
Do You “Cry, Abba, Father”?

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— Keith R. Blades

[The opening portion of this article is taken from a previous article on the reality of our sonship status in this present dispensation. We are repeating it at the beginning of this article to refresh the memory on this important truth, before presenting some further aspects of it.]

In Romans 6-8 God has the apostle Paul teach us about the magnificence of our sanctified position “in Christ,” and how that He is dealing with us today “under grace” and not “under the law.” As Paul teaches us these things, he declares that in connection with our sanctification 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)

Indeed in this present dispensation of God’s grace we are the *adopted sons of God*. And this is an astounding position for us to be in; a wonderful and phenomenal privilege of God’s grace unto us. However unfortunately all too often it is not understood and appreciated as it ought to be, due primarily to the restricted meaning that belongs to our present day usage of the word “adoption.”

Today when we speak of “adoption” we usually refer to the issue of someone, who is not the natural born child of a couple, being taken in by them and being 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. For this is not what He is talking about.

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 now part of God’s family. Yet again, this is what is so commonly thought. In truth, 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 in some particular way. Hence, there are other kinds of “adoptions,” especially in other cultures and in other circumstances. And one of these other kinds of “adoption” is what Paul is telling us about in Romans 8. We are not only the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus, we also have received “the adoption of sons.”

The Adoption of Sons

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 in view of it 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.

Now this is the kind of "adoption" Paul is referring to in Romans 8. And 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 describes 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. Rather 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. In so doing he declares that his offspring is no longer to be considered a "child" in the state of childhood, but now he is to be considered an adult, a "son." He has attained unto sonship. And with this 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 present dispensation of God's 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)

In "time past" the Law covenant with its "elements of the world" functioned like "tutors and governors." And through it God dealt with Israel as the "children" that they were. He dealt with them as ones in the state of childhood, with all of the limitations, restrictions, and rudimentary practices and experiences belonging to childhood. However the appointed time would come when God would make provision so that He could adopt His heirs, and in so doing make it so that He could begin dealing with them as adult sons, no longer having to deal with them as children. And when Christ came, He came in accordance with "the appointed time of the father." He came to provide for "the adoption of sons."

4 But when the fulness of 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 that would enable God to deal with His heirs as "sons" and no longer have to deal with them as "children" was made by Christ Jesus on the cross. As part of His overall redemptive work, He made it so that God's heirs could be delivered from childhood and translated into adulthood. Christ made it so that God could "adopt" His heirs, and the glories and privileges of sonship could begin to be enjoyed both by He

and them. Yet in God's program with Israel the adoption of sons has yet to be fully possessed and enjoyed by them. For God has suspended His program with Israel, leaving the fulness of their adoption still "to come."¹

However we, the members of the church the body of Christ, are the heirs of God in this present dispensation of His grace. And 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 now treating us as such. We, therefore, in this present dispensation are not being treated by God as "children" under the tutor and governor system of the Law. Instead we have received "the adoption of sons" and are being treated by God as "sons."

The Intimacy of Sonship

Now there are many wonderful issues belonging to our sonship status. And they by nature are markedly different from the issues that comprised God's childhood treatment of, and dealings with, Israel. The primary and most outstanding issue is that of the intimacy and direct personal relationship that now exists between God and us as His adopted "sons." Instead of having "tutors and governors," we possess the "Spirit of adoption." Instead of intermediaries, God deals with us directly through the Holy Spirit, just as Paul declares is the case now with 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)

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 characteristic of our sonship status is the issue of us 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. And this is something that has been eagerly looked forward to by the father. He now gets to take his child unto himself in the close, personal relationship of sonship, which will involve him being able to do things with his child that he was unable to do before.

Specifically, the child is now in the position of maturity where he is able to understand, appreciate, and participate with his father in his business. And with this being so, the father begins to educate his "son" in his business, and also gives to him the privilege and responsibility of working with him side by side in its operations.

Likewise the greatness of this transition to maturity is also understood, appreciated, and eagerly anticipated by the "son." Going from "tutors and governors" to being personally dealt with by his father is an issue of great joy and relief to him. Again, with him now being personally dealt with by his father, he knows that the adoption commences a glorious intimate relationship for both he and his father. One which

was never able to be experienced by either of them while he was in childhood under the “tutors and governors.”

Hence in full accordance with us now possessing this new intimate relationship of sonship, along with what it brings and entails for us, Paul says God has “sent forth the Spirit of his Son into (our) hearts.” Possessing the Spirit of God for the particular purpose of being led by Him is in direct contrast to the “tutor and governor” system of the Law. The restrictions of relationship and intimacy 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 us, and what that holds for us, is what we possess as “sons.”

“Crying, Abba, Father”

Now in view of this, (and just as would be the case with an adopted son), our hearts ought to be filled to overflowing with joy and happiness. First of all there ought to be joy and profound relief that childhood is over; that we “have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear.” But more than this, and in fact beyond this, we ought to be filled with the joy of great anticipation for participating in the glorious prospects that our sonship status now holds for us. For nothing less than the grandest of all sonship privileges is set before us; the privilege of working with our Father in His business. And because our hearts naturally should be filled with abounding joy for all of this, this is just what “crying, Abba, Father” expresses. Hence Paul says, ...

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 8:15)

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

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Naturally enough, if the doctrine of the “adoption of sons” is not understood and appreciated for what it is, then what it means for us to “cry, Abba, Father” is not going to fare any better. And unfortunately this is often the case. As a result sometimes what Paul says here is treated as if he is telling us the appropriate way to begin our prayers to God. “Abba, Father,” therefore, is often simply looked upon as the familiar way for us to address God as our Father; as the personal way for us to address Him since we are His children and are “of the household of God.” In connection with promoting this idea the Lord Jesus Christ’s own use of the expression in Mark 14:36 is often cited as support.

36 And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt.

(Mark 14:36)

Though we certainly are “of the household of God,” and we certainly do have a familial relationship to God, “Abba, Father” is expressive of something much more than that. And by the Lord’s own particular use of this expression in Mark 14:36, He actually testifies to this very thing. For at this particular time in His ministry the Lord was not simply, or casually, communing with His Father in prayer, as He had done a myriad of times before. Instead at this particular time He was preparing to enter into the most demanding aspect of His Father’s business. And as such, as ‘a son with his father,’ He was communing with His Father over the issue of seeing it through to the end.

As both the “Son of God,” and as a “son,” the Lord Jesus Christ had been laboring in His Father’s business throughout His ministry. But now the hour was at hand for the operation of

redemption. And in connection with His approaching involvement in this most demanding operation of all, He prefaces His prayer with "Abba, Father." He thereby acknowledges and expresses to His Father His sonship status. And in so doing He professes His complete willingness to labor with Him regardless of its personal impact, and to see every operation (including this one) through to its end, just as an obedient "son" should do. This is why He uttered "Abba, Father."²

Once again, therefore, the issue of us "crying, Abba, Father" is the issue of us acknowledging our sonship. It is the issue of our joyful response to having now received "the adoption of sons." And if we truly understand what it means for us now to be God's adopted "sons"; and if we truly appreciate the nature of our sonship status and sonship relationship to God, along with what it now entails both for us and Him; then our hearts can do nothing less than cry out to Him in joy. We cannot help but cry out to Him as "sons" to our Father, joyfully acknowledging to Him the glory of our sonship status, as well as joyfully anticipating each and every aspect of what our sonship life with Him has in store for us.

A Simplified Prospectus of Our Sonship Life

Indeed our sonship life does have much in store for us. Its prospect is of the highest order; its privileges absolutely grand. In fact as our God and Father educates us as His "sons," He is actually educating us and training us in the operations of His business. And as this takes place with us, He also grants us the privilege of laboring together with Him in the things He is doing and accomplishing in His business. Moreover He does all of this in preparation for the day when we will be entering into the full and future aspect of His business, following the conclusion of this present dispensation of His grace.

Needless to say, a detailed or full description of all that pertains to our sonship education and life would exceed the capacity of these few words. For in truth everything God says to us, He says to us as His "sons." And nothing is enjoined upon us, or given to us by way of exhortation, that is not in accordance with our sonship. Nevertheless the basic scope of our sonship education and life can readily be described, and the gist of it is something we should understand and appreciate right from the outset.

Simply and briefly put, the sonship education and life of a "son" is composed of three major stages.³ In total they provide for his complete education, training, and work experience, with respect to his father's business. Accordingly in each stage a father educates his son in some particular issues pertaining to his business. And within each stage, as the "son" receives his education, he is trained in particular aspects of his father's business, and is given opportunities to labor with his father in the day-to-day operations of that business.⁴

Now just as it is in 'natural sonship,' so also is it with us as God's "sons." We too are provided with a sonship education from our Father. And we too, as we receive that education, are trained in various and progressive aspects of God's business, and are given opportunities to participate in it.

In connection with this it is interesting to note something about the structure of Paul's church epistles to us, i.e. Romans through II Thessalonians. It is quite easy to see, and commonly acknowledged, that they have a three part makeup, or are composed of three groups. First comes Romans through Galatians; then Ephesians through Colossians; and then I and II Thessalonians. And as the internal evidence of the epistles themselves shows, they possess a clear doctrinal and educational sense and sequence as we progress through them from Romans to II Thessalonians.⁵

However what is often not recognized is that this three part structure with its doctrinal progression exists as such because it conforms to the issue of providing for our sonship education and life. The three groups of epistles set forth and provide us with the progressive education we need for the three stages that belong to our sonship education and life in this dispensation. And as we receive that education in its proper order, and as it effectually works within us, it takes us through the three stages of our sonship life, and we are thereby effectually trained in our Father's business, and are given the opportunities to labor with Him in the various operations of it.

In simple terms, such is our wonderful prospect and privilege as "sons."

Do You "Cry, Abba, Father"?

A popular recruiting motto in our day says, "There is no life like it." That's some boast, as well as quite the prospect to have laid before you. However it is undeniably true when it is applied to us in this present dispensation. For as the heirs of God and adopted sons that we are, indeed there is no life like the sonship life.

Hence in view of the incomparable grandeur of our sonship status, the original question in the title to this article now bears asking. *Do you "cry, Abba, Father"?* In other words, do you indeed know what it means to have received "the adoption of sons"? And does it hold the same importance to you that it does to God?

Furthermore: Does your joy as a "son" go beyond the issue of you not being "under tutors and governors" and not being "in bondage under the elements of the world"? Does it include you being thrilled at the prospect of being educated by God as a "son," and of actually participating with Him in the operations of His business in this dispensation?

Without a doubt our sonship status is a glorious thing. Our Lord Jesus Christ died for us, not only

to save us from the debt and penalty of our sins, but also so that we could receive "the adoption of sons." And yet though this be so; and as fundamental as our sonship status is to our identity "in Christ"; as essential as it is to our proper understanding of what our "godly edifying" is all about; it remains one of the least taught and most neglected aspects of God's grace unto us. And this is not only a shame, it can actually be a hindrance to our "godly edifying which is in faith."

This article, (as with its predecessor), has only dealt with a few fundamental issues pertaining to our sonship status and life. Yet may it prompt you to give further consideration to your sonship, and so all the more live your life as the "son" that you are. — *Keith R. Blades*

¹ 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 Romans 9:1-5; Romans 11:1-36.

² The Lord's use of the expression in Mark 14:36 is indeed highly significant. It is especially significant and instructive regarding the issue of the *extent* of sonship living. And though this is something that needs to be understood and appreciated, it is beyond the purpose of this article to deal with it.

³ Cf., for example, the doctrine of sonship in the opening chapters of the book of Proverbs.

⁴ Admittedly, this description is overly simplified. However it provides a basic prospectus of the sonship life.

⁵ Paul's pastoral epistles of I Timothy through Philemon, have a structure, as well as a sense and sequence, all their own. One that is befitting their singular doctrinal design, purpose, and effectual working.