

# TOGETHERFORADOPTION



## True Religion: A Gospel-Centered Look at James 1:27

By Dan Cruver

On July 8, 2005, in Fuling, China, I spent the early morning meditating on James 1:27, specifically about what “visiting orphans in their affliction” means. I probably should have given this serious thought years before this day since James says that visiting orphans in their affliction is an essential mark of true Christianity, but I had not. There is something about spending several days in an orphanage in the middle of China along the Yangtze River that forces you to think about the meaning of James’ words. So there I sat at 4:30 a.m. on July 8th, 2005, in Fuling, China wondering what “visiting orphans in their affliction” might mean for the church today.

Two cross-references came to my mind fairly quickly—Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2. Together they

worked to ignite a flame in my heart that continues to burn today. In Psalm 8:3-4, David writes, “When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you *visit him* [emphasis mine]?” I found it interesting that the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, uses the same Greek word translated “visit” in James 1:27 to translate the Hebrew word behind “visit” in Psalm 8:4. In Psalm 8:4, this word is used to refer to God’s gracious redemptive care for man. In James 1:27, it is used to refer to the Christian’s gracious redemptive care for orphans. As I sat on the side of the bathtub in my hotel room that early morning in Fuling, China, I wondered if James

intended for us to see a connection between what he wrote in James 1:27 and what David wrote in Psalm 8:4. It seems to me that if in merely reading James 1:27 David's words in Psalm 8:4 came to my 21st century, non-Jewish mind, it's very possible that Psalm 8:4 would have been in James' 1st century, Jewish mind as he penned the final verse of chapter 1.

This is where the second cross-reference proves very helpful. In quoting Psalm 8:4-6, Hebrews 2:6-8 reads, "It has been testified somewhere, 'What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you *visit him* [emphasis mine]? You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet.'" What I find helpful in filling in our understanding of James 1:27 is what the writer of Hebrews does after quoting Psalm 8. He identifies Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of David's words (see Hebrews 2:9). The writer essentially tells us that Jesus was "for a little while made lower than the angels" (i.e. he was made man in weakness) in order that he might accomplish the climax of God's redemptive purposes. Notice the purpose-indicating "so that" in Hebrews 2:9.

"But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, **so that** by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."

The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus became man in order that he might redeem us from our fallen condition, that he might rescue us from the power and fear of death (Hebrews 2:15). According to Hebrews' use of Psalm 8:4, Jesus is the one in whom God the Father's redemptive care or visitation is climactically accomplished.

It's also helpful to briefly consider a couple examples of Hebrews 2's stress upon suffering and death within this redemptive context. First, the writer states that although Jesus was for a little while made lower than the angels, he is now crowned with glory and honor. In other words, God the Father has exalted him.

Question: Why is he now crowned with glory and honor? Answer: Because of his "obedience to death, even death on a cross" as man (cf. Philippians 2:8-9).

Second, verse 10 not only states that Jesus tasted death in order that he might bring "many sons to glory," but also that as the founder of our salvation he was "made perfect through suffering." Suffering is a very important redemptive theme in Hebrews 2. When we look at Hebrews 2:4-10 together, we find that it is within the context of Jesus' redemptive suffering, death, and exaltation that David's words are quoted. Keep this in mind as we continue.

Now, if Psalm 8 in general has been fulfilled in Jesus, how has Psalm 8:4 in particular ("What is man...that you visit him?") been fulfilled in him? In other words, how is it that God has ultimately visited man within the unfolding saga of human history? I think Hebrews 2 provides an answer for us when it tells us Jesus was made man in order that he might redeem us through his own suffering and death. According to Hebrews 2, Psalm 8:4 was fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Think of it this way: Through the incarnation of His eternal Son God entered into the very heart of our misery and brokenness (i.e. our affliction) in order that he might redeem us. I think we are now very close to seeing how all of this opens up our understanding of James 1:27.

Hebrews is clear that when the Son of God became man he did not assume a humanity that was untouched by the Fall. To state it positively, the eternal Son assumed a humanity that was subject to decay, pain, misery, suffering, and death. In other words, he took up a humanity that had been affected deeply by the Fall; yet he himself was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Hebrews 2:17 says that the Son was made like us "in every respect." Why was this the case? In order that he might redeem us from the profound misery of our condition (i.e. from our profound affliction) from the inside out. Jesus visited us in our affliction by entering into the very heart of our brokenness in order that he might restore our humanity to its originally

intended wholeness. God brought Psalm 8:4 to its climactic fulfillment not by merely meeting our superficial needs but by a real and profound entering into our affliction in order that He might deliver us from it. Thomas Torrance sums it up well.

In Jesus God himself descended to the very bottom of our human existence where we are alienated and antagonistic, into the very hell of our godlessness and despair, laying fast hold of us and taking our cursed condition upon himself, in order to embrace us for ever in his reconciling love. He did that in such an incredible way that he pledged his very Being incarnate in Jesus for us as the immutable ground of our salvation and peace against all the onslaughts of the forces of evil (*The Mediation of Christ*, 43-44).

Now, with all this profound truth in mind, what might it mean for us to “visit orphans in their affliction” (James 1:27)? We can certainly agree that it involves much more than a superficial meeting of needs. Surely God’s example of visiting us *in our affliction* should inform our understanding of what it means to visit orphans *in their affliction*. So, what might entering into the affliction of orphans involve? We must say that it would at least involve the following: going to where they are; holding them in their less than suitable, non-absorbent diapers; allowing ourselves to be wet upon without reaction or visible displeasure in order that they might enjoy tender affection; playing with them even when we are sweating profusely because of high temperatures and suffocating humidity; feeding and clothing them; and giving them the medical care they need.

Visiting orphans in their affliction certainly involves meeting these important physical and emotional needs. But if we consider how it is that God entered into our affliction *in order to deliver us from it*, we must conclude that visiting orphans in their affliction necessarily and ultimately involves adoption.<sup>1</sup> Can you think

of a better way to mirror God’s gracious care for us in our profound need than through adopting orphans in their profound need?

Let’s take one last brief look at Hebrews 2. I think it is significant (and wonderfully beautiful) that the writer of Hebrews uses adoption related terminology. In verse 10, he says that it was God’s intention to bring “many sons to glory” through Jesus’ redemptive suffering (Hebrews 2:10). God did what He did through Jesus in order to add sons (and daughters) to His family. The writer then states, in verse 11, that Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers. Did you get that? Jesus is proud to call those for whom he suffered and died brothers. What an amazing thought!

So how can we read Hebrews 2:10-11 and not think in terms of adoption? Is this not what the writer of Hebrews is implying? It is a truly stunning thought that the eternal Son of God became man, suffered, died, and was crowned with glory and honor in order that rebellious sinners might become his brothers! What are we that God is mindful of us in this way (see Psalm 8:4 again)?

If visiting orphans in their affliction ultimately involves adopting them, and if James identifies visiting orphans in their affliction as an essential mark of true Christianity, shouldn’t churches seriously consider (at the least) actively encouraging and facilitating adoption? Not every believer is called to adopt an orphan, but every believer is called to somehow participate in visiting orphans in their affliction at some level. And what a wonderful calling it is! Adoption is a breathtakingly beautiful way to live out the gospel of Christ among the afflicted. It provides another way for the church to bring the gospel to those who, like we once were, are without God and hope in this world (Ephesians 2:12).

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that no other kind of visiting orphans is legitimate or real. Orphans have very real needs that must be met whether they are ultimately adopted or not. My point is simply that if visiting orphans in their affliction ultimately involves removing them from it, then we must pursue adoption, whether by assisting other families as they pursue adoption or by pursuing adoption ourselves.