

## THE MERCIES OF GOD: Adoption

**“In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.”**  
~ *Ephesians 1:5-6*

### Introduction

Any thorough discussion of the components of salvation inevitably leads to a fundamental question: **Does Scripture speak of any *order* to the sequence of actions or events that make up salvation?** Theologians use the Latin term *ordo salutis* to describe any such order (see the “Introduction to the Study of Salvation,” 9/4/2019). In defining *ordo salutis*, Louis Berkhof writes that it is

the process by which the work of salvation, wrought in Christ, is subjectively realized in the hearts and lives of sinners. It aims at describing in their logical order, and also in their interrelations, the various movements of the Holy Spirit in the application of the work of redemption. . . . When we speak of an *ordo salutis*, we do not forget that the work of applying the grace of God to the individual sinner is a unitary process, but simply stress the fact that various movements can be distinguished in the process, that the work of the application of redemption proceeds in a definite and reasonable order, and that God does not impart the fullness of his salvation to the sinner in a single act. . . . The question may be raised, whether the Bible ever indicates a definitive *ordo salutis*. The answer to that question is that, while it does not explicitly furnish us with a complete order of salvation, it offers us a sufficient basis for such an order. (*Systematic Theology*, 415-16)

When discussing the *ordo salutis*, it is important to keep in mind an important distinction—**the distinction between *chronology* and *causation***. When the components of salvation are viewed according to *chronology*, many of salvation’s components—regeneration, repentance, faith, justification, and adoption—must be understood as occurring *instantaneously*. These components cannot be distinguished according to an order of time. For example, one cannot be regenerate for days without also expressing faith; and one cannot be justified for several months prior to spiritual adoption. However, when viewed according to *causation*, the Bible does indicate that there is a distinct, logical priority of some of these components over others—even though they occur instantaneously in time. As has discussed earlier, regeneration *causes* conversion (repentance and faith). Faith is then the *means* through which justification is declared. And as will be shown below, justification inevitably *leads to* adoption. Again, these components are applied to the believer instantaneously. Yet there is a logical order to which Scripture testifies, one which ensures that God will not be robbed of His glory and grandeur in the work of redemption.

With that in mind, we turn now to **the doctrine of adoption**. This doctrine suffers from two incorrect responses on the part of theologians and ordinary readers of Scripture alike. First, its study is greatly neglected. As D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones states, “For some inexplicable reason, it is a doctrine which we very rarely hear. How often have you heard sermons on it?” Second, some theologians incorrectly treat adoption as synonymous with other concepts of salvation—such as regeneration or justification. These responses lead to an ignorance in the understanding of many Christians regarding what is perhaps the highest privilege attained through redemption. As Robert Webb writes,

There is a sense in which it [adoption] is to be the crown and glory of the entire redemptive process. The admission of sinful men through the grace of adoption into the family of God with all the rights and privileges of sons in His house is, in a lofty sense, the culmination and climax of the blessings of redemption.” (*The Reformed Doctrine of Adoption*)

**“What is a Christian? The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God as Father. . . . If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father.”**  
—J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 200-201

### A. Key Terms and Definitions

1. **“Adoption.”** In the New Testament, the English word “adoption” translates the Greek noun *υιοθεσία* (*huiiothesia*), a compound word made up of *υιός* (*huios*) meaning “son,” and *θέσις* (*thesis*), meaning “position.”

The word gives the idea of **“in the position of a son.”** It is found only five times, and only in the writings of the apostle Paul (Rom 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5).

The Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultures of Bible times practiced adoption differently. But because the apostle Paul was a Roman citizen writing to distinctly Gentile audiences when he used the term, it is best to understand his use of the term as **drawn from Roman practice**. Harold Hoehner describes the Roman practice of adoption as follows:

The father had absolute power (*patria potestas*) over the members of his family so that he could even take the life of a member of his family and that act would not be considered murder. . . . With regard to property, he had the full legal ownership of everything the family had and could dispose of it as he willed. . . . Under Roman law the procedure of adoption had two steps. In the first step, the son had to be released from the control of his natural father. This was done by a procedure whereby the father sold him as a slave three times to the adopter. The adopter would release him two times and he would automatically again come under his father’s control. With the third sale, the adoptee was freed from his natural father. Regarding the second step, since the natural father no longer had any authority over him, the adopter became the new father with absolute control over him, and he retained his control until the adoptee died or the adopter freed him. The son was not responsible to his natural father but only to his newly acquired father. The purpose of adoption was so that the adoptee could take the position of a natural son in order to continue the family line and maintain property ownership. The son became the *patria potestas* in the next generation. (*Ephesians*, 196)

The spiritual adoption spoken of by Paul—and alluded to by other writers of the New Testament, especially John—is defined by John Murray as **“act of transfer from an alien family into the family of God himself”** (Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 141). Similarly, MacArthur and Mayhue write, “In adoption, God legally places regenerated and justified sinners into his family, so that they become sons and daughters of God and thus enjoy all the rights and privileges of one who is a member of God’s eternal family” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 625). Thus, **central to the Christian life is the identity of being a “son” or “daughter” of God.**

**Key idea:**  
The transfer from an alien family into God’s family, thus receiving all the associated rights and privileges as a natural child

2. **“Fatherhood of God.”** The doctrine of adoption naturally raises the notion of “the fatherhood of God”—a concept that has been misunderstood and twisted by unorthodox theologians. To appreciate the glory of adoption, it is important to define accurately God’s “fatherhood.” There are three fundamental aspects:
  - (a) **The fatherhood of God according to essence.** This fatherhood is unique within the trinity; it describes who the first person of the trinity is according to His *identity*. The trinity is one God (e.g., Deut 6:4) simultaneously and eternally existing in three persons: the “Father,” the “Son,” and the “Spirit” (e.g., Matt 28:19). Thus, “Father” is the distinguishing name for the first person of the trinity, and according to John 3:16, the “Son” eternally exists as “the only begotten” of the Father.
  - (b) **The fatherhood of God according to creation.** This fatherhood speaks to God’s ultimate authority and ownership of creation; it describes God as “Father” because of His role as creator and the source of life to all living things. Paul adapts a line from a Greek poet on Mars Hill when he states before the Areopagus, “for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children’” (Acts 17:28; see also Heb 12:9). This fatherhood is *not* salvific in nature.
  - (c) **The fatherhood of God according to redemption.** This fatherhood speaks of God’s special relationship to those whom He has chosen to save from sin. Thus, this fatherhood is *exclusive* in nature. It draws an unmistakable distinction between two categories of humanity: (1) those who *are* God’s children—who have been “adopted” into His family; and (2) those who *are not* God’s children—who remain in “the world.” The apostle John draws this out when he states, “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and *such* we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him” (1 John 3:1; see also John 1:12-13).

Consequently, the Bible’s teaching about spiritual adoption definitively negates any concept of a universal fatherhood of God whereby He bestows on all humanity without distinction all the blessings of His goodness and grace, regardless of their position in Jesus Christ. **Only those who have been adopted through faith in Christ have the right to be called a “child of God”; only they have the right to call God “Father.”**

## B. Essential Characteristics

**1. Adoption is rooted in God’s sovereign grace.** The concept of adoption itself emphasizes the free choice of the parents in adoption. Adoption is not a *forced* act. Rather, it is a vivid demonstration of *grace*.

- **Ephesians 1:5** – “In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will.”

**2. Adoption is judicial in nature, not transformative.** Indeed, adoption does *lead* to the transformation of the adopted sinner, but that is due to other causes. In itself, adoption is a *judicial act done for the sinner*—a declaration made in the courtroom of heaven. Through it God bestows a status, not a nature.

- **John 1:12** – “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name.” Here, “right” means “legal authority.”
- **Galatians 4:4-5** – “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.” Adoption is “received” by us, not “accomplished” by us.

**3. Adoption is inaugurated through faith in Christ.** The status of “son” or “daughter” of God is not a universal right. It is an exclusive status that is based exclusively on faith in Jesus Christ:

- **John 1:12** – “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name.”
- **Galatians 3:26** – “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.”
- **Ephesians 1:5** – “. . . adoption as sons through Jesus Christ.”

**4. Adoption bestows the Holy Spirit.** As a result of adoption, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the believer as a testimony to the adoptee’s status:

- **Galatians 4:6** – “Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” See also **Romans 8:15-16**.

One of the Holy Spirit’s ministries in the believer is to “testify” to us regarding our new identity. This testimony is not a delivery of “new” revelation. It is not an audible voice that speaks to us as God spoke to the prophets. It is “reiterative rather than innovative” in nature (Burke, *Adopted into God’s Family*, 150). In other words, the Holy Spirit reminds us of the redemption God has accomplished for us through Christ. He keeps pointing us back to the truths of the gospel—that God has done this all *for us*.

**5. Adoption guarantees an imperishable inheritance.** Central to the idea of adoption is the transmission of an inheritance. In fact, the concept of “inheritance” is a key analogy used to describe the hope of Christian life. It is a life of expectation—expectation of an *inheritance*.

- **Galatians 4:7** – “Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.”
- **Romans 8:16-17; Ephesians 1:3; Philippians 3:21; 1 Peter 1:3-5**

“If God has adopted you into His family, if you are a child of God, your destiny is secure, it is certain. . . . It is a guarantee. If God has taken me into the family, I am not only a child, I am an heir, and nothing and no one can ever rob me of the inheritance.” —*Martyn Lloyd-Jones*

**6. Adoption establishes special family relationships.** The believer is now a “son” of the Father (John 1:12-13); he is now a spiritual “brother” of Jesus Christ; and he is now a member of one great spiritual family with other believers—“brothers and sisters”—from various ethnicities, languages, social statuses, and families.

- **John 1:12-13; 1 John 3:1; Romans 8:17; 8:28; Hebrews 2:10-11**

**7. Adoption is an astonishing display of divine love.** Before their adoption, believers were “sons of disobedience” (Eph 2:2; 5:6) and “children of wrath” (Eph 2:3). Their “father” was “the devil” (John 8:44). But in and through Christ, now they are called “sons” of God. God has put His own name on them! And He desires for them to address Him as “Abba, Father!” (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). This is astonishing, and leads Packer to write,

[Adoption] is *the highest privilege that the gospel offers*: higher even than justification. . . . Adoption is higher, because of the richer relationship with God that it involves. . . . 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—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 a greater. (*Knowing God*, 207)

Or in the words of John Murray, “This is surely the apex of grace and privilege. . . . It staggers imagination because of its amazing condescension and love” (*Redemption Accomplished & Applied*, 141).

**“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 justification . . . the third is radically distinct from them, as being founded on a nearer, more tender, and more endearing relation—that between a Father and his Son. . . . There is a manifest difference between the position of a servant and of a friend—and also between that of a servant and a son.”**

—James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, 27

#### D. Practical Implications

Homework (see below).

#### For Further Reflection

**Scripture Memory:** 1 John 3:1

**Recommended Reading:**

- John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 624-631.
- John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, “Adoption,” 139-148.
- J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, “Sons of God,” 200-242.

**Homework:**

- How often do you recall and reflect upon your status or identity as “a child of God” (if you are indeed in Christ)?
- Review the “Essential Characteristics” listed above. Read through the Scriptures provided. For each of the seven characteristics, provide at least one “practical implication.”
- John Owen once stated, “The greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the Father, the greatest unkindness you can do to him is not to believe that he loves you.” Explain this in light of the doctrine of adoption.
- List the practical ways in which the doctrine of adoption *comforts* you? How does it *challenge* you?
- Why must the doctrine of adoption be carefully protected from the efforts of liberal Protestants and ecumenical theologians who argue for the “universal fatherhood of God”? How do their efforts undermine the glorious nature of spiritual adoption?
- How would you respond to someone who rejects Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, yet who claims to be “a child of God”? List the Scriptures you would use to refute his claim.
- Do you love other believers and view them as spiritual brothers and sisters? How does the doctrine of adoption impact your efforts to preserve unity among true Christians?
- Do you seek to please your Father through obedience? Is there a new and growing resemblance between Him and you—as there would be between a father and his adopted child?

**Hymns:** “Come Praise and Glorify” (*Hymns of Grace* #44)

**This Week’s Audio:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next Meeting:** February 19 – “Union”