

Salvation - Adoption by God

What Does It Mean to Be Adopted by God?

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Part one of a series.

This precious doctrine is often neglected in contemporary preaching. In a three-part series we shall examine three related questions: How are believers adopted by God? What does adoption mean for the believer's present life? What does adoption mean for the life to come? We'll also examine some current false teachings about adoption.

A Key Passage

One of the key passages that presents this wonderful doctrine is Galatians 3:26-4:7 —

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ [this speaks of Spirit baptism, not water baptism] have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.

Believers Are Legally Adopted

So how is it that we are adopted by God? How has it come about, and what does it involve?

Adoption is a legal act of God on our behalf, in the same way as justification. Justification is legal language in Scripture. We stand before the judgment bar of God as hopeless sinners, condemned to death, with nothing to offer for our own redemption. But Christ comes and stands before His Father at the judgment bar, and offers His perfect righteousness – His full atonement for our sins and His perfect keeping of God's law – as our substitute. And so God the Father declares us not guilty. Not because we paid the penalty. Not because we have a righteousness of our own. Only because of the perfect and complete work of His Son Jesus Christ on our behalf. And so, legally, we stand before God clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

In the same way, adoption is legal language in Scripture. We see this in the passage we just read in Galatians. Notice chapter four, verses four and five: "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons."

Believers Are Adopted Sons

Note that we are adopted as *sons*. And we need to be very careful here to say what Scripture actually says, and to understand why it says it. Today many people want us to use so-called gender-neutral versions of the Bible that remove all the masculine and feminine references. That may be politically correct in some circles, but it is not Biblically correct. We must completely reject that kind of thinking.

And here in this passage we have one of the strongest arguments. The wording here is clearly masculine. The word is *huiothesia*. It means, literally, "to be placed as a son." And in Galatians 4:4 the word is translated "the adoption of *sons*." The word is clearly masculine. Not merely adoption as children, not as sons *and* daughters, but adoption as *sons*. Yes, God created us male and female. But as it concerns our redemption, we who are in Christ, men and women and boys and girls alike, are adopted by God as sons — in that sense, as Paul says, "there is neither male nor female."

Why is that important? We need to remember that Paul is writing to people who were under the rule of the Roman Empire. They were subject to Roman law. Although we do see forms of adoption practiced in the Old Testament, there was no mention of precisely this kind of adoption in the Mosaic law. The picture that Paul by the Holy Spirit is using here in Galatians is definitely the Roman law of adoption of sons, because that is what the people who received this letter would have understood.

And adoption as a son in Roman law was something very specific. Adoption as a son in Roman law meant that you had the right to the name and the citizenship of the person who adopted you, and the right to inherit his property. The adopted son had the same rights and privileges as a naturally born son. These were rights that were not granted to an adopted daughter. And the law also granted the one who adopted that son the full rights and responsibilities of a father, full authority over the adopted son, and full responsibility to care for him. So it worked both ways.

Believers Are Adopted Through the Only Begotten Son

And how is it that God has brought this kind of adoption about for us as believers? Well, again, our passage tells us, beginning at verse four: "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!' Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ."

And we read the same thing in Romans chapter three, verses 23 to 25: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith."

So we are justified by the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, and we are also adopted by the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. The one transaction, redeeming us, buying us out of the slave market of sin — that is the picture here — that one transaction between God the Son and God the Father has wrought both legal acts on our behalf: justification and adoption. Not only have we been declared not guilty by God the Judge, but God the Judge has adopted us as His own sons!

The Condemning Judge Is Now Our Loving Father

What a turnabout! We were on our way to Hell. We were without God, without hope in the world. Lost, spiritually dead. Totally unable to save ourselves. Filthy with sin. Guilty through and through. Condemned to eternal death. The righteous Judge has pronounced the sentence against us according to His perfect Law, and all that waited was for us to be cast into Hell.

But then — God's only begotten Son comes, and in one great transaction He not only causes the Judge who condemns us to declare us not guilty, but He also causes the Judge who had condemned us to adopt us as His own sons! What indescribable grace! What infinite mercy! The Apostle John marvels at it in his first epistle: "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called the sons of

God!" Unbelievable. We could not believe it were possibly true, if God's Word did not tell us that it is so.

"Behold, what manner of love" John says. Behold! Comprehend the meaning of it! Understand what has been done for you! Rejoice in it! Glory in it! Rest in it! Live in it! God your condemning Judge is now God your loving Father!

The Believer's Adoption Is Eternally Secure

And this adoption as sons of God is secure. John 1:12 tells us, "As many as received Him, to them he gave the right, the authority, to become the children of God, even to those who believe on His name." We have the right to be called the sons of God, because that is in fact what we are, and no one can take it from us. God says, "I, even I, am the LORD, and besides Me there is no Savior...and there is no one who can deliver out of My hand." No one can take you out of the hand of God. And that verse in Isaiah continues, "I work, and who will reverse it?" "I work," God says, "and who will reverse it?" No one will.

A False Teaching About Adoption

There is a false teaching in some circles today about the doctrine of adoption. It says that we are saved by being united with Christ through water baptism. And it says that we get the benefits of salvation through that union. It says that Jesus was justified, so we are justified. Jesus was sanctified, so we are sanctified. Jesus was adopted, so we are adopted. And, this false doctrine goes on to say that we can lose all of that if we don't stay saved by keeping the law.

This is wrong on so many levels. First of all, we are not saved by water baptism, but by faith in the person and work of Christ. And Scripture never says that Jesus was justified, so therefore we are justified; or that Jesus was adopted by the Father, so therefore we are adopted. Jesus is the God the Son. He is sinless. Always was. But

this false doctrine takes Jesus off His throne as God the Son and makes Him nothing more than the first Christian. Jesus is God. He didn't need to be justified or sanctified. And He didn't need to be adopted. Scripture makes it clear that Jesus is the *only begotten* Son of God. We are the ones who are *adopted* sons of God according to Scripture.

And we can't lose our adoption. The way these false teachers have it, it's as though God is saying, "If you don't behave yourself, I'll tear up the adoption papers and put you out into the street. You'll no longer be my son." But that's not what Scripture says. Scripture says that what God has done will never be reversed, and not only that, by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit He will cause us to walk in a way that is worthy of the name, "son of God."

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