

Abba, Father (Part 2)

Galatians 4:5-6

I have heard and read people who object to the doctrine of justification by saying it is a “legal fiction.” They object to the idea of the judicial declaration of justification. They object to a doctrine that has its focus upon the law, and the judgments of the law. They think that Christian doctrine should always focus upon the actual life experiences of a person, not merely on legal standing. They think that a doctrine that involves only legal standing is somehow “not true,” thus a legal fiction. As if legal declarations are fiction.

But I believe that perspective is terribly mistaken. Take a defendant in a court of law. Suppose a trial ends with an acquittal. Simply not enough evidence to convict him of some offense, his defense prevails. He is found “non-guilty.” What will happen to the defendant? He goes home, a free man. When the legal declaration is rendered, the case is closed. And there is nothing about that situation that is fiction! If you are the one freed by a legal acquittal, then it is very, very real. When the law no longer condemns you, that is very, very real. And in the spiritual realm, that is the doctrine of justification.

But there is another legal declaration that is just as real. In many ways, even more so. And that is the doctrine of adoption, the declaration of adoption. I think you can understand that easily, because it is easy to illustrate. Just consider adoption as it takes place within families. Adoption is, at its heart, a legal declaration. When an adoption is finalized, it is done by the judgment of a court, by the action of a judge. An adoption decree is entered into the record of the court. There is nothing fictional about it at all. A new birth certificate is issued, and the child’s new mother and father are identified. We often misidentify those

parents as the “adoptive mother” and “adoptive father.” But that’s not even accurate. That’s not the judgement of the court. It is simply “mother” and “father,” and the child is not placed into some alternative category to be called an adopted-child. No, the effect of adoption is to put a child into a single, simple category called “child.” No hyphenated qualification or definition, a child. So the legal declaration of adoption defines a family, a parent and a child. The legal declaration of adoption creates that family with the same reality as a child naturally born into a family.

And that is the picture that is given to us as Christians. As our Shorter Catechism puts it, “Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of, the sons of God.”

Adoption is not legal fiction, but legal reality. It is a reality of the greatest importance and encouragement. We are received into the family of God. We become children of God.

John 1:12 “12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: 13 who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

We are given the legal right to become the children of God, and I would propose to you that adoption ought to be recognized as one of the most important doctrines of our Christian faith because of all its practical implications. For this legal declaration changes your identity. You get a new birth certificate. Instead of that old certification in which under the heading of “father” is listed “Adam,” now God puts his own name on that line. God is your father. You are given the right to claim the identity of being a child of God. And you are given a new last name, too. You are given Jesus’ name, so you are called a “little Christ,” or more familiarly, a “Christian.”

Is that a legal fiction? Absolutely not, no more than any child who joins a loving family by means of adoption would claim that new family relationship is a fiction. Adoption it is the most real thing that some children ever experience. And I want to linger on these two verses a bit more this morning because of that emphasis on adoption. What becomes obvious here is that,

I. THE PURPOSE OF REDEMPTION IS ADOPTION.

The purpose of salvation is adoption. The goal, the end game, the telos if you know Greek, the objective, is not simply salvation from sin. The final goal is not simply the forgiveness of sins. But adoption. And our translation, “adoption as sons,” is very accurate. It is one Greek word, a compound word which means something like this, “to receive the appointment of a son.” The word itself is a very clear definition of everything that we mean when we say “adoption.” A legal declaration to be sure, but a legal declaration that transforms your very identity, a legal declaration that establishes a father-son relationship.

So my starting point this morning is that that was God’s ultimate purpose all along.

A. God redeemed his people in order to enter into a father-son relationship with them.

The English word “that” in verse 5 is translated from an important Greek word which defines this purpose. The word means “so that,” or “in order that,” “for the purpose of.” God redeemed those who were under the law, he saved them, for the purpose of adopting them. For the purpose of entering into this most personal and intimate of relationships with them.

We gain a particularly encouraging insight into this whole work of adoption in,

1 John 3:1 “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!”

You see, as soon as you talk about adoption, you talk about God’s love. As soon as you define the legal declaration of adoption, you enter into a relationship characterized by love. Adoption is a legal declaration, to be sure. But it is not cold, nor clinical. “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!” Some translations help understand the emphasis by ending the sentence with the words, “And that is what we are!”

Adoption means that God has set his affection upon you, that he has set his love upon you. Adoption means that God has established a relationship with you, a father-son relationship. A father-daughter bond. A parent-child relationship. And for all the imperfections of our human parents, that relationship is absolutely perfect. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called [his] children.”

Let me make this point as clearly as possible. That was always God’s purpose and intention. Adoption as sons was always his goal. That’s why he saved you. And that purpose goes back to before the creation of the world. That purpose of adoption goes back to God’s eternal decree.

Turn back just one book to,

Eph. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”

It is so sad to me that Christians spend their time arguing and

disagreeing about this doctrine of predestination, when Paul includes it as a given in the broader context of love. “In love he predestined us...” And don’t stop there, “In love he predestined us for adoption as sons...”

You see, he chose us in love, even before the foundation of the world, he chose us to be his children. In love.

There was a day in our country when adopted children were chosen. Parents were able to choose children, from orphanages or from adoption agencies, in this country and around the world. There were so many children and so few potential parents. Those days are gone, and because of the ravages of abortion and the wickedness of foreign governments, it is the adopting parents who are chosen. And most families wanting to adopt now wait years before a child is placed in their homes. But for God, that situation never changed. The adopting father chooses his children. “In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ.” That is his ultimate purpose, and for that reason, he saves us.

And then, as the book of Galatians so consistently emphasizes,

B. God redeemed his people in order to give them the freedoms of children.

Sometimes parents today will adopt children to rescue them from unimaginably horrible situations. Sometimes that is within an extended family. Sometimes through agencies that specialize in special needs children. We understand that situation, and that is a good analogy for the work of God. He redeems us from slavery. He rescues us from bondage. And the purpose is freedom.

That freedom has been the focus for the past several sermons, and I raise the issue again this morning only to connect it with adoption. According to verse 5, God redeems those who were under law. Under the slavery of the law, the requirements for external conformity, so that those slaves might become sons and daughter, they might receive, verse 5, “the adoption as sons.” In other words, freedom!

Now, you who are children might not think of yourselves as “free.” In fact, our culture encourages you to think of yourself as a minor child as enslaved, waiting for the day when you are 18 when you can really be free. And of course, that means free from authority. Free to do whatever you want.

But think about it another way. When you are living as a child with your parents, you are free because you don’t have to earn that relationship. You don’t have to do something to earn the right to eat dinner with your family. You don’t have to do something to earn the right to sleep in a bed with a roof over your head.

So if you think becoming 18 and getting away from your parents is freedom, then you need to realize that when you get a job to support yourself, you will get fired if you don’t perform well enough. You might get fired even if you do perform well enough, but the company just can’t afford you any more. And if you lose your job, you won’t be able to buy food to eat. You won’t be able to buy clothes to wear, or gasoline to put in your car. You won’t be able to continue payments on your car nor afford auto insurance. And if you don’t pay your electric bill the electricity will be cut off. If you don’t pay your water bill, you will have no water.

But all of those things are included in the freedom of being called a child, belonging to a family. All of those things are included in the father-son relationship. And if you are a Christian,

God redeemed you from slavery to give you those freedoms. Because he loves you. Because he chose to love you before the foundation of the world.

Let me be practical. And personal, pastoral. I have known many people over the years of my ministry whose basic spiritual struggle was right at this point. Usually because of unhealthy experiences with an earthly father, some people struggle to understand and experience the reality of this vital relationship. They struggle, perhaps, with an assurance of their salvation. They struggle, perhaps, with an inability to believe that God would love them, that he would forgive them their sins. Perhaps the struggle with guilt is unending, or seemingly so, as they feel guilty about almost everything because what is missing in their soul is this confident freedom about which Paul speaks so earnestly. The freedom of being loved.

Now, notice how Paul speaks of that freedom of adoption and what provision God makes for our experience of adoption. What does God do to give you encouragement? To give you assurance? To give you confidence that you are, in fact, loved by God as father loves his children?

Easy answer. God gives us the Holy Spirit.

II. ADOPTION AND THE HOLY SPIRIT.

v.6

The Holy Spirit. Sometimes, the forgotten person of the Trinity. But here he comes to the forefront with good reason. Because you are sons, Paul, because you are members of God's family, you receive,

A. The blessing of the Holy Spirit.

And hear the Trinity works together, three persons as one. God the Father sends the Holy Spirit, though Paul calls him, "the Spirit of his Son." The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. And as Calvin puts it, "We are the sons of God because we are endowed with the same Spirit as his only Son." Thus it is a promise made to all Christians. It is not a second blessing to be experienced by some in conjunction with charismatic gifts. It is not a blessing limited to only a select few who would be identified as "saints." The blessing is to all believers.

And remember the blessing as Jesus spoke of it, John 14:16 "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, 17 even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. 18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

John 14:25 "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. 26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."

John 15:26 "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me."

The Helper, the advocate, the paraclete, the comforter. The Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit. They are all one and the same. He proceeds from the Father and the Son, that's the meaning of those words in the Nicene Creed. As that creed continues, "who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified."

Beloved, don't fail to rightly emphasize this blessing of God, the blessing of the Holy Spirit. And to make that personal, note

the words in verse 6, “into your hearts.” “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts.”

So the blessing of adoption is that as children of God, we have,

B. The Holy Spirit within us.

In your hearts.

That’s the reality of life as a Christian. The reference isn’t to some emotional experience, and certainly to some merely emotional high, something you feel. But it is more than that.

Eph. 1:13 “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”

Too often, perhaps, we think of the Holy Spirit in merely subjective experiences. What you feel. But here is an objective work of the Holy Spirit just as plain as can be. He is the seal, the guarantee of our inheritance as Christian. The Holy Spirit is God’s own downpayment upon the fulfillment of his promise of salvation. The Holy Spirit is the deposit which God himself pays, to ensure the full payment of the inheritance. The point is, because you have the Holy Spirit, your salvation is secure. You are sealed—preserved and authenticated.

We find the same idea in,

2 Cor. 1:20 “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. 21 And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, 22 and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.”

So the Holy Spirit is a guarantee of God’s promises. The Holy Spirit is the assurance, the guarantee of the completion of God’s work in your life. And in that capacity, the Holy Spirit does something further. Look again at,

v.6 “And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, “Abba, Father!”

So who is crying, “Abba, Father?” It is the Holy Spirit. It is what we often call,

C. The witness of the Holy Spirit.

It is actually the Holy Spirit who bears witness with our spirit, it is the Holy Spirit who cries out in us, such that we cry out ourselves as well, “Abba, Father.”

The main cross reference for this text is,

Rom. 8:15 “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, Abba! Father! 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.”

Do you see how these two passages fit together? They are both saying the same thing, though in Galatians the blessing and work of the Holy Spirit is even more evident. The Holy Spirit cries out within us, “Abba, Father.” So it is the Holy Spirit that testifies to you, within you, that you are adopted. In Romans, that Spirit is called the Spirit of adoption as sons. And Paul writes to the Romans, “By whom we cry, Abba! Father.”

People of God, Christians, the Holy Spirit cries out within your heart many things, but none so important as this, that you are a child of God. If you are a Christian, the Holy Spirit bears witness with your spirit that you are adopted. The Holy Spirit works in

your heart, teaching you and enabling you to know and believe with assurance, that you belong to God.

That's where the assurance of salvation ultimately comes from, this confidence that God is your father. It comes from this testimony, this witness of the Holy Spirit within you. So how do you know God loves you? How do you know God forgives you your sin? How do you know God accepts you and receives you as his one beloved children?

The answer is this, the Holy Spirit cries out within your heart that those things are true and real. That's his purpose, this helper, this comforter. And when the Holy Spirit is at work within you, then you cry out as well, "Abba, Father."

It is like going to a young child who has been raised in a stable, loving family. As a two year old, a four or five year old, "Is that your Father?" As a young child who is standing next to his father, "How do you know that is your father?"

How do you know? No five year old child will be able to answer that question logically, because it is not a question in the realm of logic. It is in the realm of experience. How does a child know? Well, every inclination of his heart leaves him absolutely confident and absolutely assured. His own heart cries out within him. "That's my father." Children know their parents. Their hearts give them assurance. The simplicity of their mind is unchallenged. There is a testimony within in them that leaves them secure.

So it is with God. God gives to his children his Holy Spirit to be that testimony. And the Holy Spirit testifies in you and with you, so that you cry out with that word of glorious freedom, "Abba, Father." As I emphasized last time, there are only three people

on this earth who have that freedom with respect to me. Only three people whose relationship with me is defined by this Hebrew word Abba. Only three people, and they are therefore, to me, cherished and adored above all others. Only my own precious daughters know me as Abba.

As a Christian, that is to be relationship with your Father in heaven, a relationship made certain by the presence of the Holy Spirit himself. It is to be as warm and as affectionate a relationship as that which I share with my own daughters.

v.6

If you struggle with assurance of your salvation, if you struggle with the assurance of God's love for you in Christ, then meditate much upon these words. Memorize them, hide them in your heart, for this is not a doctrine to be learned merely with the brain. The doctrine of adoption is not just a legal definition to be explained and understood in the realm of the intellect.

This is who you are. This is your identity. This is the foundation of the motivation for your love to God. This is the source of your psychological health and emotional well-being as you live on earth. And this is to be your confidence as you wait for heaven. That you have been adopted into the family of God, because God chose you for adoption before the world began.

If you believe in Jesus, if you trust in Jesus for your eternal salvation, then the blessing of the Holy Spirit in you is your guarantee. And with that testimony of the Holy Spirit within you, cry out to God as only a child would dare to cry out to a beloved father. "Abba, Father."

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"