

3. The New Relation (8:14–25)

Verses 14–17 introduce a new topic. Believers enjoy eternal life because they are sons of God. The connection to what precedes is that verse 14 explains further why those under the dominion of the Spirit experience life (8:13), namely, because they are sons of God.

This is another section of Romans that demonstrates the “already/ not yet” tension mentioned earlier. Although believers *already* belong to a new realm (the realm of the Spirit), they continue to be influenced by the old realm. Being a child of God means that we are heirs of God (8:17), but we are *not yet* experiencing this in its fullness. We are sons and daughters now, but we wait for the full enjoyment of that sonship later. The movement in this passage is very similar to that of Galatians 4:1–7 where Paul says that believers are redeemed from being slaves by the sacrifice of Christ and have received a new status as children.

8:14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

In verse 13 Paul had said, “if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” Verse 14 gives the basis and explanation of what Paul meant, as the word “for” indicates. To “put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit” in verse 13 means “to be led by the Spirit.” In other words, if we were to ask, “How do we put to death the deeds of the body *by the Spirit?*” The answer would be “by being led by the Spirit.”

The verb “led” is passive; the Spirit is doing the acting upon the Christian; it is His work in us, not our work. He is not an instrument in our hands; we are an instrument in His hands. We are not leading Him; He is leading us. In other words, we kill sin because we are moved by the Spirit to kill sin. It’s His battle through us. In Galatians 3:24 the Law is pictured as leading men to Christ. Once that goal is achieved the Holy Spirit leads the believer.

Those whom the Spirit is leading are sons of God. Being called a son of God usually expresses one or more of the following three ideas (from Hodge, 265): (1) It means having a similarity of disposition, character, or nature to the Father (Matt. 5:9, 45; Jn. 8:44). (2) It means being an object of God’s special affection (Ro. 9:26; II Cor. 6:18). Or, (3) it means having a peculiar dignity or advantage (Jn. 1:12; I Jn. 3:2). In the present passage the first and third ideas are prominent.

Children of God have the values, priorities, preferences, and tastes of their Father because their thoughts, feelings, and conduct are regulated by the Holy Spirit.

In sum, we could say that we know we shall live (13) because we are sons of God (14), and we know we are sons of God because we are led by the Spirit to put sin to death (vv. 13 and 14).

8:15 For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father."

The Holy Spirit which we have received does not produce a slavish and anxious state of mind like those under the Law experience; but He produces “the filial feelings of affection, reverence, and confidence, and enables us, out of the fullness of our hearts, to call God our Father” (Hodge, 266).

“The spirit of bondage” could refer to *a sense of bondage* we feel under the Law (or sin), and “spirit of adoption” could be *the feeling* of being adopted into God’s family when we become believers (cf. Ro. 11:8; I Cor. 4:21; Gal. 6:1; I Pet. 3:4 where the word “spirit” refers to a disposition of the mind). But it is more likely that the Spirit of adoption is the Holy Spirit, due to the close parallel in Galatians 4:6 and the immediate context (vv. 14, 23). In this case the “spirit of bondage” would refer to what the Holy Spirit is *not*. The Holy Spirit whom we received is not “the spirit of bondage” who produces fear as the law did (Moo, 500).

The Spirit is poured out into our hearts to confirm and make real our adoption. How does He do that according to verse 15? He does it by replacing the fear of a slave toward a master with the love of a son toward a father. As “the Spirit of adoption,” the Holy Spirit produces the feelings which children have toward their parents. We can, therefore, respond to God by calling Him “Abba,” Father.

“Abba” is “father” in Hebrew. Although Paul wrote in Greek (the lingua franca of his day), the warmest word he could think of to express the privilege of being God’s child came from his mother tongue, Hebrew. Using this word shows that our relationship to God is more than knowing that God takes on the role of “Father,” the head of the household; it expresses a relationship characterized by intimacy, affection, tenderness, familiarity, love, and warmth.

**8:16 The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,
8:17(a) and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, . . .**

The Holy Spirit produces the assurance in our own hearts that we are children of God—that we love Him and that He loves us. The witness of the Holy Spirit that we are children of God is not a testimony that appeals logically to a neutral heart that has no affection for God; rather, the fact that we now cry “Abba! Father!” IS the testimony that the Spirit has created affections for God in us.

As children we are also heirs. In Paul’s day, an inheritance was more secure than goods obtained through a purchase or any other means, so this became a favored term among biblical writers (cf. Gal. 3:29; 4:7; Col. 3:24; Heb. 9:15; Eph. 1:14). Possessions can be stolen or lost; an inheritance is a promise that cannot be taken by another.

The reason for adopting, in the first century world, was specifically to have an heir to whom one could bequeath one’s goods. So, too, God’s adoption of us makes us His heirs, and so guarantees to us, as of right (we might say), the inheritance that He has in store for us. “We are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:16f.). “So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir” (Gal. 4:7). Our Father’s wealth is immeasurable, and we are to inherit the entire estate (Packer, *Knowing God*, 15).

The inheritance we will receive is not of worldly value; it is the enjoyment of everlasting life and all the glory it contains. We will “enter into the joy of the Lord,” eat and drink at Christ’s table in His kingdom, and rule with Him (Matt. 25:21; Lk. 22:30; Rev. 3:21).

8:17b . . . if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

Suffering is the condition (*hina* - ἵνα) that leads to glory (I Pet. 1:6–9; Matt. 16:24). The emphasis is joint participation in both; if we do not suffer with Him, we will not share in His glory. This is why the NT writers often make a connection between our sufferings and Christ’s (cf. II Cor. 1:5; Phil. 3:10; Col. 1:24; II Tim. 2:11–12; I Pet, 4:13). Suffering with Christ is validation of the union we share with Him (Ro. 6).

NOTES ON BEING CALLED SONS OF GOD:

In the OT there were only a few references to God as “Father.” However, when you come to the NT you will find that it is the normal way that Jesus addresses God. In John 17 alone Jesus calls God “Father” six times. The great hallmark and breathtaking privilege we have under the New Covenant is that we are brought into the same relationship with God that Jesus Himself shares with His Father! We now have the same right of access to God that Jesus did; we possess the same sense of intimacy and the same assurance that He loves us. We can address Him as Jesus did, as Abba (Daddy). We can come to God as Christ did because we come in Christ. And this is the common possession of all the people of God. This should cause us to stop in amazement; “the damnable dust of the earth can call the ever-blessed, infinite Creator “Daddy” all because of the merits of Jesus Christ” (Hamilton).

The following notes are selected sections from J.I. Packer’s book, *Knowing God* (from the chapter on adoption).

Sonship to God is a gift of grace.

We are not sons by nature but by adoption.

In Roman law, it was a recognized practice for an adult who wanted an heir, and someone to carry on the family name, to adopt a male as his son—usually at age, rather than in infancy, as is the common way today. . . [They were] young adults who had shown themselves fit and able to carry on a family name in a worthy way. In this case, however, God adopts us out of free love, not because our character and record show us worthy to bear His name, but despite the fact that they show the very opposite. We are not fit for a place in God’s family; the idea of His loving and exalting us sinners as He loves and has exalted the Lord Jesus sound ludicrous and wild—yet that, and nothing less than that, is what our adoption means.

Adoption, by its very nature, is an act of free kindness to the person adopted. If you become a father by adopting a child, you do so because you choose to, not because you are bound to. Similarly, God adopts because He chooses to. He has no duty to do so. He need not have done anything about our sins save punish us as we deserved. But He loved us so; He redeemed us, forgave us, took us as His sons and daughters, and gave Himself to us as our Father.

Justification and Adoption.

That justification—by which we mean God’s forgiveness of the past together with His acceptance for the future—is the *primary and fundamental* blessing of the gospel is not in question. Justification is the primary blessing, because it meets our primary spiritual need. We all stand by nature under God’s judgment; His law condemns us; guilt gnaws at us, making us restless, miserable and in our lucid moments afraid; we have no peace in ourselves because we have no peace with our Maker. So we need the forgiveness of our sins, and assurance of a restored relationship with God, more than we need anything else in the world; and this the gospel offers before it offers us anything else. The first gospel sermons to be preached, those recorded in Acts, lead up to the promise of forgiveness of sins to all who repent and receive Jesus as their Savior and Lord (see Acts 2:38; 3:19; 10:43; 13:38f.; cf. 5:31; 17:30f.; 19:21; 22:16; 26:18; Luke 24:47). In Romans, Paul’s fullest exposition of his gospel—“the clearest gospel of all,” to Luther’s mind—justification through the cross of Christ is expounded first (chapters 1–5), and made basic to everything else. Regularly Paul speaks of righteousness, remission of sins, and justification as the first and immediate consequence for us of Jesus’s death (Rom. 3:22–26; 2 Cor. 5:18–21; Gal. 3:13f.; Eph. 1:7; etc.). And as justification is the primary blessing, so it is the *fundamental* blessing, in the sense that everything else in our salvation assumes it, and rests on it—adoption included.

But this is not to say that justification is the highest blessing of the gospel. Adoption is higher, because of the richer relationship with God that it involves. . . Justification is a *forensic* idea, conceived in terms of law, and viewing God as *judge*. In justification, God declares of penitent believers that they are not, and never will be, liable to the death their sins deserve, because Jesus Christ, their substitute and sacrifice, tasted death in their place on the cross. This free gift of acquittal and peace, won for us at the cost of Calvary, is wonderful enough, in all conscience—but justification does not of itself imply any intimate or deep relationship with God the judge. In idea, at any rate, you could have the reality of justification without any close fellowship with God resulting. But contrast this, now, with adoption.

Adoption is a *family* idea, conceived in terms of love, and viewing God as father. In adoption, God takes us into His family and fellowship, and He establishes us as His children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater. This point has never been better put than in the following extract from *The Doctrine of Justification*, by James Buchanan:

According to the Scriptures, pardon, acceptance, and adoption are distinct privileges, the one rising above the other in the order in which they have been stated... while the first two properly belong to (the sinner’s) justification, as being both founded on the same relation—that of a Ruler and Subjects—the third is radically distinct from them, as being founded on a nearer, more tender and more enduring relation—that between a Father and his Son . . . There is a

manifest difference between the position of a servant and a friend—and also between that of a servant and a son.... A closer and dearer intimacy than that of a master and servant is said to subsist between Christ and His people: “Henceforth I call you not servants: for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends” (John 15:15); and a still closer and dearer relation is said to exist in consequence of adoption; for “Thou art no more a servant, but a son, and an heir of God through Christ” (Galatians 4:7). The privilege of adoption presupposes pardon and acceptance, but is higher than either; for, “To as many as received Him, to them gave He power”—not inward strength, but authority, right, or privilege—“to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name” (John 1:12). This is a higher privilege than of Justification, as being founded on a closer and more enduring relation—“Behold! what manner of love the Father hath bestowed on us, that we should be called the sons of God” (1 John 3:1) (op. cit., p. 276 f.).

We do not fully feel the wonder of the passage from death to life which takes place in the new birth till we see it as a transition, not simply out of condemnation into acceptance, but out of bondage and destitution into the “safety, certainty, and enjoyment” of the family of God. This is the view of the great change which Paul sets out in Galatians 4:1–7, contrasting his readers’ previous life of slavish legalism and superstition in religion (verses 5 and 3, cf. 8) with their present knowledge of their Creator as their Father (verse 6) and their pledged benefactor (verse 7). This, says Paul, is where your faith in Christ has brought you; you have received “the adoption of sons” (verse 5); “you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son then an heir” (verse 7, RSV).

...

It is clear that, just as Jesus always thought of Himself as Son of God in a unique sense, so He always thought of His followers as children of His heavenly Father, members of the same divine family as Himself. Early in His ministry we find Him saying, “Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35). And two evangelists note how after His resurrection He called His disciples His brothers. “The women hurried away from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them.... Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. Go and tell *My brothers* to go to Galilee; there they will see Me’” (Matt. 28:8-10). “Go... to My brothers and tell them ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples...” (John 20:17f.). The writer to the Hebrews assures us that the Lord Jesus regards all those for whom He has died, and whom He makes into his disciples, as his brothers. “The Son does not shrink from calling men his brothers, when he says, ‘I will proclaim thy name unto my brothers...’ and again, ‘Here am I, and the children whom God has given Me’” (Heb. 2:12f. NEB). As our Maker is our Father, so our Savior is our brother, when we come into the family of God.

Now, just as the knowledge of His unique sonship controlled Jesus’s living of His own life on earth, so He insists that the knowledge of our adoptive sonship must control our lives, too. This comes out in His teaching again and again, but nowhere more clearly than in His Sermon on the

Mount. Often called the charter of God's kingdom, this Sermon could equally well be described as the royal family code, for the thought of the disciple's sonship to God is basic to all the main issues of Christian obedience with which the Sermon deals. This is worth showing in detail, especially since the point is so rarely given its proper weight in exposition.

What are the privileges of adoption?

1) Because God is our Father we no longer need to see ourselves as slaves.

- Galatians 4:7: "Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God."

2) As our Father, God loves and understands us.

- Psalms 103:13–14: "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust."

3) As our Father, God takes care of our needs.

- Matthew 6:32:31–34: "Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

The Gentiles worry because they are without God and do not understand His benevolent providence. When we worry we are living as if we believed like they do. Trusting God for physical needs gives the Christian the opportunity to live a life distinct from unbelievers who never learn to trust God for basic necessities (Lk. 10:41, 42; Heb. 13:5, 6).

4) As our Father, God gives us many good gifts, including the Holy Spirit.

- Matthew 7:11: "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!"
- Luke 11:13: "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"

Even men, whose goodness cannot compare to the goodness of God, give good gifts to their children. No parent would give an inedible rock to a child who is hungry, nor would he give a snake to a child wanting a fish. Should anything less be expected from God by those who ask? God is our Father; He will never ever give what is bad for us (Ja. 1:16–17).

5) As our Father, God gives us a great inheritance.

- Romans 8:17: "and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him."

- 1 Peter 1:4: “to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,”

6) Because God is our Father, we are led by the Holy Spirit.

- Romans 8:14: “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.”

7) Because God is our Father, we are disciplined by someone who loves us.

- Hebrews 12:5–6: “and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, “MY son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprovved by Him; For those whom the Lord loves HE disciplines, and HE scourges every son whom HE receives.”
- Hebrews 12:7, 10: “It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? . . . For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.”

8) Because God is our Father, we are all members of one family.

9) Because God is our Father, we have the privilege to honor and glorify Him in our actions and thoughts as His children.

- Ephesians 5:1: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children;”
- 1 Peter 1:14–16: “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”
- 1 John 3:10: “By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.”
- Matthew 5:16: “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven”