

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A SON OF GOD

(Doctrine of Adoption) Romans 8:15

Our exposition of the great eighth chapter of Romans brings us face to face with one of the great doctrines of Christianity, namely, the doctrine of adoption. This word "adoption" occurs only five times in the New Testament. It occurs in Romans 8:23, Romans 9:4, Ephesians 1:5, Galatians 4:5 and then in Romans 8:15, "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, "Abba, Father."

When one reads that verse of Scripture he is impressed to stand back and say, "Now what is Paul talking about?" If we really wanted to take the easy route in preaching, we would never use a text like this. But this does not accomplish our task. If the preacher constantly lives in the "ABC's" and preaches only the "ABC's," he develops an "ABC" congregation. Truth is not always so plain and evident. Our text falls into this category. It speaks about the tremendous gospel blessing that comes to God's children through adoption. The task before us is to understand adoption as used in the New Testament. In order to do this we must raise and answer three questions from the New Testament.

I. What is the meaning of this word, "adoption"? The word is made up of two words in the original tongue: the noun, "son," and the verb, "to place." Therefore, the word "adoption" literally means "to place a son." Many people have confused adoption with the new birth, but they are not the same thing. A person becomes a Christian or a child of God through the experience of the new birth and only through that experience. This is biblical teaching. Have you been born again? You must be in order to be God's child. The new birth gives this child of God a new life, a new nature, and eternal life. It is the beginning of a new spiritual existence. But in adoption, this same person who has received new life is placed in the relationship of a son of God. That is to say, he is introduced into this new and wonderful relationship not only to have life, but to reach the highest status that a mortal can attain - a son of God through the Holy Spirit's work in his heart. So Paul says, "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again unto fear but ye have received

the spirit of adoption." The revised version says, "the spirit of sonship" - which is correct. Professor Wuest¹ says, "The spirit who ~~makes~~ places you as adult sons" - that is a good translation. Therefore, if you contrast adoption with other related doctrines, we would have to say this: in justification the believer receives a new standing before God. In regeneration the believer receives a new life or a new nature in God. In adoption the believer receives a new relationship and a new position. Paul is absolutely thrilled when he talks about this in Romans 8 because he recognized and realized what it meant to be a real son of God. You see, no Old Testament believer was ever called a son of God; sonship is a post-Pentecostal privilege which came through the full work of the Holy Spirit.

II. What are the benefits of adoption to a son of God? We shall consider verse 17 later, which says that the son is an heir of God and a joint heir with Jesus Christ. Many people would postpone the Christian life to beyond this world. Sonship involves the heavenly inheritance, which I shall discuss when I get to it. But Romans 8:15 deals with the present blessings of adoption in sonship that will come to us if we will believe this truth and appropriate its wonderful benefits in our hearts. In our text Paul mentions three great benefits which come to God's sons.

(1) In the first place, Paul says that adoption gives the son of God the most personal and the highest relationship to the almighty, eternal God. Notice our text says that the spirit of adoption enables us to cry "Abba, Father." Now the word "Abba" was the most tender word for "father" in Paul's native, Aramaic tongue. If we were to translate this literally, we would have to say "my daddy." Paul is actually saying that there is no barrier between the son of God and the Father, for he is entitled to come to Him without any obstacles, and to feel that utter nearness and closeness which would motivate addressing Him, "My daddy."

¹The New Testament: An Expanded Translation, p. 365

This cry of "Abba" was used by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane according to Mark 14:36. Jesus said, "Abba, Father," connoting an intense, earnest cry, the upward movement of man's spirit to the Father, the man who knows that he is God's son; the man who knows that the Father loves him with an indescribable love; the man who knows that he can bring before the Father every problem, large or small; the individual who is filled with gratitude to God for what He has done. Have you ever had this experience? Have you ever had this intensity of spirit that moved toward God in praise, thanksgiving, and adoration, causing you to know that you were united with Deity? Some say that this intensity comes only in times of great crises, or great sorrow. I am sure that it would be more real at a time like that, but there is nothing in Scripture to say that it is not something that can happen to us anytime. I am sure that in my own experience that I do not have the "Abba, Father" relationship a lot of times, but when I do have it, it is tremendous. When the intensity of my spirit moves toward God; when I pray and call upon God, the wonders of the "Abba, Father" relationship take place. This can be experienced only by a son of God, one who is enlightened in the truth of God, and who is walking in the Spirit. Paul is not wasting our time; he is talking about that which is so needed ^{for} for the saints of God.

(2) In the second place, Paul says that adoption removes fear. Had you stopped to realize that most of the world's religions are based on fear, including some so-called Christian religions? Even the Jewish religion had much fear in it. Did you know that a Jew would never think of addressing Jehovah as "Father" or "Abba"? That was unheard of. They would not even pronounce the name "Jehovah." They called Him Adonai which does not mean "Father" at all, but "Lord" or "The Almighty One" or "the One out yonder." They thought of God as being distant, as being majestic and holy but really not involved with, or close to them. This has been the curse of religion through the ages - that it has removed God from man rather than bringing the reality of the goodness of God into the experience of man. Christianity is just the opposite. It began with the incarnation when the very Word of God became a man and lived among us to show that He was identifying with humanity with all of its calamities - even its sin.

So in New Testament Christianity we do not find the element of fear. The first message that came to the shepherds from the angels at the birth of Christ was "fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be unto all people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10). If you are afraid today of life and even of death, there is something else for you in the Gospel. "We have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear but the spirit of sonship whereby we cry Abba, Father." Paul wrote Timothy in II Timothy 1:7 and said, "God has not given you the spirit of fear." If you have fear, you must look somewhere ^{else} besides God to find its source; God did not give it to you. Your mother may have given it to you; your sins may have given it to you; but God has not given us the spirit of fear but "of love, power, and of a sound mind." The Bible does say to fear God, but that is a reverential awe and a bowing before Him. It is not the kind of fear that I am talking about. It is wonderful to live a life knowing God loves us, knowing that we are accepted and redeemed, not afraid to live and not afraid to die. Paul says adoption gives us freedom from fear.

(3) In the third place, Paul says that adoption makes us mature sons of God. We hear a great deal today about Christian maturity. Entire libraries of books have been written on the subject. Most people who talk about Christian maturity and who write about it do not know what it is - they think of it as personality adjustment to this present world and to our environment. Some people talk about it who are not even Christians and do not even claim to be born again.

Christian maturity is spiritual maturity. Your maturity depends entirely upon your grasp and experience of revealed truth. Your maturity depends upon how much you are centered in Christ. Paul says that Christian maturity results from sonship. He talks about this in the Galatian epistle (Galatians 4:4-7). He talks about people who are minors - undeveloped, immature, living by little rules, having no understanding. He says that people under the law were that way. He would also declare this of believers

today who have not gone on with Christ beyond justification, who have not allowed the Holy Spirit to do His wonderful work of revealing Christ in their lives. He says in Galatians 4:3 for instance, "Once we were children. We were under the elements" -- and that word "elements" means that we did not know anything but the "ABC's" -- "were in bondage." A man who does not know the full truth of the New Testament is in bondage. Truth is the only thing that will get a man out of the rut and make him a new man. One must experience all of the truth that God has revealed.

Having talked about the spiritual incompleteness of those under the law Paul says, "But when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying Abba, Father" (Galatians 4:6). There it is again, "Abba, Father." And Paul said, "If you are a son you are no more a slave" (Galatians 4:7). Why does he make this contrast? There are many believers who never get beyond the slave stage. Christianity is nothing to them but service. Going to church here and there, attending a meeting here, doing something there. We do not need to do less of that, and I am not debunking that, but oh, how sad if all you know about Christianity is church attendance and religious activity. Paul says, "Because ye are a son and you have received the spirit of adoption in your heart, the Holy Spirit has come within your soul and you are now a son -- not a slave, not a servant; you are free in Christ." So it is this experience about which I speak. It is the consciousness of this relationship - the outworking of it in our lives which makes us mature, adult sons, giving us understanding and moving us along in spiritual things for the Lord.

III. When does adoption occur? Ephesians 1:5 declares that it was in the predestined purpose of Christ before the world began. Is that not blessed? I do not understand it, but I know it is a great ~~scriptural~~ scriptural truth. Adoption was predestined in eternity past, but in actual experience it becomes ours, at least potentially, when the Holy Spirit enters our lives, He himself being the spirit of adoption at the time of the new birth.

How sad it is that so many believers do not know or enjoy the benefits of God's real sonship. They live, as it were, under the law. They do not claim to be under the law of Moses, but you see, you can be a Christian and be under the law. There are many people who think Christianity is a set of rules. To some of you it means a set of "do's" and "don'ts." Of course there are some things you should not do, but that is not Christianity; it is the result of Christianity. Christianity is a relationship - a fellowship - it is knowing God. It is not marking up the six-point record system - it is knowing-God, knowing Christ - not only from 11 until 12 on Sunday, but daily - knowing Christ and living in the fullness of His life.

It is so sad to see people who are still slaves, minors, not really sons of God from a standpoint of the benefits of a son of God. ~~Therefore, they are babies.~~ Hebrews says, "Many are spiritual infants and they still need to be taught when they should be teaching" (Hebrews 5:12). Have you seen anybody like this? What is wrong with the person who sits in your Sunday School class year after year and is no further along today than he was yesterday? What is wrong? Is it the Gospel? That is not God's will for my life or yours either. Spiritual babies - when they should be full-grown sons, rejoicing in Christ and speaking of Him. What are the characteristics of a baby? Babies are always jealous. They require special handling. Babies have to be given special attention. They have to have their way. They are very fussy. Babies get their feelings hurt very easily. Have you seen any of these around? What is the trouble? If the preacher does not do what you want him to do, are you mad with him and with the deacons? Were you born in the "objective" case and ~~reared~~ in the "kickative" mood? It is not the preacher or the deacon, it is you! It is a spiritual problem right at the heart of your being. You need to find out the sweetness and the joy of having fellowship with Jesus, of walking with the Lord, of witnessing for the Lord, of being a son of God - not a slave. I have seen people who never missed a church meeting but who had the spirit of the devil. It is not enough to attend church, and it is not enough to sing in the choir or to be a deacon. God gives us the privilege of being full-grown spiritual sons.

Are you a son of God today? If you are, act like it. Do not run around acting like a baby and telling me you are a son of God. Ask God for the "Abba Father" relationship. Remove fear from your soul and be mature in Christ. Some of you are not sons of God. The highest privilege open to mortal man is to be a son of God. There is nothing like it. You must start at the cross. You must start with repentance and faith. Do not make it hard today. The chief question is, do you want to be a son of God? Would you like to be saved? You can be. "As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God." Every man can become a son of God because it has been provided by Christ on the cross and in the sending of His Spirit in the world.

When Louis the 16th was killed, history tells us that he left a son who was an heir to the French throne. The enemies of the Monarchy tried to corrupt the little boy by making him drink and making him curse and being immoral. The world knows these things will corrupt anyone. But he would not do these things. The little Dolphin would not drink and would not curse. He would not commit immorality. One day someone in the court said, "Why do you refuse to do these things?" He replied, "Because, I was born the son of a King."

Thank God that every mortal man can be a son of the King of Kings and can enjoy all the benefits of this relationship. I am so glad today that I am a son of the King. Are you glad you are a son of the King? If you are not a son of the King, I pray that you will become one now!