
The Adoption of Sons

A Primer on this Wonderful Truth

A reprint from The ENJOY THE BIBLE QUARTERLY — 1996, 1st Quarter

— Keith R. Blades

In Romans 6–8 the apostle Paul teaches us about our sanctified position in Christ and how God is dealing with us today under grace and not under the law. As he does so he declares that in accordance with this God has adopted us.

14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

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.

(Romans 8:14–15)

In this dispensation of grace we are the adopted sons of God. And this is a wonderful privilege of God's grace. However, unfortunately it is often not understood and appreciated as it ought to be due primarily to the restricted meaning given to the present usage of the word adoption.

Today, when we speak of adoption we refer to the issue of someone, who is not the natural born child of a couple, being taken in by them and constituted a member of their family. By natural birth the child is not theirs, but by adoption the child legally becomes their own. This is the common meaning of the term today, and it certainly is an adoption. However, it is not what we should think of when we read about God adopting us. In Romans 8:14–15 Paul is not simply referring to the fact that we now belong to God being saved. He is not simply referring to the fact that we are part of God's family. Yet this is what is commonly thought. To adopt a child not naturally your own is only one kind of adoption.

To adopt simply means to take something unto yourself and make it your own. Hence, there are other kinds of adoptions, especially in other cultures, one of which is the kind of adoption Paul refers to in Romans 8.

In Hebrew culture, and even among the Greeks of Paul's day, parents adopted their own children. When they did this they recognized a level of maturity that their child had reached and they no longer treated him as a little child, but began treating him as an adult. By this kind of adoption the child was declared to be no longer in a state of childhood. He had now passed from childhood into adulthood. He was now declared to be a son and no longer a child, and he was now going to be treated as an adult by his parents. This is the kind of adoption Paul is referring to in Romans 8. This is made perfectly clear in Galatians 4 where he deals with it in quite some detail.

1 Now I say, *That* the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all;

2 But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father.

(Galatians 4:1–2)

Here Paul cites this unique cultural issue of adoption so common in his day. As he says, a father's own offspring is his heir. But for as long as he is a child, or is in the state of childhood, his father doesn't treat him any different from a servant. He may be lord of all being his father's heir, but he is not treated as such by his father for as long as he is in the state of childhood. Rather, in accordance with childhood and being a minor, the father deals with his offspring through the use of tutors and governors. The relationship between

the two, therefore, is restricted and is on a puerile level. However, the father does not intend to always be treating his child as a child. There is an appointed time coming at which the father will no longer treat his child as a child, but will in accordance with his growth begin to treat him as an adult. This appointed time of the father is the time at which the father adopts his own child. He declares his offspring to no longer be a child in the state of childhood, but now he is an adult, a son. He has attained unto sonship. Being so his father is going to begin to treat him as such and deal with him accordingly.

Again, this is the kind of adoption Paul is talking about when he declares that we in this dispensation of grace are now the adopted sons of God. Having adopted us God has put us into the position of adult sons. We possess sonship. He is not treating us like children. Instead, He is dealing with us as adults, as sons.

The Privilege of Sonship

In time past God's heirs did not possess the adoption of sons. Rather, as Paul points out in Galatians 4:3, they were children and God dealt with them as such.

3 Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world:

(Galatians 4:3)

The Law contract with its elements of the world functioned like tutors and governors and through it God dealt with Israel as the children that they were. However, the appointed time was coming when God would make provision so that He could adopt His heirs and begin dealing with them as adult sons and no longer have to deal with them as children. When Christ came, He came in accordance with the appointed time of the father.

4 But when the *fulness of the time* was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,

5 To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

(Galatians 4:4–5)

The provision to enable God to deal with His heirs as sons and no longer have to deal with them as children was made by Christ on the cross. In view of it, God could adopt His heirs and the glories of sonship could begin to be enjoyed by them. God, however, suspended His program with Israel and they have yet to receive the adoption of sons.

We, the members of the church the body of Christ, are the heirs of God in this present dispensation of grace. In accordance with the provision God has made through Christ for sonship to be a reality, and in view of the riches of His grace unto us, God has wonderfully adopted us, putting us in the position of adult sons and treating us as such. We are not being treated by Him as children under the tutor and governor system of the Law, but we are being treated as sons. (Israel will receive the adoption when God resumes and fulfills His program with them upon the conclusion of this present dispensation of Gentile grace. See Romans 9–11, especially 9:1–5; 11:1–36.)

The Glory of Sonship

There are many wonderful issues associated with sonship. There are also a number of differences between the way God dealt with Israel in treating them as children and the way He now deals with us as sons. One outstanding issue is that of the intimacy and direct personal union that now exists between God and us. Instead of tutors and governors, we possess the Spirit of adoption. Instead of intermediaries, God deals with us directly through the Holy Spirit.

14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. 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.

(Romans 8:14–15)

6 And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.

(Galatians 4:6)

As Paul says, the major mark of sonship, (and one of its most glorious features), is the issue of being led by the Spirit of God. When a father adopts his child the relationship becomes much more personal between the two, and hence much more intimate. No longer does the father want tutors and governors to come between him and his child. And no longer does the child need them. No longer does the father want his child's education limited to elementary and rudimentary things. Instead, having placed his child in the position of an adult son, now the father himself personally becomes his son's teacher and guide. The father now personally assumes the remaining education of his son. This is something not only looked forward to by the father, but it is also a wonderful liberty for the son. Going from tutors and governors to being personally dealt with by his father is an issue of great joy and relief to a son. The adoption commences a glorious intimate relationship never experienced under the tutors and governors.

In full accordance with establishing this new intimate relationship that sonship brings, Paul says God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. Possessing the Spirit of God to be led by Him is in direct contrast to the tutor and governor system of the Law. The restrictions of relationship associated with that system are not being employed with us. The weak and beggarly elements of the world associated with that childhood system are not the basis of God's

dealings with us today. Instead, nothing less than the personal operation of the Spirit of God within is what we possess as sons.

In view of this, just as with any adopted son, our hearts ought to overflow with joy and relief. Hence, Paul says that the Spirit cries Abba, Father.

6 And because ye are sons, God hath sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.

(Galatians 4:6)

The doctrine of our sonship status is full of glory. Being adopted sons is one of the jewels of the riches of God's grace unto us in Christ. Yet it remains one of the most least appreciated aspects of God's grace that we are possessors of today. And this is a shame.

This has been nothing more than a very short primer on this wonderful truth. Yet may this brief introduction to sonship motivate us all to learn more about this privilege of God's grace unto us, and most of all to live as the sons God has made us to be. — *Keith R. Blades*