deliverance and renewal for mankind. There was no one. Our history was a history of death. Period. Every so-and-so who begot another so-and-so eventually died.

Century after century sin and death dominated the human landscape. But when the fullness of time had come, Jesus was born. His birth changed everything. It was the sudden turn for joy for which humanity had been longing. When the angels announced his birth to the shepherds, there was finally a reason for exceeding joy and celebration. Someone had broken into our catastrophic history who would ultimately transform everything. That's what Tolkien means when he refers to the birth of Christ as "the eucatastrophe of human history."

**Century after century sin and death dominated the human landscape. But when the fullness of time had come, Jesus was born. His birth changed everything.**

### *The Catastrophe of All Catastrophes*

According to Tolkien, though, the birth of Christ is not the only eucatastrophe within the Gospel story. "The resurrection," Tolkien writes, "is the eucatastrophe of the story of the incarnation." Jesus was "a man of sorrows" and "acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). He was rejected by his own (John 1:11) and ultimately crucified at the hands of sinful men (Luke 24:7). On the surface this appears to be the catastrophe of all catastrophes, but there was much more going on than what could be seen on the surface of things.

On the Sunday following Jesus' crucifixion, two individuals were traveling from Jerusalem to a village named Emmaus. They were devastated over what had happened to Jesus and were talking about what had transpired just a couple days before. As they were talking to each other about what had happened, Jesus suddenly joined them. The conversation that ensued is absolutely amazing. Luke records the conversation in his Gospel:

"While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?' And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?' And he said to them, 'What things?' And they said to him, 'Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a



vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.' And he said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that I the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:15-27).

What these two disciples had failed to recognize was that there was a resurrection! All they could see was that the one they had hoped would redeem Israel had been crucified at the hands of the Romans. In their mind, a crucified messiah was a messiah that had failed. What they discovered, though, to their great joy, was that the resurrection of Jesus was the eucatastrophe of Jesus' incarnation. The resurrection was the sudden unexpected turn for joy. It was the "happy ending" to the crucifixion story.

### *Adoption is a Eucatastrophe*

Do you know how adoption fits into all of this? God's work of adoption is the eucatastrophe of our catastrophic story. It's the sudden turn of events, the sudden breaking in of joy that radically changes our relationship with God. God broke in vertically at climactic junctures within the unfolding story of redemption, and He did so that He might adopt us as sons.

**Through adoption God graciously brings us to participate in the reciprocal love that ever flows between the Father and His Son. This is the very heart of adoption.**

As I wrote earlier, the five occurrences of adoption in Scripture actually serve as markers along the timeline of redemption's remarkable story. If we look at them together, we find that there is a vertical preamble that establishes the way things will be as God deals with our catastrophic history, and then there are three vertical breaks into our catastrophic history. Let's look briefly at each of them.

### **The Vertical Preamble**

In Ephesians 1:4-5, Paul transports us to eternity past when he writes, "In love [God the Father] predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ." Here is the stunning reality before us in these two verses: before the dawning of human history God marked us out and established the boundaries of our habitation, as His sons.

It is these verses that prompted John Piper to say, "Adoption is bigger than the universe!" John Piper said that because, according to Paul, adoption is not only before the universe, it is also the purpose of the universe. Just several verses later, Paul tells us that this adoption plan that God set forth in Christ was "to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:10). How utterly breathtaking is that?

So, before time began God marked us out for adoption as sons. This is the vertical preamble.

### *The God Who Adopts*

Who is this God who before time planned on adopting us? Great question! Adoption is ultimately about relationship, and the relationship that transcends all others is the relationship(s) that the Persons of the eternal Trinity have eternally enjoyed with each other. Our God has always been and always will be a communion of Persons. Reciprocal love forever flows between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So what do the eternal relationships of the Trinity have to do with the doctrine of vertical adoption? First, there would be no biblical doctrine of adoption if God were not Triune. Think about it: If God were only one Person rather than three, there would be no love into which we could be brought to share through adoption. Only a God who is more than one Person can be love. There is much more that could be said here, but the bottom line is that

if there is no Trinity, there is no adoption as sons, period.

Second—and this is absolutely staggering—God's gracious provision of adoption is the activity by which He enlarges the circle of communion that has eternally existed between the three Persons of the Trinity! The good news of the gospel is that God the Father brings us to share in the loving communion that He enjoys with His eternal and natural Son through the work of His eternal and natural Son. Through adoption God graciously brings us to participate in the reciprocal love that ever flows between the Father and His Son. This is the very heart of adoption.

Our vertical adoption brings us into relationship with the eternal Triune God. The first person of the Trinity, God the Father, becomes our Father (John 20:17); the second person of the Trinity, the eternal and natural Son of God, becomes our Elder Brother (Hebrews 2:10-12); and the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit of adoption (Romans 8:15), places the cry, "Abba! Father!" in our hearts and on our lips (Galatians 4:6). To be adopted by God is to enter, amazingly, into a profound relationship with each person of the glorious Trinity. This is the greatest benefit of adoption! As Augustine once prayed to God:

"You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

God made us for Himself, and adoption is His gracious work to give us the very thing for which we were made!

When God predestined before time to bring us near through adoption, to bring us into the love between the Father and the Son by the Spirit, that was the vertical preamble that changed everything. It changed the course and destiny of human history. The vertical preamble of Ephesians 1:4-5 is not only bigger than the universe, it also established the purpose of the universe.

**God does not adopt us because we have our act together.**

That's the vertical preamble, God planned our adoption before time. But when does God's work of adoption actually break into human history and have a visible manifestation?

### **Vertical Break One**

In Romans 9:4, Paul is discussing the privileges that Israel enjoys when he says, "They are the Israelites and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises."

Notice the first privilege Paul lists: "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption." Scholars believe that Israel received adoption, becoming God's corporate son formally, three months after God delivered them from Egypt. Israel's adoption at Mt. Sinai as God's corporate son coincided with their inauguration as a nation. To be the Nation of Israel, then, was to be God's son.

It was common for ancient Near Eastern nations to boast of having a father-son relationship with their gods. Most ancient religions believed that the gods bore their sons through companions. These nations considered themselves to be the "natural" born sons of their particular gods. This was the religious and cultural context in which Israel entered into a Father-son relationship with God. What distinguished Israel's Father-son relationship from the father-son relationships of which the other nations boasted was that Israel entered into theirs through adoption. It was through this unique adoptive relationship that God, in due time, would address man's catastrophic history. But the outworking of this redemptive relationship would be slow going.

Do you remember what happened when God was adopting Israel at Mt. Sinai? While Moses was receiving the law, Israel grew tired of waiting for him. So they built a golden calf. In Psalm 106:20, the psalmist tells us what

was going on theologically when Israel did this: "They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass." Israel, like Adam at the beginning, failed in their calling as God's son (Adam is called God's son in Luke 3:38).

Again and again throughout their history, Israel, like Adam, failed to be what God called them to be. Israel at last proved to be God's prodigal son. In the end, the privileged Nation of Israel essentially replayed the story of Adam's failure. As a result, it seemed as though God's redemptive mission to rescue humanity through adoption had failed, but it only seemed that way. It was through Israel, God's corporate son through adoption, that God's eternal and perfect Son would be sent to redeem humanity.

There is good news to be seen in Israel's failure, though. It showcases the astounding beauty of God's adopting love. God does not adopt us (just as He did not adopt Israel) because we have our act together. We were once rebellious sons of disobedience (Ephesians 2:2), but our disobedience did not thwart or derail the adoptive love of God. Why didn't it? Because before our catastrophic history even began, God marked us out for adoption as sons. God's intention from the very beginning was to use our catastrophic history for good (cf. Genesis 50:20; Acts 4:27-28).

## Vertical Break Two

Now we come to the climax (not the end) of God's story of redemption. Let me set this up by looking at what Matthew does in chapter 2 of his Gospel to introduce Jesus' Messianic mission. He makes a striking contrast between God's son, Israel, and God's Son, Jesus. Matthew is clear, whereas Israel, according to Hosea 11:1 (cf. Matt. 2:15), was God's unfaithful son whom He called out of Egypt; Jesus, according to Matthew 2:13-15, was God's faithful Son whom He called out of Egypt.

In Matthew 2:13-15, we learn that after warning Joseph of Herod's plan to kill the child Jesus, an angel tells him to "take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt." Joseph obediently heeds the warning and takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt, where they remain until Herod's death.

After recording this sequence of events, Matthew then adds: "This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'" God's faithful Son, the Son whom He also called out of Egypt, is the one

**Christ redeemed us so that we could freely delight in his Father and be delighted in by his Father.**

who, according to Matthew 1:21, was sent to save his people, God's unfaithful son, from their sins. The point of this contrast is crystal clear: while Israel, like Adam before, failed in its sonship, Jesus succeeded in his Sonship in order that he make all things right.

So what does this have to do with Paul's teaching on adoption? Consider what Paul writes in Galatians 4:4-5, "But 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* [italics added]." Why did God the Father send His only-begotten Son to redeem us? For what purpose did He send the one with whom He enjoyed eternal love to redeem His people? Paul announces that God sent His Son to redeem us "so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:5).

The eternal Son of God was born of woman, born under the law, to redeem us so that we might share in the communion of love that the Father has eternally enjoyed with His Son. This is the end for which we were redeemed! Even before the creation of the world, God the Father determined that we should participate in the love and joy of the Trinity as His sons through adoption (ultimately, as we will see, on a renewed earth). Christ redeemed us so that we could freely delight in his Father and be delighted in by his Father.

Paul presents adoption as the goal of redemption. It is redemption's climax. Even as the creation of man was the climax and crown of God's work of creation at the very beginning, adoption as sons is the climax and crown of God's work of redemption. God the Son was sent by God the Father in order that our lost sonship might be

restored and exponentially improved upon through the gift of adoption.

You may be asking, "Where's the Spirit in all this? What role does he play in the outworking of adoption within the story of redemption?"

### *The Spirit's Adoptive Work*

The work of the Spirit in adoption is two-fold. He provides us with inner and outer experiences of our adoption, both of which are inextricably connected. As we just noted, adoption as sons was redemption's primary objective. When "God sent forth his Son" at the climax of the story of redemption, according to Galatians 4:4-5, adoption was the direct result. Adoption as sons took effect within human history when the Son of God became man and accomplished redemption.

Then, in Galatians 4:6 Paul adds, "And because you are sons (by adoption), God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" The Spirit of adoption, as Paul refers to him in Romans 8:15 (the fourth text where the word "adoption" occurs), comes to us from God to cry "Abba! Father!" within our hearts. God the Father sent the Spirit to do this for us because we are His sons.

As we've already seen in chapter one, the "Abba! Father!" cry is primarily a hope-filled cry for deliverance—a cry grounded in the reality of Jesus' redemptive accomplishment. Because of our adoption as sons, God has given us the Spirit of his Son so that we might long for our final deliverance with increasing intensity.

This brings us to the final vertical break.

### **Vertical Break Three**

One of the great temptations we face each day as Christians is to live for the here and now. The world (not the material world but the "world system" as John speaks of it in 1 John 2:15-17) is a seductress.

As we considered at the beginning of this chapter, all of the world's energy is devoted to seducing us into thinking that what we can see and touch now is ultimate. It wants us to live without eternity in view, to make decisions each day without reference to the glorious future that God has in store for his creation. If the world can get us to feel content with pursuing the "good life" here and now, it's content (at least for a few seconds). To borrow from C.S. Lewis, the world too often seduces us into thinking that we are now enjoying our "holiday at the sea."

The two adoption texts in Roman 8, verses 15 and 23, are surrounded by strong Exodus imagery. God's deliverance of Israel out of Egyptian bondage is the story that echoes behind the Grand Story of Romans 8. We find evidence of this fact all throughout the chapter: "set you free" (v. 2); "led by the Spirit of God" (v. 14; see Exo. 13:21); "the spirit of slavery" (v. 15); "subjected to futility" (v. 20); "will be set free" (v. 21); "bondage to corruption" (v. 21); "obtain the freedom" (v. 21); "groaning together" (v. 22; see Exo. 2:23); "redemption" (v. 23); and "firstborn" (v. 29; see Exo. 4:22).

If you recall, one of Israel's great struggles after God delivered them from Egypt was the temptation to return to Egypt. Yes, God's deliverance opened up a whole new world and future for them (i.e., the opportunity to enjoy being God's children in the Promised Land, a second Eden of sorts), but Egypt was the only "world" they knew.

As great as God said the Promised Land was, it was still an unknown commodity as far as they were concerned. Getting to this second Eden required that they continue to believe and follow the God who delivered them; and for people who are prone to forget God's great deeds (see Psalm 106:21), believing is not easy, especially when it means defeating giants. So while Egypt worked to seduce Israel with its promise of familiarity and predictability, the people repeatedly forgot God their Savior—the God who delivered them from the "mighty" Egyptians. That's a dangerous combination.

So what did God do? He graciously continued to lead them "by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night" (Exo. 13:21). This pillar not only daily reminded them that God had redeemed them from Egyptian bondage with his outstretched arm, it also led them forward to the land of their inheritance, the second Eden. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night led Israel away from Egypt's seduction into the glorious future that God had prepared for them.

### *Crying Into the Future*

Just as God led Israel, his son by adoption, into the future he had prepared for them, by the Spirit of adoption he now leads us, his sons by adoption, into our promised inheritance (Romans 8:14-15). When we by the Spirit of adoption cry, "Abba! Father!", we show that we are groaning for the day when "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9).

As Paul writes in Romans 8:23, we "who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." By the Spirit of adoption God is leading us to long increasingly for the day when the entire earth will become our happy home, to be enjoyed with God our Father and our Elder Brother, Jesus. Paul calls this great day our adoption!

### **Implications for Orphan Care and Horizontal Adoption**

How does all of this relate to orphan care and the earthly practice of adoption? If any group of people should care for orphans, strangers without hope in this world, it is those who were strangers without God and without hope in this world that God brought near by the blood of Jesus and placed in His household so that they would be His sons through adoption. If anybody should lead the way in caring for orphans, it should be those who have experienced the privilege of adoption, yet await the day in the future where God removes the totality of our affliction. That's why James says, "pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is to visit orphans in their affliction."

I'm convinced that as the church grows and deepens in its understanding of vertical adoption, we will see the church mobilized to care for orphans like it has never been mobilized before. Why am I convinced of this? Because the gospel is not only the power of God to bring us into His household through the blood of Jesus, it is also the very power of God to affect cosmic change and to right every wrong. Ultimately, the hope of this world, and therefore the hope of every orphan, is the gospel.



# 3

## **Glorifying the Father of the Fatherless**

*How Families Can Change the World for the Glory of God and the Good of Orphans*

**Jason Kovacs**

Like every other dad, the day I became a father for the first time was unforgettable. My wife and I were a happy young couple waiting to adopt our first child. Visions of a beautiful baby filled our minds. We weren't sure if we would be matched with a birthmother a few months prior to the due-date or if we would get a phone call that a baby had been born and the brave young mother was ready to immediately place her child for adoption. Months went by and we finally got a phone call, but it wasn't for a baby. God had a two-year old boy and an eight-month old girl for us. The social worker asked if we were interested and we said "Yes!" and drove down to Florida to meet our children. At the adoption agency, the first person I met was my son toddling around the corner. He walked up to me and grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the door. He wanted out of that place! What I believe he wanted even more than that was a daddy.

That is the case today with millions of children around the world. UNICEF estimates that there are over 145 million orphans in the world today living without a permanent family.<sup>1</sup> In the United States alone, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services says, there are over 129,000 children waiting for a mother and father.<sup>2</sup> There are also many mothers with unexpected pregnancies who want to choose adoption instead of abortion.

Many of the children overseas must fight all by themselves for their very lives. Others are cared for in orphanages. The orphaned children in America will fight for their futures as well: roughly 2% will receive a university degree and 84% will have their own children within a few years of aging out of the foster-care system.<sup>3</sup> Looking at statistics like that it becomes clear that something must be done to stop the cycle perpetuating the orphan crisis.

**Throughout the Scriptures we see God's burning heart for orphans.**

This is not a new problem and God is not silent about the issue. Throughout the Scriptures we see God's burning heart for orphans. He cares so deeply for the orphan that He calls Himself the "Father to the fatherless" in Psalm 68:5. In Scripture, the names of God carry great significance. They reveal to us God's character, His works, and His relationship with us. The various circumstances that bring forth each of the names of God are also important. Therefore, the fact that God aligns himself by name to the fatherless tells us God's love for the fatherless is an essential part of who He is and what He does. In other words, God's love and practical care of the orphan is part of His very nature and therefore part of His very glory. Charles Spurgeon made this comment about this verse:

"To this day and for ever, God is, and will be, the peculiar guardian of the defenseless. He is the President of Orphanages, the Protector of Widows. He is so glorious that he rides on the heavens, but so compassionate that he remembers the poor of the earth. How zealously ought his church to cherish those who are here marked out as Jehovah's especial charge. Does he not here in effect say, "Feed my lambs"? Blessed duty, it shall be our privilege to make this one of our life's dearest objects."<sup>4</sup>

1 [http://www.unicef.org/sowc08/docs/sowc08\\_table\\_4.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/sowc08/docs/sowc08_table_4.pdf)

2 [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/afcars/tar/report14.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report14.htm)

3 <http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/NorthwestAlumniStudy.htm>

4 Charles Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Vol. 2, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, p. 138

A love and care for the fatherless ought to be a special mark of God's people. Because this is who God is and what God does, this is who God's people ought to be and what God's people ought to be about.

God makes this explicit in His commands throughout Scripture to care for the fatherless. In Psalm 10:18 we are commanded to "do justice to the fatherless." In Isaiah He commands "Defend the cause of the fatherless" (Isaiah 1:17). In Jeremiah God condemns the neglect of the fatherless by his people, "They are fat, they are sleek, and they also excel in deeds of wickedness; they do not plead the cause, the cause of the orphan, that they may prosper; and they do not defend the rights of the poor." (Jer 5:28). In Job, we see the care of the fatherless commended, "Whoever heard me spoke well of me, and those who saw me commended me, because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him." (Job 29:11-12). In the New Testament, James picks up on the Old Testament commands, "religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans... in their affliction" (1:27).

Undergirding of all these admonitions to God's people and the example of God Himself is the Gospel. The Gospel is the greatest encouragement and revelation we have when it comes to our understanding of adoption. Ephesians sums up the place of adoption in the gospel succinctly:

"In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved." Ephesians 1:4-6

From the foundation of the world, God planned to save sinners and make them his very sons and daughters through the Cross. Wayne Grudem writes:

God could have given us justification without the privileges of adoption into his family, for he could have forgiven our sins and given us right legal standing before him without making us his children. It is important to realize this because it helps us to recognize how great are our privileges in adoption. Regeneration has to do with our spiritual life within. Justification has to do with our standing before God's law. But adoption has to do with our relationship with God as Father, and in adoption we are given many of the greatest blessings that we will know for all eternity.<sup>5</sup>

Adoption was not plan 'B' in God's mind, it is the very heart and apex of the Gospel and God's mission to redeem a people from every nation, tribe, and tongue. Therefore, our understanding of adoption ought to be central to our gospel-thinking and gospel-living. A right understanding of adoption is meant to have great impact and sway in our understanding of our relationship with God and others. The thought of God being our Father, writes theologian, J.I. Packer, ought to be the thought that "prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life."<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, just as God is passionate about magnifying Himself as a Father of many sons and daughters through adoption, both spiritually and practically, so we ought to reflect Him in this mission. How do we do this? We take part in God's mission to save and adopt sinners by preaching the gospel and making disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18). Likewise, we take part in God's passion to care for the fatherless through our practical care and adoption of orphans. With 145 million orphans worldwide we have an unprecedented opportunity – and biblical responsibility – to glorify God as the Father to the fatherless.

What can you do practically?

First pray about what God would have you do. It may or may not be adoption for your family, but God has called all His people to have a heart for the fatherless and to extend His love to them. If it is not adoption, then maybe it is helping another family with the cost of adoption, fostering, sponsoring a child, visiting orphans, praying regularly, or serving as voice for the orphan.

5 Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 323

6 J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, InterVarsity Press; 20th Anniversary ed. edition, Downers Grove, IL, p. 201

Second, engage your church in caring for the fatherless. All our orphan care and adoption efforts ought to be done as God's community (the church) on mission in this world by the power of the Holy Spirit. We cannot care for the fatherless as effectively alone as we can in community. We can do more for God's glory and the good of the fatherless as the body of Christ, with all its parts working and serving in the power of the Spirit, together.

Third, aim to create a culture of adoption in your church community. Do not settle for merely adding a program to the list of hundred other good things your church is doing. Aim to stir within the ethos of the church the heart of God for the fatherless. Aim to be a church community that has been so gripped by the heart of God for the fatherless and the gospel that you are known for it in your city because of the fruit it bears. "Let your light shine before all men that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven."

In light of the glory of God and His passion to magnify Himself as an adoptive Father, the issue will never be *whether* we should care for the fatherless. The issue will always be *how* each family and church will care for them. As families and churches deepen in their understanding of God's heart for the orphan and act upon it, God will be glorified and orphans' lives will be changed for good – both temporally and eternally.

# 4

## The Cosmic Significance of Adoption

Dan Cruver

### *Christianity's Vertical to Horizontal Movement*

Have you ever thought about Christianity's unique vertical to horizontal movement? Since Christianity's vertical to horizontal movement is ultimately what will mobilize the church to address the global orphan crisis, let's take a few moments to consider it.

The uniqueness of Christianity's *vertical* movement is that it is never first man responding to God; it is always *first* God coming down to man in grace. Nor does Christianity's *horizontal* movement from man to man (i.e., love your neighbor as yourself) precede its vertical movement from God to man. In other words, we move horizontally as Christians because God first moved vertically to us in grace.

Let me give you a few of examples.

**Example one:** love moved vertically before it ever moved horizontally. Love moved from God to man before it ever moved from man to man. But it's not enough merely to say that love moves vertically from God to man before it moves horizontally from man to man. Scripture teaches that we love horizontally because God first loved us vertically. In the words of John, "We love because he (God) first loved us" (1 John 4:19). So, Christianity has an essential vertical to horizontal movement. And without this vertical movement of God's love for us, there is no Christianity.

**Example two:** forgiveness is first vertical before it's horizontal. Paul commanded the Ephesian church to forgive one another even as God in Christ had forgiven them. Vertical forgiveness — God's forgiving of us in Christ — precedes *and* enables horizontal forgiveness — Christians forgiving Christians. So to borrow John's words from 1 John 4:19, "We forgive because God first forgave us."

**Example three:** in Romans 15, the Christians in Rome are commanded to welcome one another even as Christ already welcomed them (v. 7). So, once again we see there is a clear horizontal and vertical movement. We welcome one another horizontally as believers, Paul says, because we have first been welcomed vertically. Christ has first welcomed us; and as a result, we are enabled to welcome one another within the household of faith.

### *Vertical to Horizontal Adoption?*

Christianity has a unique vertical to horizontal movement, and without this movement Christianity ceases to be Christianity. So the question is this, since Christianity has this unique vertical to horizontal movement, how does its vertical to horizontal movement relate to adoption and orphan care?

We know how it relates to love: God first loved us so that we can express and extend the same kind of love to others.

We know how it relates to forgiveness: God first forgave us in Christ so that we can horizontally extend that

forgiveness to others.

We know how it relates to welcoming kindness: God first welcomed us in Christ so that we as believers can move out horizontally and welcome each other.

So how does this vertical to horizontal movement relate to adoption and orphan care? Listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 1:3-5.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love. Having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to himself according to the good pleasure of his will."

Scripture leaves no doubt here: before the dawning of human history, before the earth was created, before the universe came into existence by the spoken word of God, God marked us out for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ. Get this: adoption existed in the mind of God an eternity before it ever occurred to man to adopt. Vertical adoption precedes *all of human history*. Adoption existed vertically before it ever existed horizontally. Man did not invent adoption. God did.

Therefore, the way we think about adoption horizontally should be shaped by Scripture's teaching on vertical adoption. How we think about bringing orphans into our families should be influenced and determined by how we understand what God has done vertically in adoption. Our adoption of orphaned children should be informed by what God has done to bring us into his household.

### *The Question*

Unfortunately, I don't think that vertical adoption really shapes the way we think about earthly adoption, at least not the way it should. Let me give you an example from my own family's experience. My wife and I are caucasian—always have been, always will be. Shortly after we adopted our second black child, a couple from our church came over to us after corporate worship to congratulate us. I was holding the youngest of our two boys while the other one was holding on to my leg.

After talking about the boys for a minute or two, the wife pauses, looks me in the eyes and says, "Have you and your wife determined whether or not you are going to tell your boys that they were adopted?"

It was one of those moments when everything felt like it was moving in slow-motion, except for my mind. Questions like "How do I handle this? Is she joking? Is she not joking? Is she serious? Is she not serious?" rushed through my mind in a split second. I stood there waiting for a smirk to appear on her face—the kind of smirk that says, "Ha! I gotcha, didn't I?" No such smirk came. But God was gracious to me (and to her!) in that moment. I simply said, "Yes, we plan on telling our boys that they entered our family through adoption."

Now, here's why I tell that story. If we are thinking *first* vertically about adoption, we won't ask a question like that—even of a family that adopts within their same ethnicity.

Why not? Because God does not hide our adoption from us! As a matter of fact, Paul tells us that before human history even began, before there was an earth, before there was a universe, God marked us out for adoption. Paul thinks it is important enough to tell us that before the beginning of time God decided to bring us into his family, into his household through adoption. Now if *that* reality is primary in our thinking, when we hear the word "adoption," we will first think vertically before we think horizontally about adoption.

As I have already argued, Christianity has a unique vertical to horizontal movement. The vertical realities of Christianity (i.e., God's love, forgiveness, welcoming kindness, adopting love, etc) should determine how we think



about life horizontally. Vertical adoption, then, should influence how we think about and practice horizontal adoption.

### *Adoption's Happy Ending*

The word "adoption" occurs only five times in all of Scripture, and it's found only in the writings of Paul. But here's what's interesting about the five occurrences of the word "adoption" in Paul's epistles. If you look at them together, you can see that they are easily arranged chronologically. Paul's references to adoption actually serve as markers along the entire timeline of the story of redemption. So that, as we saw in Ephesians 1, not only does adoption actually precede human history, but it also actually brings the story of redemption to its consummation. Adoption plays a central role at the climax of redemption's story. Scripture presents adoption as our happy ending. Take a look at Romans 8:23.

"And not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruit of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23).

Not only is adoption something that happened to us in the past when we first believed in Christ, but Paul says it's also something that will happen to us in the future. There is an "already, not yet" thing going on here.

So what's the "not yet" aspect of our adoption that Paul's is referring to in Romans 8:23? I've found it helpful to think of it as the finalization of our adoption. Yes, we have already been adopted, but we are still awaiting the finalization of our adoption. When we brought our two boys into our household, they were our children through adoption. But there came a day when we went before the court, and their adoption was finalized. I think that's a helpful way to think about what's going on in Romans 8:23. We have been adopted; yet, we are awaiting the finalization of our adoption.

**Scripture presents adoption as our happy ending.**

**Now, with all of this in mind, let's answer three questions: (1)** What will the finalization of our adoption look like? **(2)** What has Jesus got to do with it? **(3)** What does the finalization of our adoption have to do with the global orphan crisis?

### **What will the finalization of our adoption look like?**

Let's take a closer look at Romans 8:23. Just several verses earlier Paul writes, "For I consider that the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God" (Romans 8:18-19). Do you see what Paul does here? He personifies creation, all of it, and says that it is eagerly awaiting something: *the revealing of the sons of God*.

But what exactly is "the revealing of the sons of God for which creation eagerly awaits"? It is, according to verse 23, the finalization of adoption as sons. It's the day our bodies are redeemed or glorified. And as we shall see, that future day has everything to do with mobilizing the church for orphan care and adoption ministry now.

### *Hints from the Old Testament*

Have you ever noticed that there is a past Old Testament event that illumines what Paul is talking about in Romans 8:23? It's actually an event that sets this future aspect of our adoption firmly within the larger context of redemption's story.

The word "redemption" is hint number one of this past event that illumines what is taking place in Romans 8:23. Back in the first century, anyone familiar with the Bible's story would have immediately thought "Exodus" upon

hearing the word "redemption." Their minds would have recalled what God did to redeem Israel out of Egyptian bondage. This Exodus was *the* redemptive event within Old Testament times.

In Romans 8:23, Paul's telling us that there is a *future* Exodus, and it has everything to do with the finalization of our adoption. It has everything to do with the transformation of our bodies. That's the first hint.

The second hint is found Romans 8:14-15. Let's see if you can hear Exodus-echoes from the text itself: "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." God leads his sons.

Verse 15 continues, "For you did not receive the spirit of (notice this next word) bondage again to fear, but you received the spirit of adoption, whereby you cry 'Abba, Father.'" Paul's point in these two verses is that God leads his sons out of bondage. He leads his children out of slavery.

Think of how Israel's Exodus unfolded: God commands Moses to say to Pharaoh, "Israel is my firstborn son. Let my son go that he may serve me, that he may worship me" (Exodus 5:1). And then after ten plagues, God delivers Israel, His firstborn son, out of Egypt.

What does God do next? He leads His sons out of slavery by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God is the God who delivered Israel in order to lead them out of slavery into the freedom of worship. He's also the God who still leads His sons out of bondage into freedom by the Spirit.

**The story of the Bible is the story of God visiting us in our affliction — like He visited Israel in its affliction (Exodus 4:31) — in order to deliver us from it.**

Both of these hints tell us that *the* Old Testament event that is behind what Paul is talking about in Romans 8:23 is the Exodus. The biblical story that stands behind this text is what God did to deliver Israel out of Egypt. There is a strong connection between what God did back then and what God's going to do in the future when he finalizes our adoption.

This connection tells us that what God did for Israel back then foreshadowed what God did in Jesus through his death and resurrection and what He will yet do through Jesus in the future. God is the God who leads out of slavery. God is the God who leads out of bondage.

One day God will free His children, all of us, from our bondage to decay. When this happens, the created world "will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). The created world will be renewed.

Have you ever thought about how the truth of Romans 8 should inform our understanding of "visiting orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27)? The story of the Bible is the story of God visiting *us* in our affliction — like He visited Israel in its affliction (Exodus 4:31) — in order to deliver us from it.

If any group of people should be passionate about visiting orphans in *their* affliction in order to deliver them from it, it should be the children of God. There is no other group of people that should be more easily mobilized to care for orphans. Period. *Visiting orphans in their distress mirrors what God has done for us in ours.*

This is one reason why the church needs to rehearse and rejoice in the story of redemption over and over again. Not only is redemption the Grand Story of the universe, but it is also our story, and it is what will move us out in mission to visit orphans in their affliction.

*Cosmic Freedom*

As we've just seen, the finalization of our adoption is an Exodus—an incredibly massive, cosmic Exodus. But our

Exodus is not just about us. It's much bigger than that. Yes, it begins with us, and we trigger what happens after it, but it's not just about us.

Look back at Romans 8:19-21. "For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God." Why? Why is creation eagerly waiting for us to be revealed? Verse 20 tells us, "For the creation was (listen to the language again) subjected to futility. Not willingly but because of him who subjected it in hope. Because the creation itself (I love this!) also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty (the glorious freedom!) of the children of God."

Our adoption — the finalization of our adoption — has cosmic significance! Creation is beautiful, and God intended that mankind steward it for his glory. But because of sin creation is also profoundly dangerous—tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes. Do you know what Paul is saying here? Every time the plates in the earth shift, and the ground opens up; every time buildings collapse, and people are crushed by falling debris; do you know what creation is doing in those horrific moments? It is groaning!

All of creation is eagerly awaiting for the finalization of *our* adoption because at that time creation itself, which has been subjected to futility just as Israel had been in Egypt, will be set free to be what God has always intended it to be. It's all triggered by the finalization of *our* adoption. So, let me ask you this question: how significant is vertical adoption? How important is vertical adoption? It has cosmic significance. Its importance is incalculable.

### *The Point of It All*

Now let me ask another question, really two. What was the ultimate point of the Exodus in the Old Testament? Our answer to this question will tell us what the ultimate point of our future Exodus, the one in which creation will also share.

Let's quickly rehearse the events of the first Exodus: God delivers Israel from Egypt, they cross the Red Sea, God conquers and slays the Egyptian army. Then we have in Exodus 15, the Song of Moses, which the people of Israel sang together in celebration of what God had done.

Do you know what the climax of that song is? It's found in verse 17, "You, God, will bring them in and plant them in the mountain of your inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which you have made for your own dwelling, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established."

What is verse 17 talking about? The "mountain of God's inheritance," His own dwelling place, is the Promise Land. God delivered His people out of Egypt in order that He might bring them into the land where His presence will be made known and enjoyed. That was the point of the Exodus. In this land that was flowing with milk and honey—where the curse seemed to be reversed—God would give Israel His special presence.

And this is the ultimate point of the *cosmic* Exodus too! Biblical scholar Michael Goheen says that life for Israel in the promised land was "to be an emblem of the full restoration of God's presence within the whole creation" (*The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 72).

So, when God brought Israel into the Promised Land in order that He might dwell with them, it was to be an emblem of the future day when God's presence would fill the entire creation. The universe was designed, as another scholar writes, "to be filled, flooded, drenched in God as a chalice is beautiful because of what we know it is designed to contain or as a violin is beautiful because we know the music of which it is capable. God intends to flood the universe with his presence as though the universe, the entire cosmos, was designed as a receptacle for his love" (N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 102) And this great filling of the universe with the all-satisfying presence of God will be triggered by the finalization of our adoption as sons!

## **What has Jesus got to do with it?**

Where is Jesus in all this? What exactly did Jesus do to give us the hope of such an unfathomable future? Great question!

We were created to commune with God, to know and be known by God. That's why we were placed on this earth. But what happened? The fall. Man rebelled against the fatherly love and care of God, and suddenly everything changed. We became, as Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1-3, "sons of disobedience," "children of wrath."

In his genealogy of Jesus, Luke says that Adam was a "son of God" (Luke 3:38). Adam was a little "s" son in that he was created in the image of God to enjoy God's fatherly love and care on this earth. But Adam rebelled. And as a result, his sonship was lost. The image of God in man was defaced. And now man is a son of disobedience, a child of wrath.

So, here's the big question: how is the hope of our glorious future as God's sons through adoption even possible? How is it possible that God can take "children of wrath" and give them an unbelievable future on a renewed earth? What has God done to give us this hope that is laid out for us in Romans 8:23?

Paul's amazing answer is given to us in another adoption text. Galatians 4:4 says, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son." Who is this Son that he sent forth? God sent the Son with whom he enjoyed eternal love and communion for all of eternity past.

For all eternity the Father poured out his infinite love upon his Son, and His Son joyfully received that love; and the Son eternally poured out his love upon the Father. Forever and ever in eternity past, the Father and the Son enjoyed perfect unending fellowship and communion and love. It's this God who sent his Son on a mission into this fallen world.

**He experienced at the cross what we sons of disobedience, children of wrath deserve.**

And what was that mission? Paul says, "God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, (so that the eternal Son became the incarnate Son) born under the law." The law under which the Son became incarnate meant condemnation for us. As Paul says earlier, this law 'held us in bondage.' It could not give us life. It could not quicken us. Rather, it put us to death because of our sin.

But God sent His Son, His eternal Son, who became the incarnate Son without ceasing to be the eternal Son, and he lived his life under the law in order to fulfill it. To paraphrase what Paul says in Galatians 3, "The curse of the law was placed upon his shoulders."

At the cross this One who in the Garden of Gethsemane cried out, "Abba, Father, remove this cup from me," willingly submitted to the will of the Father on our behalf and went to the cross. At the cross *this* Son cried out, not 'Abba, Father,' but "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?" He experienced at the cross what we sons of disobedience, children of wrath deserve.

Why did Jesus do that? Why did God send forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem us? (There's the word "redemption" again.) Why did he do this? Paul tell us in verse 5: "that we might receive adoption as sons." Jesus bore the curse of the law that we might be brought into the household of God to share in the love that has existed between the Father and the Son for all of eternity. We who by nature are sons of disobedience, we who by nature are objects of God's wrath are brought in to share in this amazing love which will one day fill the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Do you remember what happened on the day of resurrection? Mary Magdalene ran to the tomb looking for the

body of Jesus. When she saw the the tomb was empty, she wept. Jesus then approached her, but she didn't know that it was him.

When she finally realized that it was Jesus, she grabbed him. Do you remember what Jesus said to her? "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father, but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and to your Father'" (John 20:17).

Do you know the significance of Jesus' words? He accomplished redemption! He took the curse of the law upon his own shoulders and was forsaken by his Father so that we might receive adoption as sons! And on the day of his resurrection Jesus said to Mary, "Go to my brothers and tell them I'm ascending to my Father and *your* Father." *Your* Father! Mission accomplished!

### **What does the finalization of our adoption have to do with the global orphan crisis?**

Now remember, Christianity has this amazing vertical to horizontal movement. As a result, Christians should see a vertical to horizontal movement with adoption.

Let me be clear, though: We are *not* saying that God calls every Christian couple to adopt. He simply doesn't. But what we are saying is that God has called His people, He's called the church to visit orphans in their affliction and distress.

So, how should our vertical adoption influence how we view orphan care? How should it influence how we practice or think about horizontal adoption (i.e., couples bringing children into their family)?

### **Not only has God placed us in His household as His dear children, but He's also going to give us a restored creation as our home!**

Here is what I know: I was once a stranger outside the covenants of promise (Ephesians 2:12). I was once without God and without hope in this world. But God brought me near by the blood of Jesus and placed me in his household (Ephesians 2:13). That's

not all: not only has God placed us in His household as His dear children, but He's also going to give us a restored creation as our home! That means that our eternal home will be a renewed earth where God's presence is known and enjoyed and where there is no more suffering, no more distress, no more affliction!

If there is a people on the face of the earth who should be passionate about caring for orphans in their affliction, it is those whom God has visited in their own misery. He has given us a remarkable gift by sending his own Son into the world to redeem us that we might receive adoption as sons (and everything else that comes with it). If there is anyone who should care for orphans in their affliction, it will be God's children, God's sons through adoption.

Don't forget this either! Our efforts to visit orphans in their affliction are an emblem of the future day when God will finally and completely deliver us from the suffering of this present age and make all things new! At the beginning of this chapter, I said that Christianity has a unique vertical to horizontal movement. What God calls us to do, therefore, is to know what it means to be brought into His family through adoption, to understand afresh that our Father is a Father of the fatherless (Psalm 68:5), and then to move out in mission to visit orphans in their distress.

Certainly, if any group of people would joyfully give themselves to care for orphans, it would be those whom God has adopted. Some of us are called to adopt children ourselves, others to come alongside adoptive families in different ways, and still others to care for orphans by supplying their physical needs in hope that there will be families who will bring them in. Why are we to do things like this? Because Christianity has an essential vertical to horizontal movement.

# 5

## Creating a Culture of Adoption in Your Church

Jason Kovacs

Today, around the country, churches of all denominations are taking serious God's call to care for the fatherless and starting orphan care and adoption ministries. This is very exciting – for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of the millions of children that are waiting for a family, and for these churches!

Many of these churches are asking how they can serve the fatherless most effectively?

The best advice I can give is to not simply start an orphan care/adoption "ministry" but aim to see an orphan care/adoption culture established. What do I mean by that? It may be semantics but I see a difference that has great implications:

- *Ministry tends to be an optional program that a small group of interested individuals can take part in.*
- *Culture is something that the whole church community takes part in by virtue of being part of the church.*
- *Ministry does not necessitate the involvement or the vision casting of the church leadership.*
- *Culture will be sustained by the preaching of the gospel and the particular ways it is worked out.*
- *Ministry is not always clearly connected to the mission of the church.*
- *Culture is a means to work out the mission of the church.*

**The greatest thing you can do to establish a culture of adoption/orphan care in your church is to be gripped by the reality that God has adopted us as His children.**

Think of these statements in regards to other "ministries" that we find in our churches – evangelism, prayer, mercy. The extent to which these gospel-activities are seen as "ministries" or "programs", as they so often are, they often struggle. I find churches that are most effective

at evangelism are those churches that see evangelism as a non-negotiable for every member and have created a culture in which every member by virtue of their involvement in the church community is caught up into the activity of reaching the lost. I think the same ought to be true for orphan care/adoption.

The greatest thing you can do to establish a culture of adoption/orphan care in your church is to be gripped by the reality that God has adopted us as His children. The church is God's great trans-racial adoptive family. As the gospel takes root in our hearts and we recognize that adoption is central to the heart and mission of God it also becomes something we care about. We will naturally begin to reflect our vertical adoption in our horizontal efforts. This is the foundation for creating a culture that believes that every Christian is called to care for the fatherless in some way. Not everyone is called to adopt but everyone is called to do something. The question for each Christian and each church is not "Should I care for orphans?" The question is "How can I care for orphans?"

One church aiming to create an adoption culture is Ashland Avenue Baptist Church in Lexington, KY. They have committed to do all they can to adopt as many orphans from around the world as possible. Here is a statement from their website:

*"Every member of the AABC family is challenged to be apart of rescuing children from around the world, by giving, praying, and adopting. Our commitment to adoption flows from our commitment to the gospel. All who know the grace of God found only in Jesus Christ, have been adopted by God. It only makes sense that those of us who have been adopted in this way display such grace in the world through a radical commitment to adoption."*

Would your church commit to the same? Imagine the potential if thousands of churches aimed for cultures in which the gospel led to this kind of radical commitment to do all we can care for the fatherless. May God continue to move in our hearts and the heart of His church!

Below are some practical things that you can do to nurture an adoption/orphan care culture in your church.

1. Get together as adoptive families. If you have more than one adoptive family in your church you are already ahead of the game. You may be the start to a great movement in your church. Find one another and meet for fellowship, encouragement, and prayer.
2. Preach on and speak about adoption and orphan care. Start with the gospel and move outwards to the implications on our lives. If you are not in leadership, pray for and encourage your church leadership to speak about adoption and orphan care. If they seem reluctant at first, don't pressure them but be patient.
3. Help others with creative ways they can care for orphans. Your story and experience will be the best resource they have. Not everyone is called to adopt but everyone is called to care for orphans in some way. It may be through prayer, foster care, respite care, giving financially, babysitting, orphan sponsorship, or serving on a mission trip.
4. Provide financial assistance to families considering adoption. For so many couples the number one obstacle to moving forward with adoption is the cost. By providing even a small amount of financial assistance churches take part in opening the doors of faith for families to adopt. I have seen this as a catalyst which has led to many adoptions over the years in one church which has led to the creation of a distinct adoption culture. Visit **[www.abbafund.org](http://www.abbafund.org)** for more information on how your church can establish a local church adoption fund.