

Romans 8:12-17 (DHT)

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh to live by the flesh, for if you live by the flesh, you will soon die; but if you put to death the practices of the body by the Spirit, you will live. For as many as the Spirit of God brings are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery to fear again, but you received a spirit of adoption-as-sons, by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs indeed of God—and joint-heirs of Christ if we suffer with him so we may be glorified together.

Illustration: Rachel’s Adoption

Many of you know that my sister Rachel was adopted from Russia at ten months old. To adopt this baby, my parents had to follow a meticulous process—they couldn’t just show up at an orphanage and claim a baby. They had to make multiple visits to the orphanage. They had to observe and play with the child—a requirement more so for older children. They had to appear before a judge with a legal-advocate for them, a woman my parents still describe as nothing less than saintly. And before the judge in Russia, my parents had to make several promises under oath. One of those promises my parents had to swear to this judge was that along with any other children, my parents had to swear that this baby would receive an equal inheritance. Then, before several witnesses the judge authorized my parents to take that baby as their own, and to give that baby a new name, namely the family name.

First Century Roman Background to Adoption

The modern practice of adoption mirrors in many ways what Paul sought to communicate with the metaphor of adoption. Adoption is the most tangible illustration I know of what God has done and continues to do in and for every Christian. The term used in our passage is *Huiiothesia*, the combination of two Greek words meaning “adoption-as-sons.” “In the patriarchal culture of the ancient Near East, *son* was a legal category that we dare not lose in our proper sensitivity to inclusive language... [In the Bible it is] revolutionary that both genders are comprehended under the term *son*: co-heirs of the image of God and, in redemption, of God’s entire estate.”¹ Just like

¹ Michael Horton, *Christian Faith: Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

the female-metaphor “Bride of Christ” applies to all Christians, including men, so also the male-metaphor “Adoption-as-Sons” applies to all Christians, including women.

Huiiothesia is a term used just five times in the New Testament (NT),² all of which appearing in Paul’s letters to Rome-occupied territories; all of which adding their own distinctives to the metaphor. It is for this reason that the key to understanding the metaphor of adoption is to consider the Roman historical background from which Paul is pulling.³ While adoption in first century Roman culture rarely involved babies, it did involve a legal transfer of a person from one family to another family. First century Roman adoption also could not take place except at the initiative of the patriarch of the new family, called the *paterfamilias*. The adoptee would take the name of the *paterfamilias*, and this process could only be done in the presence of witnesses. Unlike the temporary nature of slavery in the ancient world, the legal transfer of adoption was permanent, even beyond death. This family transformation came with a set of obligations from both the *paterfamilias* and the adopted adult.

First, the adopted adult had to totally forsake any legal, economic, or social attachment to their biological family. And second, the adopted adult was not just obligated to forsake their old family, they were also obligated to submit, obey, and support the reputation of the new family. They weren’t expected to lounge, but to behave as full-fledged members of the new family. In fact, so explicit are the first century Roman laws on this point—adopted adults were expected to behave as if they were *naturally-born* children of the *paterfamilias*.

The first obligation of the *paterfamilias* was immediate: they were expected to welcome the adopted adult into the life of their family and were immediately subject to judicial assessment at any proven abuse or mistreatment. The adult they adopted was not an employee or a slave or second-tier family member, but a full-member of the family, immediately. The second and more significant obligation of the *paterfamilias* was a pledge that upon their death the adopted adult would receive the inheritance. It was shameful to have no one to pass your inheritance to, so a big motivator for adoption directly corresponding to passing the inheritance. If a *paterfamilias* did the adoption process and then afterward his wife bore him a child, the adopted adult was to be treated as the firstborn, as if they had been naturally born. In this circumstance, the adopted adult would not receive the total inheritance but would receive an inheritance equal to what a

² Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5

³ Trevor J. Burke, *Adoption into God’s Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor* (Downers Grove: IV Press, 2006).

naturally-born firstborn was entitled to. If a family already had a firstborn and then adopted an adult who was technically older than the natural-firstborn, the natural firstborn would still receive the normal firstborn inheritance and the adopted adult would receive a normal second-born inheritance. The point was that based on the adoption date, the inheritance was to be given without any regard for whether your child came through your wife or through adoption; and the equal access to the inheritance was the legal sign that the adopted child was a full-fledged member of the family, not a second-tier member on the periphery.

In other words, in first century Roman culture, the father of a family would initiate before a plurality of witnesses the adoption of another person, typically an adult, to leave his biological family and become a full-member of the new family with the immediate and permanent obligation to carry the name of the new father, with the pledge of inheritance as the reward.

This is actually a lot like my sister’s adoption. One distinction is of course her age as an infant, and the other is that the process of adoption did not involve her then leaving her previous family, for that had already happened. But she was transferred into a new family in a legal process before a plurality of witnesses. She was given the new family name, and at that legal transfer she was pledged an equal share of the inheritance. In all this, my sister became a full-fledged member of the family as if she had been born to my mother—with this came certain obligations from her. She is to behave like a Harrison for everywhere she goes she represents the family. When she misbehaves, she deserves to be punished and corrected, but if she was abused or mistreated by her new family she also deserves judicial protection. In many ways, the dynamics of modern adoption are not all that different from the revolutionary adoption practices of first century Roman society. This is the world in which the Apostle Paul writes, and he uses adoption as a metaphor that summarizes the doctrines of salvation.

Adoption = *Ordo Salutis*

The four doctrines of salvation wrapped up in the metaphor of adoption are regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification. Some theologians have incorrectly placed adoption as synonymous with justification. They suggest the legal imputation of righteousness is the objective side of justification and adoption is the subjective side. However, this is incorrect for it reduces adoption to a sentimental construct of God’s declaring at our conversion that we are righteous. Other theologians have incorrectly suggested that adoption is synonymous with

sanctification. They suggest the Christian’s lifelong living into the new identity is what adoption is. However, this also is incorrect for it reduces God’s demand for holiness into a sentimental family construct. Rather, adoption is the umbrella-term; the metaphor for the whole order of salvation: regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification.

Regeneration within Adoption

The late R.C. Sproul has simplistically summarized the center of Reformed theology that *regeneration precedes faith*. He wrote, “Yes, the faith we exercise is our faith. God does not do the believing for us. When I respond to Christ, it is my response, my faith, my trust that is being exercised... The question still remains: ‘Do I cooperate with God’s grace before I am born again, or does the cooperation occur after?’” The answer Dr. Sproul offered is that “no man has the power to raise himself from spiritual death. Divine assistance is necessary... The reason we do not cooperate with regenerating grace before it acts upon us and in us is because we cannot. We cannot because we are spiritual dead. We can no more assist the Holy Spirit in the quickening of our souls to spiritual life than Lazarus could help Jesus raise him from the dead.”⁴

Paul writes in Eph. 2:5 that *when we were dead in sins, God made us alive with Christ*. In his conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, Jesus says *unless someone is born again*—literally born from above—*he cannot see the Kingdom* (v. 3). Jesus clarifies, saying *unless someone is born of...the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom* (v. 5). The phrases “born from above” and “born of...the Spirit” are in parallel, so only if someone has been born of the Spirit can they *then* put their faith in Jesus for salvation.

One of the distinctives in our passage this morning is the regenerative work of the Spirit in the process of adoption. Rom. 8:14 says, *for as many as the Spirit of God brings are sons of God*. And in verse 15 we read that it is this Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, who brings us into our adoption as sons. In first century Roman culture, people did not initiate their own adoption; rather it was the *paterfamilias* who initiated the adoption of another. It was not my sister who initiated her own adoption, but my parents. It is God, our Heavenly *Paterfamilias* who, by his Holy Spirit, initiated our adoption.

⁴ R.C Sproul, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2014).

Justification within Adoption

Earlier in Romans, Paul wrote extensively that everyone and anyone who receives salvation are justified by faith in the resurrection of Jesus. Regardless of how horrible of a sinner you were before, the gift of salvation is available for all who receive it by faith.⁵ At our conversion when we believe Jesus died for our sins and was raised from the dead, we are declared righteous. Even though in the practical sense we are still sinners, the vicarious righteousness of Jesus was imputed to us and we were legally declared righteous by God the Judge. God made him who knew no sin to be our sin so that we who know no righteousness would become his righteousness. Christians are not autonomous persons; we belong body and soul to our savior because he purchased us at a great cost, the cost of his own life. There is no such thing as “My Body, My Choice” for the Christian, because the bodies of Christians belong entirely to our Sovereign Lord. Adoption happens when the judge or sovereign official legally declares an individual to belong to another, and that declaration is made at our conversion when God declares us his own, bought by the blood of Jesus his Son.

The undeserved freedom from slavery legally granted by the Judge to the sinner who lives by faith is justification. In justification the shackles of enslavement are unlocked and the believer is set free from bondage to sin and death. Paul does not use the word “justification” in our passage; he uses the phrase “Spirit of Adoption” in contrast to “the spirit of slavery.” To be freed is to be justified, which is the legal declaration of adoption, signifying our *new belonging*.

Sanctification within Adoption

When someone in first century Rome was adopted, their adoption came with it immediate obligations for how they lived—lifestyle expectations. To be regenerated by the Spirit and have faith in Jesus Christ means we have been brought into God’s family *and therefore have certain obligations we must live up to, namely the commands and requirements of Jesus and the Apostles*. Paul could have been direct like Peter who commanded Christian to *be holy for God is holy*. Yet, Paul was not so direct. He used the metaphor of adoption to convey what it means to be part of a new family—the family of God.

As a representative of our Heavenly *Paterfamilias*, we are to live holy lifestyles. We must recognize the magnitude of God’s holiness, our own unholiness, and rest in the grace of God

⁵ Romans 3:20, 22, 28, 30; 4:13; 4:19-5:1

who reaches out his welcoming hand to pull us from the ditch we buried ourselves into, and gives us his Spirit who enables us to live how we previously could not. God did not just adopt us and say, “Good luck!” No, he adopted us and gave us his Spirit *so we could represent him to the world*. When we’ve been saved by God we say we’ve been transformed by the power of the Gospel. If that’s true and then we go out and behave exactly like unbelievers, what great dishonor that brings to the head of our new family. This is not the same thing as fighting temptation and sometimes failing—the great dishonor I’m referring to is a complete disregard; willful defiance against the Will of God for how we should live; to claim the name of the Risen Christ but to live like he’s still in the grave. If we were dead in our sins and God made us alive but then we keep living like we were dead, how can we possibly say we were made alive? “No one can be so foolish as to imagine that the judge of all the earth will put away our sins if we *refuse* to put them away ourselves.”⁶ But when we have been transformed by the power of the Gospel and resist temptation to sin; when we submit our bodies to God’s Will—even at a loss to us—in that suffering we honor the family name, the name above every other name: Jesus Christ.

How do we do this? How can we live holy lifestyles? How can we behave like we’ve been made alive by God? Our passage tells us *we are debtors* (v.12), which means we have an obligation, but our passage says we do not have an obligation *to live according to the flesh* (v. 13) because we have been set free from the chains of the flesh by the Spirit of Adoption. Our passage interestingly does not say “we are not debtors.” It says we *are* debtors, just not debtors to the flesh. To what, then, are we debtors? I mentioned that Paul contrasts the Spirit of Slavery with the Spirit of Adoption. In verse 13, to live like we’ve been made alive is to crucify the self; to deny the self; to take off the old self and put on the new self; to live like Christ. When we do this, we are living into the lifelong, permanent obligation of an adopted child of God.

As a result of our adoption we are debtors to live according to the Spirit. This is in part what Paul means only a few verses later when he says that *those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that his son Jesus might be the firstborn among many brothers* (v. 29). This is precisely what Paul says in Ephesians 1 when he writes, *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who...chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will* (Eph. 1:3-5).

⁶ Charles Spurgeon, *All of Grace* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010)

Without a shadow of a doubt, if you are a Christian, God’s will for your life is your holiness; that you would live life-Christ. And it is this lifestyle of holy Christ-likeness that Paul refers to in Romans 8 as the lifelong obligation attached to our adoption.

So far the focus has been entirely vertical, in terms of the implications adoption has for how we live in relation to God. But there are also horizontal implications. The *Paterfamilias* is expected to welcome his adopted children as full-members of his family and the adopted children are likewise expected to treat others in the family *as if they were naturally-born*. If I am an adopted child of God and if you are an adopted child of God, then I am expected to treat you as if we were biological family; the covenant family is to have priority *over* biological family. We are to care for one another as if there was no biological distinction between us. Do we always do this right? Of course not; yet the obligation remains. If we are wronged by one another, there ought to be a necessary urgency to resolve conflict, always with the goal of reconciliation.

Our culture has exponentially normalized homosexuality. The Christian who experiences same-sex attraction who resists temptation and forsakes the great ease created by our culture of indulgence to instead honor the Lord with his body by submitting his body to the one who owns his body—this is someone the Family of God must welcome, honor, and support as he continues to suffer through putting to death the deeds and desires of the body—supporting him by lifting the burden he frequently carries alone. Adoption reminds us that we are obligated to love God *and* our fellow-heirs; to care for one another as family.

Glorification within Adoption

Jesus is the unique, only-begotten Son of God, yet Paul writes that we who are brought by the Spirit into justification and who *put to death the deeds of the body* are adopted as sons of God. We are not sons of God in the same way Jesus is Son of God, namely we do not become divine; however, Paul tells us if we are adopted children of God then we are pledged full and equal access to the inheritance, an inheritance we will receive in the age to come. Paul tells us two explicit things that adopted children of God will inherit. The second one is in verse 23—the result of our adoption is that we eagerly await the future redemption of our bodies. Our adoption and subsequent lifestyle as a child of God has eternal ramifications; the total and complete sanctification of our bodies in the age to come is what we eagerly await.

The first inheritance, however, is in our passage, in verse 17. The ESV is not quite as helpful as it could be. It says *if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ*. The ESV makes this out to describe who we are rather than what we inherit. In the Greek, there is a point of emphasis that leads us to understand that *God is the inheritance*. In the age to come, those of us who have been adopted—which is every Christian—will inherit full and equal access to God in bodies that are just as God originally created them to be.

Conclusion

There is one more element to our passage we need to consider. The Holy Spirit confirms our adoption by bearing witness with our Spirit that we are children of God. Anyone can claim to be a Christian, but that does not mean they are. Adoption requires a plurality of witnesses. If before the throne I tell God I am one of his children and that’s the only testimony he hears, then I never was a child of God. The necessity for a plurality of witnesses is not just related to first century Roman adoption practices. It is one of the enduring values of the OT law reflected over a dozen times in the NT.⁷ The testimony of one person was insufficient not just to convict someone of a crime, but to establish any matter as true.

Just before his death, when Jesus was suffering, he cried out for his *Abba*, his father in the Aramaic. The Gospel writers felt it was necessary to retain with this word the Aramaic language of Jesus. David Wenham, whose groundbreaking tome *Paul, Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity*, makes the case that Paul’s theology was not original to Paul but flowed from the tradition of Jesus from the Gospels.⁸ One of the evidences to his argument is Paul’s use of *Abba* explicitly connected to our union with Christ’s suffering. The adopted child in Romans 8 cries out for *Abba* while they suffer with Christ. Our passage says that our spirit cries out *Abba Father*, which is meaningless if the Holy Spirit does not also testify *with* our spirit that we are the children of God.

From this short passage, we see that God our Heavenly *Paterfamilias* initiates our adoption by bringing us by his Holy Spirit into our adoption. Before a plurality of witnesses, God our judge declares us adopted at the moment we place our faith in his only-begotten son Jesus Christ. God enables us by his Holy Spirit to live as an adopted son of God throughout the course

⁷ For a fuller treatment, see my paper “Enduring Law of Deut. 19:15-19.” www.danieljharrison.com/theology.html

⁸ David Wenham, *Paul, Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

of our lives, progressively becoming more and more like Christ. And God gives us his sure pledge that in the age to come we will inherit him and all his glory. Adoption is the metaphor of our salvation. To be saved is to be adopted; to be adopted is to be saved and brought into the family of God, a new family for a new life both now and forever.

I close this morning with the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the reformed confessions of the Christian faith from church history, which reminds us that our adoption means we are joint-heirs with Christ. Q&A 33 comes from the section defining each of the clauses from the Apostles Creed. “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only-begotten Son...”

Q. Why is he called God’s “only begotten son” when we also are God’s children?

A. Because Christ alone is the eternal, natural Son of God. We, however, are adopted children of God—adopted by grace through Christ.

This glorious reality led the late J.I. Packer to say, “Adoption is the highest privilege of the Gospel... The traitor is forgiven, brought in for supper, and given the family name.”⁹

Let’s pray.

⁹ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: IV Press, 1973)